



Jewish Life in Oświęcim and Sosnowiec Before 1939

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The City of Oświęcim

The city of Oświęcim in today's south-central Poland was established in the 12th century. 400 years later the Jewish community was formed, and until World War II the city's Jewish population often reached 50% of the total inhabitants.

Oświęcim where Lea Gleitman was born is situated in today's south-central Poland.



In 1921, just after Poland regained its independence and authority over this region, the city had almost 5 000 Jews that constituted 40% of the total population. They called the city *Oshpitzin*, in Yiddish.

The marketplace in Oświęcim.

The Religious and Political Life

Jewish life was well organized and people belonged to different political parties, religious movements or youth organizations. There were eight parties and most of those had established youth or scouting movements. In 1932 there were eighteen Jews among the thirty-two members of the City Council of Oświęcim, and a year later the city elected a Jewish deputy mayor, Dr Emil Samuel Reich.



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Jewish and non-Jewish children on a school outing in Oświęcim, 1933.

There were two synagogues and multiple smaller prayer houses. Jewish schools, sports clubs, theatrical and choir associations catered for the needs of children and youth.



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The building in the background is one of the synagogues in Oświęcim, Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot. The photo is from around 1939-1941.

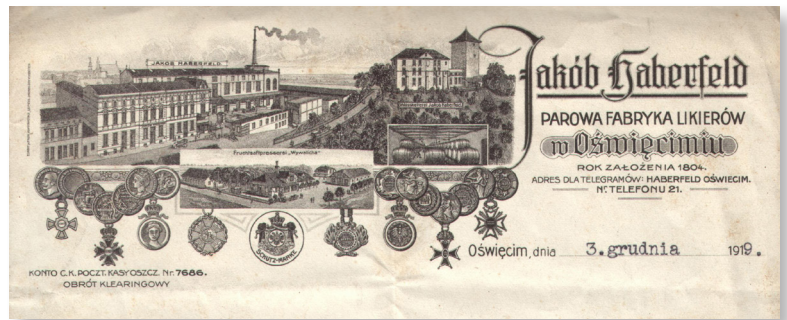
Despite growing emigration to bigger Polish cities, the British mandate of Palestine or America, the Jews of Oświęcim remained economically and culturally strong.



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Visitors mingle outside the Great Synagogue in Oświęcim.

The international rail line built in the late 19th century facilitated industrial development. This prompted new factories by several Jewish families; chemical industries by the Schenkers, alcohol production by the Haberfelds, and a tarpaper factory by the Druks.



Jakób Haberfeld's Steam Vodka and Liquor Factory.

The city's favourable location contributed to its economic strength and growth. The confluence of the two rivers Wisła and Soła, and the intersection of important merchandising trails and rail junctions, allowed Oświęcim and nearby cities to grow.



The Square in Oświęcim. The building in the background was used as a town hall during World War II.

Looking for larger markets and bigger economies, many locals started to move to cities in Zagłębie/Silesia in the northwest, or to Krakow in the east.



Horse-drawn carts line up on the outskirts of a crowded outdoor market in Oświęcim.

The Modern City of Sosnowiec



Lea Gleitman and her family moved to Sosnowiec in 1932.



The central street of Sosnowiec, ul. Modrzejska.

Lea's father ran a textile shop in Chorzów. He was tired of the daily commute by train, so the family moved Oświęcim northwards to Sosnowiec. From there it was only 20 minutes by tram to Chorzów.

In the 19th century Sosnowiec was just a small village in the midst of a pine forest. The Polish word "sosna" stands for pine tree. The city's growth was a result of the industrial revolution and the vicinity of Silesia, a major industrial region. In the mid-19th century black coal was discovered and an international rail system was built connecting Warsaw with Vienna. Up until 1918 Sosnowiec belonged to Russia. The proximity of the Austro-Hungarian and Prussian borders made the city a very good location for all kinds of trading and investments.

As a young city Sosnowiec was also free of any settlement limitations, which created opportunities for Jews from the larger region. The first Jewish resident was registered in 1859: Abram Blumenthal who worked as a municipal tax collector and later established the city's first brick building on his property.

The Sosnowiec Jewish community was growing very fast from 120 members in 1880, 2% of the total population, to 28 893 Jews in 1938, approximately 22%. Sosnowiec in contrast to Oświęcim represented the "new world" with spacious avenues, modern architecture and a variety of cultural and political life.

In 1896 the construction of the Great Synagogue was accomplished and two years later Sosnowiec became an independent Jewish community headed by Rabbi Abram Majer Gitler.

World War I ended in 1918 and the Treaty of Versailles regulated the new territories, resulting in Oświęcim and Sosnowiec becoming part of the Polish Republic.

Jewish life in Sosnowiec was centred around the synagogue and an additional few dozen smaller prayer houses. There were many private Jewish schools. In the 1930s a Jewish Gymnasium for girls was opened. A majority of the Jewish children however attended Polish state schools with Christians. This brought language conflict into Jewish families: the elders tended to speak Yiddish and German whereas the children would often communicate in Polish.

Sosnowiec Jews established a library, a *Makabi* sports club, and a couple of local newspapers such as *Unzer Blat* (which later changed into the high-tech sounding *Unzer Telefon*). In 1933 the artistic and literature association of *Jung Zaglebie* took shape.



Four Jewish girls walk along a street in Sosnowiec, 1938.



Group portrait of Jewish soccer team in Sosnowiec, 1934.

The Situation For the Jews Deteriorates

Even before World War I there were social and economic tensions between the Christians and Jews in Sosnowiec. One incident recorded in 1903 involved Polish workers throwing stones at Jews praying by the river during Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. In 1911 the Jewish community was falsely accused of kidnapping a young Christian girl and a mob stormed the synagogue. Both incidents were dealt with by the local police, which prevented escalation. Such tensions were often instigated or controlled by Russian authorities.

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Class portrait of 7th grade students at a Jewish public school in Sosnowiec, 1937.

The 1930s brought further social radicalization from nearby Germany. The right-wing Polish National Democratic Party started to propagate antisemitism in the form of economic boycotts of Jewish businesses. In November 1931 a group of 3 000 Polish nationalists marching through the city attacked two Jews. Only swift police intervention prevented the conflict from escalating.

From 1935 there were some cases of bombs planted by nationalists in Jewish prayer houses and in the Bristol Hotel, which belonged to a Jewish family. In February 1938 a sixteen year-old religious student was beaten in the street. Five nationalists were arrested and sentenced for this brutal act.

In the late 1930s, although world politics and German propaganda were heading towards war, there were few options for people to leave what would soon become an intense conflict zone. Most of the countries in the world were going though their own version of nationalism or isolationism and would not accept refugees.

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Jewish market in Sosnowiec, summer 1938.

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Text: Tomasz Cebulski, Ph.D.

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