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The exact date of when Jews began to settle in Suwałki cannot be determined. Although the founders and proprietors of the town – Hungarian Camaldolese – encouraged Jews to settle in Suwałki by granting municipal rights and establishing a separate street exclusively for the Jewish population, Jewish presence in Suwałki before the early nineteenth century cannot be confirmed based on available evidence in written sources. Some scholars believe that a small group of Jews settled in Suwałki as early as the second part of the eighteenth century but left the town not long after or were possibly expelled^[1.1].

The oldest documentation dates back to 1808 and mentions a small Jewish community of 44 in central Suwałki. This group was made up of settlers predominantly originating from the surrounding small towns and villages. During the two subsequent decades the small community grew rapidly and created an autonomous kehilla at the beginning of the 1820s^[1.2]. In 1827 Jews constituted over 30 percent of the town centre's population; in 1841 they were over 50 per cent, and in 1865, 63 per cent^[1.3].

Suwałki of the second half of the nineteenth century was one of the most populous and significant Jewish religious centres in Poland. Among the rabbis in the community were Icchok Ajzyk Wildmann (1850-53), Jehiel Heller (1853 – 57), one of the initiators of the Zionist movement, Samuel Mohylewer (1860 – 68), and Dawid Tewel Katzenellenbogen (the 1890s). However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, especially during the 1880s, the weakening economy and increased anti-Semitism caused a significant number of Jews to leave for the U.S.A., South America, Sweden, and South Africa. As a result, the number of Suwałki's Jewish inhabitants noticeably diminished^[1.1-1]. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, new groups of Jewish immigrants from the western parts of the Russian

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TAKE CARE OF THE CITY

Empire – i.e.: Lithuania and Northern Belarus – settled in town causing the kehilla's population to rise once again to 50 per cent of the local population.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Suwałki was predominantly a trade centre, whose industry was still underdeveloped. The main source of income for Jews living in town was small trade, services (transport), and craftsmanship (e.g.: shoemaking, sewing, construction). Some Jews earned their living from trade mediation between the former Suwałki governorate and the former Eastern Prussia area, others from supplying the garrison of Suwałki with provisions (till 1914)^[1.4]. Around the mid nineteenth century there were a considerable number of Jewish merchants and entrepreneurs, whose activity became significant to the town's economic development. By 1867, there were 12 Jewish factories and production plants, as well as numerous hotels, like Hotel Krakowski.

Between 1822 and 1862, most Jews of Suwałki's community lived in a district by the new marketplace, located between Jerozolimska Street and Nowy Świat (present day T. Noniewiczza Street), an area that had been sectioned off exclusively for Jewish settlement. In 1820 –1821, this district was enriched by an impressive brick synagogue and beit midrash situated on the opposite side of the street^[1.5]. Despite regulations on residential areas available to Jews, some of the tenement houses surrounding the old marketplace belonged to Jews.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, and especially in the interwar years, Suwałki became a prominent centre of the Zionist movement. Suwałki was the home town of Abraham Stern, leader of the Lohamei Herut Israel movement (LEHI), fighting for the establishment of the State of Israel in Palestine, and in 1891 it was the cradle of the Safah Berurah association, whose 70 members devoted themselves to teaching and propagating Hebrew^[1.6]. Later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a Jewish labour movement was established in Suwałki. In 1901, the General Jewish Labour Union (BUND) was created; Bundists and their supporters in Poalei Zion and other organizations were involved in the revolution of 1905–1906 through organising self-defence for the Jewish community amidst the pogroms.

During the interwar years, the Jewish community in Suwałki was deeply divided, with orthodox Jews in Agudat Israel, the Bundists, and Zionists heatedly debating ideological issues and competing for political influence. Although Zionists predominated in the election of 1924, Agudat Israel enjoyed the largest support in 1931. Subsequent town council elections in 1925, 1935, and 1939 resulted in Jews winning a quarter of the seats.

During the 1920s and 1930s, industry in Suwałki began to develop on a large scale, predominantly due to the participation of local Jews in the economy: Jewish entrepreneurs built timber yards, textile factories, food processing plants, and others.

In the interwar period, apart from the synagogue and beit midrash constructed at the beginning of the 1820s, Suwałki had 27 houses of prayer, a Jewish hospital (probably constructed in 1859), and the Jewish home for the elderly^[1.7]. There were also several Jewish centres of education – cheders, Talmud-Torah (established in 1861), a Hebrew and Polish secondary school, and a yeshiva. Additionally, there were many Jewish sports centres, like the Jewish Sports and Gymnastics Society Maccabi.

Due to weakening economy and increasing anti-Semitism, which led to attacks on Jewish merchants and entrepreneurs in the 1930s, a second wave of emigration brought Suwałki's Jews to South America and, on a smaller scale, to the United States.^[1.8] It was at that point that a significant number of the town's Zionists fled to Palestine.


After the German army entered Poland in September 1939, Suwałki was incorporated into the Reich. Approximately 3,000 Jews fled to Lithuania, Belarus, and the eastern part of the USSR. Some of the Jewish community managed to survive, but many perished in ghettos and death camps. In December 1939, many Jews of Suwałki – the elderly, ill, and disabled --were murdered by a Nazi firing squad in nearby forests. Approximately 2,000 survivors were deported to Biała Podlaska, Łuków, Kock, Miedźrzec Podlaski, and other centres in

by 1941 approximately 2,000 Jews were deported to Łódź, Lublin, Łachy, Międzyrzec, and other ghettos in the Lublin area. Ultimately, they perished with other Jews trapped in ghettos in 1941 and 1942. Having deported the Jewish population from Suwałki, the Germans began to construct a new residential district for their officials in the section of the former Jewish district (the "Małe Raczki")^[1.1.1].

Only a small group of Jews survived the occupation and returned to Suwałki, mainly from the USSR, after the war. In 1957, only 11 Jews lived in Suwałki. Currently, there is no Jewish community in Suwałki.

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