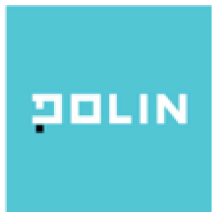


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TAKE CARE OF
THE CITY 

According to some researchers, it is possible that Jews appeared in Słonim (Slonim) as early as the 14th century thanks to Duke Witold, who bestowed many privileges upon them. At the beginning of the 16th century, Jews were banished from the duchy at the behest of Aleksander Jagiellończyk, but they soon returned to the area. The first recorded mention of the Jewish community of Słonim dates back to 1551, when the town was included in the register of Jewish communities exempt from the so-called *serebszczyzna*, a land tax imposed on each homestead and payable in silver. In the old Jewish cemetery, which existed until the German occupation, there was a matzevah from 1529.

The first half of the 16th century was a period of intense development of the community. Its growing importance was reflected in the decision of the Council of Four Lands to change its status. In 1623, Słonim was a community subordinate to the kehillah in Brest-Litovsk, but a few years later it became an independent entity. Later on, it became a district town (*galila*). The Jewish community of Słonim greatly benefitted from the general assemblies of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania held in the town, as the great numbers of envoys visiting the locality boosted the development of the local trade. Jews specialised in timber and grain trade, some of them were also engaged in distilling and handicrafts. The community soon accumulated great wealth, which is evidenced by the decision to erect the Baroque Main Synagogue.

The unstable political situation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth greatly affected the Jewish population. In June 1764, the Polish armed unit led by Karol Radziwiłł clashed with the Russian army in the vicinity of Słonim. Jews feared a pogrom. In the aftermath of the events, the Jewish community introduced a fast. It was to take place on the 26th day of *Sivan*, 5524 (28 June 1764), and it was called the 'Wednesday of the *hukkat* week'. It continued to be observed well into the 19th century, when it was eventually converted into a fund-raiser for the local hospital. A mention of this practice has been preserved in the pinkas (chronicle) of Słonim's Bikur Holim brotherhood.

In 1766, the Jewish kehillah had 1,154 members. It greatly benefitted from the patronage of the Ogiński family, who built their residence in Słonim and supported local merchants and craftsmen.

In 1797, after the area became part of the Russian Partition, 1,360 Jews and Karaites lived in the whole district. Craftsmen (ca. 965 people) formed an important social class within the local population.

In the 19th century, the town gained substantial fame among Jewish religious scholars due to the activity of Rabbi Abraham Weinberg. Thanks to him, the Słonim yeshiva gained recognition among conservative Jews. In the mid-19th century, there were seven synagogues and 14 prayer houses in the town. At the time, Jews made significant contributions to the development of the local economy. They were the ones who founded the first factories in Słonim – e.g. Abram Kamienomoscki opened a weaving mill.

In 1853, a state-run Jewish school was established in the town, with Russian as the language of instruction. The purpose of such institutions was to 'Russify' Jews in western governorates and to diminish the importance of the traditional Jewish education system. In 1854, there were seven such establishments in the Grodno district. At the end of the 1870s, the state school in Słonim had a Jewish principal and

employed three other Jewish teachers, all of whom were born in the town and graduated from the Vilnius Rabbinical School. Nonetheless, Jewish state schools were not particularly popular.

The Jews of Słonim were quite affluent, which enabled them to maintain more than twenty synagogues and prayer houses. According to some historical sources, 21 synagogues were operating in Słonim in the 1880s. Most important were the services held at the Main Synagogue, which was destroyed in a fire in 1881. Over the subsequent years, the number of active synagogues in the town was continuously decreasing. In 1910, there were seven synagogues in Słonim.

In 1897, 11,515 out of all 15,863 inhabitants of Słonim were Jewish (72.5%). They traditionally lived in the city centre, which had the characteristics of a typical shtetl. On the eve of World War I, a Talmud-Torah school and several dozen cheders were operating in Słonim. There were four private Jewish schools – two for female and two for male students. The function of the rabbi was performed by Salomon Hurwicz. There was an association helping poor Jews, led by M. Miller. It offered vocational courses for children from poor families. Jewish entrepreneurs were a dominant force in the economy of Słonim. Thanks to one of them, Grisza Konicow, a water supply network was installed in the town.

World War I had a negative impact on the Jewish community. The military activities taking place in 1915, followed by the retreat of the Russian troops, terrified the local Jews, who feared pogroms and forced deportations to the east. A part of the population was forced to leave the city, which had been destroyed in a fire.

In 1921, there were 6,917 Jews living in the town. Ten years later, their number increased to 8,650 – 64% of the total population.

The interwar period brought economic revival to Słonim. The largest factory in the town was the brickyard run by the Rabinowicz brothers, employing 10 permanent and 30 seasonal workers. Most of the local companies, however, were small establishments, dealing with wood processing, processing of agricultural products, etc.

The inhabitants of the town were also actively involved in politics. In Słonim, there were branches of the Bund, Agudath and Mizrachi. The local Bund branch had about 100 members; its leader in the 1930s was Swieticki. The General Zionists, whose leaders were lawyer Wajs and merchant Efros, were also quite influential. The Zionist Revisionists were headed by teacher Barkowski and merchant Epstein. There was a kibbutz run by the HeHalutz organisation close to the town. Poale Zion was not very prominent in Słonim. Among right-wing parties and organisations, Agudath enjoyed greatest popularity and had ca. 100 members. Its chairman was Mowsza Mielikowski, and his deputy – Mowsza Zaimczyk. Mizrachi, with less than 15 members, had no way of competing with Agudath. There were also many Jewish guilds, organisations, and unions in the district, representing landlords, merchants, craftsmen, butchers, etc.

In the interwar period, there were about 10 Jewish schools in Słonim, among them a secular CISZO (Central Jewish School Organisation) school and a facility run by the religious organisation Tachkemoni. A branch of the 'Tarbut' Jewish Cultural-Educational Association supported educational institutions which held classes in Hebrew. Two papers in Yiddish were published in Słonim – the *Unzer Żurnal* magazine (1921-1925) and the *Słonimer Wort* newspaper, published by the Zionists in the years 1926-1939.

Before 1939, there were two synagogues Słonim. The town also ran a shelter for poor Jews, helping 40 people a year – 25 women and 15 men. In 1928, the orphanage at Poniatowskiego Street housed 39 orphans and poor children aged 14 or younger. At Żyrowicka Street, there was a hostel where visiting Jews in distress could stay for free for three days.

In September 1939, the town was seized by the Red Army. The Soviet authorities started to abolish Jewish social and religious organisations, as well as political parties.

Słonim became one of the main centres of Jewish migration from the Polish territories occupied by Germans. The situation in the town became very complicated due to the high number of refugees, which increased significantly during the year – in the autumn of 1939, there were 2,000 Jewish newcomers to the town, and a year later – as many as 15,216. Less than half of them were able to work, and only some 2,600 were employed. The refugees lived in poor conditions, e.g. in synagogues, warehouses, and other non-residential buildings. The Soviet administration kept a register of the 'bourgeoisie.' Polish citizens were subjected to the process of 'passporting,' which consisted in forcing them to accept Soviet citizenship.

The Soviets saw Zionists as enemies, counterrevolutionaries, and accused them of "slandering the USSR before the arrival of the Red Army" and "opposing the revolution and the Soviet state." Novikov, the spokesman of the Communist Party, argued that Zionists had 'fascist' working methods. On 4 April 1940, the NKVD deported about a thousand local Zionists to Siberia. A few months later, the Bund met a similar fate. In this case, the NKVD had an easier task, because it had a list of party members provided to the Soviet administration by the Bund leadership in the autumn of 1939, together with a statement about the dissolution of the party and termination of operations after the entrance of the Red Army to the town. The authorities launched a widespread Sovietisation campaign directed at the youth. Religious schools were closed down. Only Jewish Soviet schools were allowed to operate.

In the early period of the German aggression on the USSR, Jews constituted about 70% of the total population of Słonim (22,000 people). German troops entered the town on 25-26 June 1941. The local population had not been evacuated. Germans ordered the Jews to gather in designated places. The crowd was attacked, beaten, and fired at by soldiers. On 12 July 1941, Jews were ordered to sew yellow stars of David on their clothes, and they were prohibited from entering the main streets of the town.

The commander of the town ordered the formation of a Judenrat, composed of 11 Jews. Its chairman was eighty-year-old gabbai of the synagogue, W. German, former bank director. The Judenrat was involved in, among other activities, the organisation of forced labour. A Jewish police unit of 30 people was set up, with M. Latotte as its chief. Its members were mainly refugees from western Poland.

On 17 July 1941, the first extermination operation in Słonim was carried out by the branch of Einsatzgruppen stationed in the town. Germans took 1,200 Jews to a location near the village of Pietrolewicze where they had previously dug out tombs. The Jews were then shot.

The authorities created a register of all Jews residing in the town and selected craftsmen and skilled workers from among them. They were given special certificates and moved to separate apartments. In October 1941, they were transferred to the

newly developed 'On the Island' district. The group hoped that their knowledge of German or professional skills would save them from genocide. The working Jews received 300 g of bread per day, while the non-working – only 100 g.

The second mass extermination of prisoners of the Słonim Ghetto took place on 4 November 1941. Germans loaded ca. 8,000 Jews on trucks and transported them to the village of Czepielów, seven kilometres away from the town. Only several people survived. After the war, they gave their accounts of the events, which were recorded and are currently stored in the Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

On 22 May 1942, 300 skilled professionals from the Słonim Ghetto were taken to Mogilev.

The third extermination operation took place between 29 May and 15 June 1942. The prisoners of the ghetto were transported by Germans to Pietrolewicze, where, as previously, mass graves had already been dug out. On 31 July 1942, Wilhelm Kube, the Generalkommissar for Weissruthenien (Belarus), reported to Lozem, the head of Reichskommissariat Ostland, that the liquidation of the ghetto had been concluded. He stated that 55,000 Jews had been killed over the period of 10 weeks, including 8,000 in Słonim itself. At the behest of the occupation authorities, however, skilled workers were spared for economic reasons. 700 men and 100 women still lived in the ghetto. The last prisoners of the ghetto were shot in December 1942.

A resistance movement was active in the Słonim Ghetto. In July 1942, a committee was formed by former members of the Komsomol. The group wanted to defend themselves against the occupier. They made contacts with Soviet POWs whom they supplied with medicine and clothes. They also contacted partisan units in the area of Słonim. Nurses and doctors from the ghetto – Klonowicz, Smoliński and Orlińska – provided medical aid to partisans. The police and the Gestapo tracked down people involved in the resistance movement. Germans captured Włodzimierz Abramson while he was carrying grenades from the camp. They threw him into a car and transported him to an execution site. Upon arriving there, Abramson blew himself up together with the executioners. In the summer of 1942, during one of the extermination campaigns, there were acts of open resistance in the Słonim Ghetto, carried out with the support of the local rabbis, S. Wainsberg and I. Aronson. The fighters killed eight Germans and collaborators. During the pacification of the resistance, Germans set fire to the buildings in the ghetto. The hospital, with 40 people inside, burned down.

Very few survived the German occupation. Gienia Wileńska went into hiding in Słonim with her six-year-old son. She managed to buy the boy from the guards when he was about to be taken to the camp in Wołkowysk (Vawkavysk). Until the end of the occupation, the boy hid in a girl's disguise.

In 1946, German police commander Hans Hermann Koch, responsible for the execution of Jews in Słonim and other localities, was put on trial in Minsk and sentenced to death.

After World War II, the Jewish community was not reborn in an organised form, although Jews did not completely disappear from Słonim. After Germans had been forced out of the town, 80 Jews returned to Słonim. Some later left for post-Yalta Poland. In 1946, only 30 Jews lived in the town. Nevertheless, in 1989 there were 95 Jews in Słonim. Currently, however, only few of them remain.

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