Jewish Life in Bodzentyn

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Jewish Life in Bodzentyn Before the Second World War

Bodzentyn is a small town in Poland, south of Warsaw and north-east of Krakow. The town is surrounded by beautiful scenery, forests, streams, hills and valleys, and patches of cultivated land.

Ruins of castle in Bodzentyn.

Up until the 19th century Bodzentyn, like many other Polish towns, enjoyed an old "privilege" as a royal town (*miasta królewskie* in Polish). According to the treaty *de non tolerandis Judaeis*, Jews were forbidden to reside in the town. However, the ban was not strictly upheld, several Jews were allowed to rent houses from the Polish residents. In the 19th century Jews were eventually allowed to live wherever they wanted.

Several of the Jews who were renting homes in Bodzentyn in the beginning of the 19th century made a living from taverns, i.e. smaller restaurants. Others worked as butchers, bakers, and tanners who treated animal skins and hides to make soft and durable leather for shoes.

Some were more well-educated, as Abram Fryzeman, who was a medical assistant. He came to Bodzentyn in 1819 from Szydlow, a town about 50 kilometres to the south. To be allowed to start his clinic Fryzeman wrote to the mayor of Bodzentyn. He introduced himself as a "Moses-believer" and asked for permission to put up a sign outside his clinic that promised people better health. Fryzeman's son-in-law also trained to be a doctor. The mayor testified that the men's knowledge had saved many lives, not least during the cholera epidemic in 1827.
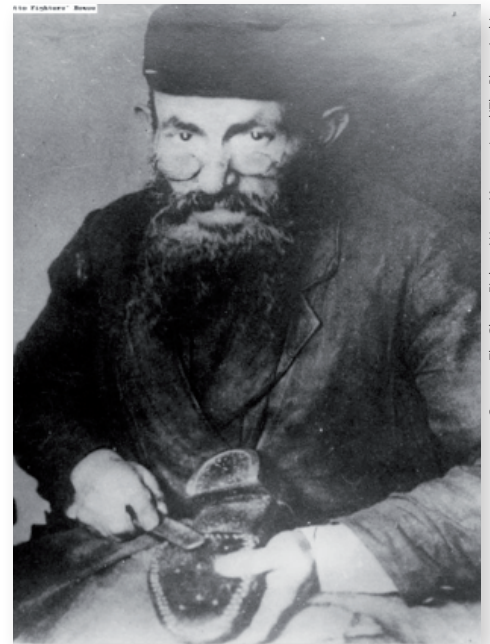

A Shoemaker.

Buildings in the Bodzentyn Market Square. The photo is from between 1895 and 1910.

From 1820 the Jewish population in Bodzentyn grew. The Jews called the town Baizetshin in Yiddish. Several Jews were appreciated for their knowledge and abilities, but many were met with opposition because their crafts and trading with goods increased the competition for customers.

Several Jews resided around the two squares and worked as tailors, carpenters, and shoemakers. Often the houses were divided into a private lodging and a shop that faced the street. On market days, that were held regularly in the town, Jews would trade for instance in livestock, grain, and handicrafts.

A Blacksmith.

All Jews were not merchants. Some had small farms in the area. Others made their living on selling tobacco and retail. Some transported goods and people between Bodzentyn and nearby town Kielce.

Many of the Jews were poor. During the late summer, some families rented orchards and picked apples, plums, and pears. Selling fruit added a welcome extra income.

The Lower Market in Bodzentyn during the 1930s.

As in other so-called *shtetls* – small towns with a relatively large Jewish population – the Jewish congregation was responsible for the organisation and administration of religious buildings and institutions, for example synagogues, prayer houses, slaughterhouses, and ritual baths, *mikve*. The congregation also run a *cheder,* a school where boys studied the holy scriptures.

Most of the Jews in Bodzentyn were living an orthodox Jewish life. They were celebrating the Jewish holidays, the Sabbath, and commemorated other important events in life as births, weddings, and funerals. It was customary that married women wore wigs to cover their hair. Photographs of Jewish families from the 1920s and 1930s also show that men in Bodzentyn often had beards and wore traditional clothes, a long coat, and an old-fashioned cap.

Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War on September 1, 1939, the Jewish population in Bodzentyn was one thousand people, making up a third of the total population.

The chairman of the Jewish community, Jicchak Szafir (furthest to the left) and the rabbi (second from the left) in a meeting with the board of the Jewish community in Bodzentyn shortly before the outbreak of the war.

Young people in the Zionist organisation Beitar, gathered at the old castle in Bodzentyn in the 1930s. The organisation arranged lectures and set up libraries and encouraged training programs in agriculture.

Source: Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem

Antisemitism and Zionism

During the decades leading up to the war, an increasing number of Jews joined unions and Zionist movements that were preparing women and men for emigration as pioneers to the British mandate for Palestine.

In the 1930s antisemitism grew in Poland and Jews were, among other things, accused of sympathizing with Communism and the Russian Bolsheviks. The church was spreading old antisemitic myths. Several priests encouraged the growing hostility against Jews and were preaching, among other things, that Jews were responsible for Jesus' death.

Some Jews in Bodzentyn chose to leave the country and emigrated to the British mandate for Palestine, France, Brazil, the United States, or Canada. When somebody emigrated more people in the family often followed. For example, a small group of Jews from Bodzentyn settled in Toronto, Canada.

Photo: Ewa Wymark

Max Safir initiated the restoration of the Jewish cemetery in Bodzentyn. 2009 a ceremony was held at the newly erected memorial monument.

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