

AUGUSTÓW

History

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Authors

In 1578 King Stefan Batory allowed Jews to settle down in the royal town of Augustow. He granted them the permission for unlimited trade and craft. The permission included the right to sell alcoholic beverages.

It is supposed the first Jewish settlers came into the town a year before or, according to some sources – as early as 1564. [\[1.1\]](#). Those days they established the first Jewish colony in the Suwalki Region (Suwalszczyzna).

The oldest preserved sources confirm the presence of the Jews in Augustow, who mostly dealt with fishing and trade as from 1630. An independent Jewish community that owned a wooden synagogue and mikvah was established in 1674. In the 18th century Augustow became the seat of the “county kehilla” consisting of few surrounding towns and villages.

In the mid-1760s there were 239 Jews in Augustow whose main occupation was hewing forest, timber floating from Gdansk and trading. Although the Russian government forbade Jewish from settling in the Polish-Russian-border town, that was in force from 1823 to 1862, the number of Jewish population kept increasing during the first half of the 19th century so that in 1860 it reached 45% of the total population in the town.

In 1840 an impressive classical synagogue called the Great Synagogue (Hebrew: Beit ha-Kneset ha-Gadol) was erected in the corner of ulica Polna and ulica Zyguntowska. There was also another synagogue, that had been built a bit earlier, operating in the intersection of ulica Zyguntowska and ulica Szkolna. At the beginning of the 20th century, apart from the two previously mentioned synagogues at ulica Zyguntowska there were three others that operated in the town - the first one was situated near ulica Mostowa (near the present-day “Albatros” restaurant), the second one – between ulica 3 Maja and ulica ks. Skorupki and the third one, erected in between 1925 – 1928 and called after its founders “Jatke Kalniz Beit Midrasz”, located at ulica Zabia, on the site where these days you can find the right wing of the Internal Revenue Service building.

In the 1890s small groups of supporters of various Hasidic factions started to emerge in Augustow. Each of them had their own house of prayer.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Augustow Jews dealt mainly with craft (food processing, tanning and tailoring), small trade and fishing. Starting from the mid-1820s, some Jewish inhabitants made a living by working at the construction site of the Augustow Canal.

In the second half of the 19th century a group of rich business people, merchants, tenants and owners of huge factories emerged from the Jewish community in Augustow whose businesses were ran over the local basis creating the financial elite of the town. At the end of the 19th century, almost 98% of all the industrial plants (breweries, brickyards, tanneries, tile works, a mead brewery, soap works, a water windmill, a foundry, sawmill, locksmith workshops) belonged to the Jewish business people. The town's population included many Jewish shopkeepers, people who sold alcohol beverages and rented houses. Among those there were some who delivered food for the Russian garrison that had stationed there from 1868. In the 1880s and 1890s, Jewish business people set up small textile factories in Augustow. [\[1.2\]](#). There was also a small group of representatives of the Jewish community worked in the education, health service and administration.

In the mid-1880s the first Jewish political parties were established in Augustow. The Zionist organization was established there in 1885 and in 1905 – the General Jewish Labour Union “Bund”- the left-wing, secular and anti-Zionist party whose activists participated in the strikes and demonstrations during the revolution in 1905. [\[1.3\]](#).

During the World War 1 many Jewish inhabitants left Augustow and most of them never returned to the town. It led to the decreasing in the number of Jews there. In 1921, the Augustow Community consisted of just 2,261 members – mainly craftsmen who dealt with tailoring. [\[1.4\]](#).

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Augustow community suffered from serious economic difficulties. Financial support was granted by the Jewish Cooperative Bank which operated in the town and was established in 1922 thanks to the support of the JOINT (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee).

Despite the difficult economic situation, the Jewish social and political life flourished in Augustow in the period between the wars. It specially included the Zionist organizations along with the youth wings, Socialists from the “Bund” party, as well as Orthodox activists under the auspices of Agudat Israel were particularly active. [\[1.5\]](#).

In 1939 there were about 4,000 Jews who lived in Augustow. [\[1.6\]](#). After the breakout of the World War 2 and after the Red Army entered the town, the Jewish municipal institutions and political parties were dissolved and some of the activists were arrested however, there were still some Jewish cultural institutions still operating. [\[1.7\]](#).

Soon after the Germans seized Augustow in June 1941, the first executions of the Jews in the town took place. In June 1941, in the forest near Szczerba, the occupants executed about 800 – 900 Jewish males from Augustów. [\[1.8\]](#).

In October 1941 there was a ghetto created the town district Baraki. The remaining 2,000 Jews from Augustow and its vicinity, such as Lipsko and Sztabin, were moved to the ghetto. The Germans destroyed the Jewish cemetery in Augustow and used the matzevot as building material to pave the streets.

The Germans annihilated the Augustow ghetto in November and December 1942. On November 2nd, all the inhabitants from the Augustow ghetto – mostly women and children – were deported to a transit camp in Bogusze, near Grajewo. In the camp, there were about 7,000 Jews imprisoned at that time so the living conditions were so difficult that about 1,700 people died in the course of a few weeks. [\[1.9\]](#).

In December 1942 and January 1943, the Augustow Jews were deported from the same in Bogusze to the extermination camps in

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In December 1942 and January 1943, the Augustów Jews were deported from the camp in Bogusze to the extermination camps in

Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau where most of them were murdered in gas chambers.^[1,10]

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