

The shtetl and the Jews of Eastern Europe

The Ukraine was part of Russia for more than a century and during the decades between the World Wars it was part of Poland. Much of the country's western plains are flat and fertile, and the area is thought of as one of world's "bread baskets." Prior to the Second World War, Jews and Christians often lived side by side in small villages that the Jews called Shtetls.

According to one historian, Poland first welcomed Jewish immigrants in 905 AD, a time when the Polish kings still resisted Christianity. Jews emigrated in increasing numbers during the Crusades, and Jews fought alongside Poles during the Tartar invasion of 1240. In 1264 King Boleslaw the Pious issued a charter of protection for Jews. The charter was respected and enforced for about 200 years during which time Jewish population and influence in the country grew.

But so did the power of the Christian church. In 1454, under the influence of anti-Semitic German traders, Jewish rights and legal privileges in Poland were abandoned, and Jews were expelled from several large cities. The Jewish lot improved in 1500 under King Sigismund I, and it waxed for 150 years. During most of those years Jews were allowed to have their own courts, judges, and to choose a chief rabbi.

Then in 1648 the Cossack revolt began. Led by Bogdan Chmielnicki, the Cossack armies devastated Jews, Polish land owners, and the Catholic clergy. 744 Jewish communities were destroyed. The Polish empire was mortally wounded and ready to be conquered and absorbed by the anti-Semitic Russian Czars.



Bogdan Chmielnicki

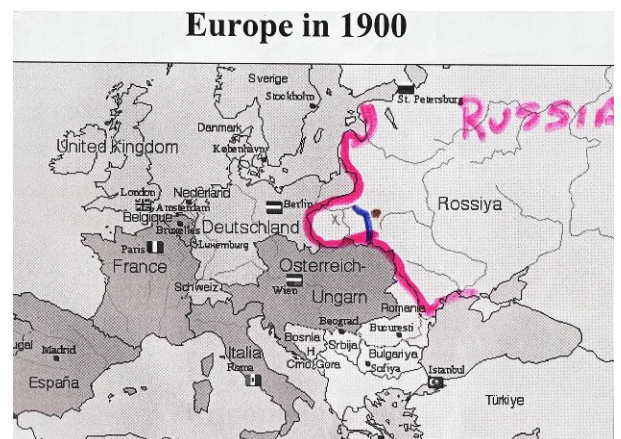


Yisroel ben Eizer

The Jewish population was thrown into despair. In 1730 the Baal Shem Tov, a mystic who seemed to communicate with God, and who preached love of life, God and religion started the Hassidic movement. The Hassidic leaders were religious royalty. Many families had its scores of adherents and followers. The Ferdmans prayed at the shul of the Karlina Rebbe.

The Russians conquered ethnic Poland and the Ukraine during the 18th century and ruled it until WWI. During those years they attempted to confine their Jewish subjects to the broad plains of ethnic Poland and the Ukraine, a vast area that was known as the "Pale of settlement." The Tsars treated their 5 million Jewish inhabitants with disdain because they didn't believe in Christ. Jews were expected to serve in the Russian army. Beyond that they were second class citizens. In my father's time Jews were not allowed to own land.

Torczyn was located 70 km east of the Bug River and straddles the main highway that ran west, out of Lutsk, the largest city in the province of Volyn. In 1908, the year my father was born, Torcyn was ruled by the Russian Czar. After the First World War it became part of Poland.



Tsar Alexander III was a gruff giant who took power in 1882 after his father freed the Serfs and was assassinated. Alexander ruled for 13 years and was succeeded by his son Nicolas in 1896. There were pogroms during Alexander's reign. During one of them, the famous Easter Day massacre, mobs of Kishnev murdered 45 Jews and destroyed 600 of their houses. Nicholas led his country into a disastrous war, was overthrown in 1916, and was executed by the Communists in 1918.

Misha Klein: In the early 20th century Torchin was like a little town like you take out of Shalom Aleichem. If you take Ubitz, that Sholom Aleichem describes, it is a little town, imaginary town, and he describes the people of Ubitz. You could find in Torchin a character just like in Ubitz, a schlimazel that couldn't make it, etc.

The physical town of Torchin consisted probably of about 2000 Jewish families. Torchin had about that many thousand Ukrainian families. In the immediate vicinity, of course, there were outlying farms and villages in which there were mostly German settlers that came here during and before the First World War; and then they integrated into the community. They were Lutherans, which was unusual, because the dominant religion was Greek Orthodox.

The majority of the people in the Ukraine were of Ukrainian origin, of Russian origin, and their church was the fundamentalist Greek Orthodox Church. And the center of the town was the Greek Orthodox Church with its bells and their colorful parades. On holidays or a burial they used to come out with those big banners and carry on with a statue of Mother Mary and the Pope. It was the clergymen who wore long hair. This was the only man who could wear long hair and a long robe; but he was married. They can marry up to the rank of Bishop. The Greek Orthodox Church was for various things, and the whole Ukrainian community was church centered. When the downfall of Poland came, after the Germans invaded (in 1939) and the Poles, who were ruling started running away, the town was left lawless. The Ukrainians, our "good neighbors" that dealt with us and bought from us, started gathering around the church. And we joined them. And the gunny sack and the ax appeared. They were ready for a pogrom. As soon as the police would move out, they start robbing Jews. *This*



was a tradition that they inherited from Chmielnitsky's times. *This* was their make-up. The Jews were hated; they were tolerated; they were needed because they were small artisans and merchants, and you could get any type of service you needed from the Jews. Jews needed a living. I don't believe there were any moneylenders between the Jews and the Ukrainians. The hatred of the Jews was very deep-rooted. It didn't come out too often. But when it did come out it was "You Jew; the Christ-killer; Jew the unchristian one. Heathen. Jid Nya Vera; The Jew; the infidel. Just what the Arabs call them, the infidel.

Misha: A physical description of the country? It was a backward let's say in comparison with Germany that was industrialized. After the First World War the Ukraine became part of Poland and was an agrarian country with little towns, hamlets, farms. There were peasants that worked hard. There was no electricity in those Hamlets. They had kerosene lamps. So did we until finally the owner of the mill in town, the flour mill, put on a generator; and since he had power, we had electricity. We had one volt in the house. There were no meters.

If you wanted to turn on the light in another room, you turned the switches. One went out and the other went on. We had just one volt; that's all; because the capacity was limited.



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