

BERDICHEV

Unit Id#: 71020

Berdichev

A town in the historic region of Volhynia, Zhitomir oblast, Ukraine.

Apart from two single references to individual Jews from Berdichev in 1593 and 1602, there is no evidence that a Jewish community existed in Berdichev before 1721. In 1732, the owner of the town granted a charter to the Jewish guild of tailors freeing them from interference by the communal authorities (Kahal).

The Jewish population gradually increased with Berdichev's development as a fair town from 1765. According to the census of 1765, the Jews in Berdichev numbered 1,220 (out of a total population of 1,541) including Jews living in the vicinity; they numbered 1,951 in 1789 (out of 2,460). In 1794, prince Radziwill, the owner of the town, deprived the rabbis of their right of civil jurisdiction, which was transferred to a court to be elected by majority Jewish vote. Berdichev had become an important center of Volhynian Hasidism in the last quarter of the 18th century, and the Hasidim were thus able to secure the election of Dayyanim so as to free themselves from the jurisdiction of the Kahal and its Mitnaggedim rabbis. As the town grew, a number of noted scholars served as rabbis of Berdichev, including Lieber "the great," Joseph "the Charif," and, from the end of the 18th century until his death in 1809, Levi Isaac of Berdichev. In 1797, prince Radziwill granted seven Jewish cloth merchants the monopoly of the cloth trade in Berdichev, and in the first half of the 19th century the town's commerce was concentrated in Jewish hands. Jews founded scores of trading companies and banking establishments there, with agencies in the Russian interior and even abroad. Jews also served as agents of the neighboring estates of the nobility, whose agricultural produce was sold at the Berdichev fairs.

The expatriation of Polish nobles and decline of the Polish nobility after the uprising of 1863 dealt a blow to Jewish commerce in Berdichev. The economic position of most of the Berdichev Jews was further impaired by the restrictions imposed on Jewish settlement in the villages by the "temporary regulations" (May Laws) of 1882 and other government restrictive measures.

The main increase in the Jewish population of Berdichev occurred in the first half of the 19th century. There were 23,160 Jews living in Berdichev in 1847, and 46,683 in 1861. It was then the second-largest Jewish community in Russia. Shortly afterward the numbers began to decline, and in 1897 Berdichev had 41,617 Jewish residents (80% of the total population). The 1926 census shows 30,812 Jewish residents (55.6% of the total); about the same number probably lived there in 1939. Until World War I, emigration was balanced by the natural increase in the Jewish population; after the 1917 revolution the proportion of Jewish residents steadily decreased through emigration.

At the end of the 19th century, about half of the Jewish wage earners were employed in manual trades, mostly in tailoring, shoemaking, carpentry, metalwork, etc. About 2,000 were hired workers, while the remainder gained their livelihood from trade. Berdichev became one of the foremost centers of the bund. After the 1917 revolution, the proportion of hired workers increased, while a considerable number of Jews were absorbed by the state administration.

The ideas of enlightenment (Haskalah) began to spread in Berdichev early in the 19th century, especially among the wealthier families. The Galician Haskalah pioneer and Hebrew author Tobias Feder Gutmann settled in Berdichev toward the end of his life. Influenced by Isaac Baer Levinsohn a group of Maskilim was formed there in the 1820's, in which the physician Israel Rothenberg was to be particularly active. Among the opponents of the Maskilim was the banker Jacob Joseph Halpern, who had great influence in Hasidic circles and was close to the government. The first public school in Berdichev giving instruction in Russian was opened in 1850. With the economic decline of Berdichev, the wealthier Maskilim left for the larger cities. Because of the poverty of the majority of the Jewish population a large number of children were even unable to attend Heder. According to the 1897 census, only 58% of Jewish males and 32% of Jewish females were able to read or write any language.

In Russian and Jewish literature and folklore, Berdichev epitomizes the typical Jewish town. It had some 80 synagogues and Battei Midrash and its cantors were celebrated throughout the Ukraine. It serves as the model for the town depicted in the writings of Mendele Mokher Seforim and Shalom Aleichem (Gants Berdichev), as well as in Der Nister (Mishpokhe Mashber). During the 1917 revolution and the civil war of 1917--19 the head of the community and mayor of the town was the Bundist leader D. Lipets. In early 1919, the Jews in Berdichev became victims of a pogrom perpetrated by the Ukrainian army.

Under the Soviet government, most of the synagogues were closed. Yiddish continued to receive official acknowledgment and Yiddish schools were opened in Berdichev. In 1924, a government law court was established there, the first in the Ukraine to conduct its affairs in Yiddish. According to the 1926 census, of the 30,812 Jews in Berdichev 28,584 declared Yiddish as their mother-tongue. However, by the early 1930's, complaints were heard about curtailment of the use of Yiddish in government offices in Berdichev. A Yiddish periodical "Der Arbeter", appeared in Berdichev about twice weekly until the middle of the 1930's. All Jewish cultural activities there were suspended before World War II.

The Holocaust Period

The Nazis established an extermination unit in Berdichev early in July 1941. Immediately afterward wholesale massacres began, and a ghetto was set up in the city. It was liquidated on Oct. 5, 1941, after all the inhabitants were murdered. One report states that there were about 6,000 Jews in Berdichev after the war (March 1946).

Although Matzah baking was prohibited in the early 1960's, it was resumed after a few years. In 1970, there were an estimated 15,000 Jews in Berdichev with a synagogue, a cantor, and a ritual

poultry slaughterer. The cemetery was reported to be neglected but the Jews had erected a fence around the grave of Levi Isaac of Berdichev.



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