



Jewish Life in the City of Lodz

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Lodz

A modern industrial city

In 1925 when Jakob was born, Lodz was a relatively modern city with a mixed population. There lived Christian Poles, Jews and Germans. The Jews had lived in the area nearly two hundred years. As Jakob tells, the actual city was only about a hundred years old. A big textile industry had developed during this period.

After 1815 the whole area was under the control of Tsarist Russia and the Jews were granted, despite many restrictions, increased rights. Until 1828 the Jews had been forced to live in a special district. But from now on wealthy Jews had the right to move if they agreed to wear the same type of clothes as the other ethnic groups and speak Polish, German or French instead of Yiddish, which was the most common language amongst Jews.

In 1863 the first synagogue built in stone was opened in Lodz and roughly 25 years later the Big Synagogue, or the Temple as it was called, was finished on the Spacerowa street.

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Piotrkowska street in Lodz.



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A woman walks down a street in prewar Lodz with her two children.

Jewish life in the city of Lodz

At the end of the 19th century there were almost 100 000 Jews in the city. Many worked in the textile industry. There was also a large group of Jewish tailors, and even more Jewish storeowners. One of the biggest textile factories in Europe was owned by Israel Poznanski. He was an important man in Lodz and played a big role in the growth and development of the city.

Still today it is possible to see the big factory that Poznanski built. He was also a pioneer when it came to taking care of his employees. He built modern apartments for the workers, arranged daycare for the worker's children and made sure that everyone got good healthcare.

Next to the factory he built a palace for himself and his family. Today the factory facilities have been restored and remade hosting a cultural center and several stores. In the old palace you can find the City Museum.

Numerus clausus

During the First World War hard battles were fought near Lodz. The war brought distress and poverty upon a big part of the population. The Jewish population in the area was discriminated in many ways. Jews were for example forced to pay a special kind of tax. It was also difficult to be employed in non-Jewish owned factories, so most Jews worked in small workshops. The Jewish workers organized themselves into different labor unions which would uphold their interests. Many political parties were established; from right- to leftwing parties.

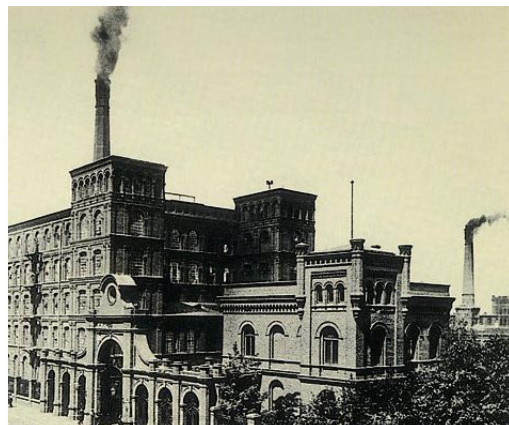


Photo: Wikimedia

The Poznanski factory.



Photo: Wikimedia

The factory today – a modern shopping centre.



A demonstration in Lodz held by the Labour Party Bund in 1917.

The Jewish community organized help for the poor and built hospitals, homes for the elderly and the children. There were also theaters and many different schools, for example a girl's school.

In 1923 the Polish parliament tried to introduce a limited admission for Jews to higher seats of learning, so called *numerus clausus* (limited number). The League of Nations protested and a formal law was never adopted, but in practice there were still many schools and universities which only accepted a minority of Jewish students.

During the 1930s these unofficial rules were further sharpened and during the years before the First World War many universities initiated so called "Jew benches" or "ghetto benches" in the back of the lecture halls. Jewish students protested, but nothing helped. Their school IDs were marked by a special stamp. In protest against this regulation it happened that Jewish students stood up during their lectures. Sometimes they were supported by non-Jewish students and a number of professors.

From the middle of the 1930s the Nazi politics in Germany affected also the Polish community and antisemitism increased. Attacks against Jews occurred with an outcome of both wounded and killed Jewish people. The Jewish organisation Bund tried to build groups of self-defense, for example in Lodz. However, unfortunately the police stood on the side of the antisemites.

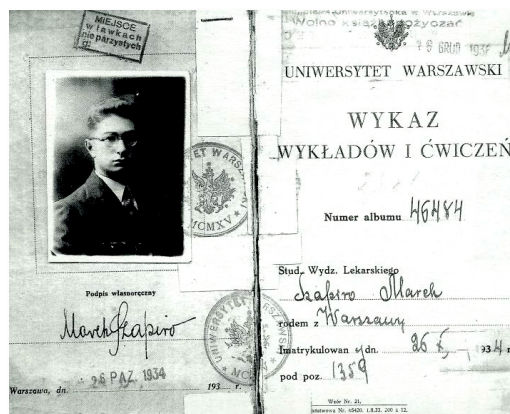


Photo: Wikimedia

A stamp for placement on ghetto benches.