

# **DOMACHEVO: AN EASTERN EUROPEAN SHTETEL**

**By Paul Lustgarten**

## **DOMACHEVO UNTIL 1938 -- BRIEF DESCRIPTION**

Domachevo is located on the right bank of the River Bug at about 40 kilometers south of Brest (Brisk). Only belonged to Poland between 1919 and 1939.

For the year 1938 the village consisted of a population of about 40,00 inhabitants almost all Jewish. It was a Jewish people in the truest sense of the word. It lacked, at that time, all services must have a city or village. It had no electricity or water distribution network and had no sewer system. Each house had a septic tank. The illumination of the house was by a kerosene lamp and was rented for a wedding a gas lamp. The town had one main street, a kind of stone road (called in Yiddish Shosei) widely used in Europe even today. That street ended at the square or market place was a land where every two weeks was a fair at which farmers and traders brought their goods for barter and sale. The day of celebration was on Wednesday.

From very early hours of the morning came the peasants from nearby villages with horse-drawn carts full of agricultural goods: sacks of barley, potatoes, onions and chickens, baskets of eggs, fruits, etc. -- scattered all over the place in the market and many streets crossing the main street. At the time, farmer stopped their wagons and headed to the buyers while their wives took care of the goods. Jewish merchants of the town erected tents around and put their goods for sale: coats, clothes, boots, shoes, etc.

It quickly filled the people with noise and voices of merchants and the neighing of horses. Everywhere were children browsing the stalls to see things they offered. The people bought from the farmers all they needed, such as potatoes, onions, garlic, etc. When farmers sold their goods, they ended up passing through the Jewish shops to buy what they needed for their homes, such as salt, matches, etc. Then came drinking in the bars in town. Many were drunk and fell down from drinking. At night, tired and some drunk, they hitched their horses and after dusk returned to their villages.

There were about three wells or cisterns that supplied water to the population. In the summer of 1937, they built one which drew the water with a hand pump. There were three churches: one Catholic, one Protestant and one Orthodox. There were several synagogues, including the largest synagogue, or main, which was in the vicinity of the marketplace. A smaller left in a side street and smaller wearing different Hasidic congregations. There were several cheder. The Bug River had a wooden bridge built during the First World War. A small stream passing tangential to the people, by the right side, which was a tributary of the River Bug and widened, forming a large lake near the Orthodox church. In winter it froze and served ice-skating and summer swimmers rushed from an outgoing beam of the bridge called kloc. The skates that were used to skate on the ice were mostly of wood because few could afford to have metal runners. These skates were in the bottom center that served a large wire surface contact with ice.

There was a public school one mile from Mark or market. That school was new and was built by the years 1934 and 1935. It was a brick building, friezes and painted white. Even as there was in 1938. It had its sports fields and game sites. Reached the 7th grade was the end of the primary. Domachevo had no high school. Besides the public, it had a private school. The public school, for reasons of space, had a branch near the Orthodox church. At school were Jewish and Christian scholars from different faiths. It was a school of females and barons. In recent years taught a trade such as carpentry, crafts, etc.

The village was populated mainly by craftsmen such as carpenters, blacksmiths, tailors, painters, etc., and small traders in grains, fruits, sheep, poultry, fish, etc. The crops of potatoes were buried in winter to prevent freezing. The ice cream and winter ice kept in cellars were protected with sawdust to prevent melting. That ice was used in the summer for ice cream. The ice cream froze spinning by hand, in a bucket with the contents, including ice. The village had an office with a typewriter that was used to write documents that require this. There was a police station with two policemen.

The houses were all wood except for two or three that were of brick. The roofs were of wood shingles and inclined to avoid the accumulation of snow in winter. The foundations were logs that were changed when they rotted. The shift towards raising the house with cats. The village had a grain mill. The milling machine was powered by a horse walking in circles, turning a wooden beam that drove the mill. The population, with some exceptions, was generally poor. On surfaces of 30 or 40 meters several families lived in complete overcrowding. The town had two pharmacies and one doctor who was really a Felsher, a sort of nurse. In one of the pharmacies was a Jewish pharmacist. The other was a pharmacist, pharmacy very Christian anti-Semitic and anti-Semitic leader of the village and its surroundings. It was a pharmacy prescriptions could do because the pharmacist was a graduate. From the main road out were several streets perpendicular to that. Around the villaje, the land was covered with crops of potatoes, sunflowers and wheat. A bus trip to the Brest Brest-Domachevo ran once a day. In summer, tourist arrivals increased the number of trips.

During the summer the population increased to about 20,000 people thanks to the arrival of tourists who came to enjoy good air that originated from the pine forests surrounding the village and turned him into a true resort.

Many of the peasants who lived around Netherlands were the so-called Holenderin. These Dutchmen were not hostile to Jews. The Netherlands were very laborious. They built their houses and fields very beautiful and useful. They were Protestant or Calvinist religion so they had separated church and cemetery.

Around the Netherlands were the populations of Poles, Ukrainians and Belarusians who lived in poverty. Worked like deer to the Polish landowners who owned land. Domachevo, if I remember, belonged to one of the richest families of the Polish nobility: the Radziwil. These tax or tax charged to residents of Domachevo as village lands were theirs. Sent their collectors once a year. When Domachevo grew and became a central town in the region, came some Catholic Polish families to work in public offices such as mail, leadership, governance, public education -- seats that were forbidden to Jews.

Every Sunday, farmers came near to pray in their churches. Dressed in traditional clothing walking with shoes hanging on their shoulders. Upon entering the town, they wore shoes to go and pray. At the end of prayers, they used to sit on the main street on the wooden railings that existed there. The rail was a kind of defense of the wooden sidewalks. These rails were located in front of houses on the left side of the street. They spent hours conversing with each other while munching sunflower seeds and watching the passers-by.

Weddings are held on Sundays. People arrived in long caravans of carts drawn by horses adorned with ribbons and flowers. An orchestra or rather a small town band was formed by accordions, trumpets and drums. Folk songs were played with emotion. All occupants of the wagons were singing in choir and music volume penetrated the village houses.

The Jews came to Domachevo possibly from Minsk, Gomel and other towns of Belarus behind the Netherlands. The Jewish cemetery had gravestones dating from the 60s of the 19th century onwards. The first Jews were nomadic professions such as: later, shoemakers, tailors, etc. Passed by the people and did work on behalf of the Netherlands and other residents until Domachevo fixed set.

The Jewish people lived almost separate from the Gentiles. The houses were of wood and built in a single Storey from pine trees growing in nearby forests. They were located next to each other and separated by wooden fences surrounding the courtyards. The main street had the front of the houses on the left a wooden sidewalk railing. Despite their poverty, the town changed its appearance and on Friday and Saturday night was completely transformed. In every house were lit candles that gave them an aspect of holiness. On Saturdays, the rabbis made their naps swinging in their hammocks and discussing Torah.

On Friday night and Saturday during the day, in summer, came the members of the community, especially youth and young women, to watch and be watched. Adult, youth and children walking in the streets in families. They were blessed to each other, exchanged views and moved on. Anyone who used it had new clothes on your walk down the main street. The couple walked arm in arm, communicating its commitments and getting a "Mázl-Tov" to all passers-by. In the village there were, at that time movies, so almost all events were held in the main street. La Casa Del Pueblo (Dom Ledowa) had sometimes theatrical companies that came from other places. Also came once in a while a circus. This all happened in the summer and into the fall. In summer, it was dark past nine at night. These activities could not be done in winter because dark came at 4 pm and sometimes the temperature dropped to -20 degrees. Domachevo was a place of typical Jewish people. It was on the right bank of the river Bug to a mile from shore. In summer the villagers went to bathe in the Bug especially on Saturdays. For its good climate and beautiful scenery happened to be in the spring and summer, especially in a town called by tourists. It was also a place of cure for lung disease.

In spring people had to paint the trees with lime, for their protection, to a certain height. This together with the flowering of the same, gave a very beautiful thing. Changes in the four seasons were very marked.

In the absence of electricity was only battery-operated radio or galena. Many families planted sunflowers in their gardens or patios and some also had a barn in back of the house.

The main economy of the town was the summer tourism. This helped the growth of the town and its surroundings. Pensions were built many summer houses for that purpose. The political movements were the bund and communism. With the move came a few Hasidic rabbis in other cities. Some famous people came to spend their summer vacation. Most of the adult population of the village was a religious and youth was much less or completely secular.

There was a library heavily used by residents and vacationers. In summer were presented some theater groups. There were several pension and vacation homes that eventually became famous. Many of the Jewish people worked very hard during the summer months in order to survive for the rest of the year. Tailors, cobblers, etc., worked all year. Despite that life was going smoothly, without much hope except those who hoped to emigrate to America. However, the town had so much life and joy.

To one or two people came a newspaper, in Yiddish, from Brest, which circulated among numerous readers. On the death of Marshal Josef Pilsudski, which occurred in 1935, the situation worsened due to the growing anti-Semitism that the government of the colonels encouraged to ingratiate itself with the Nazis. In that year I was twice attacked by kids in my school with the cry, "Jews to Palestine." Both times I was protected by a teacher at my school who was not anti-Semitic. During the 1937 pogrom, there were several threats that did not materialize, at least in the village. These are some of my memories of Domachevo.

## EPILOGUE

These notes are based on information provided by Ben-Zion Blushtein, a survivor of the catastrophe that produced the Nazi regime in Europe, the Yad Vashem and the trial held in London against Andrusha Sowaniuk, Domachevo Ukrainian resident, who with the entry of the Nazis, in 1941, volunteered for the German police and was charged and sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of about 16 Jewish people. He died last year [2006] in a prison in London.

In 1939 Russia and Germany signed a nonaggression pact ([Ribentrop-Molotov Pact](#)) by which Poland would also be distributed. The Bug River would be the border between Germany and Russia. Domachevo came under Russian domination. In September the Germans occupied eastern part of the Bug, including Domachevo. In those few days the Germans did not bother the Jewish population because they may have known that the Jews were Russian citizens and they knew that they would withdraw soon. During the Russian occupation the people lived in relative peace. During the first half of 1941, they began to feel a change in the environment. The number of Russian soldiers grew and built many military buildings. In early June 1941 came to town a postcard from some Jews who had remained in the part of Poland occupied by the Germans west of the Bug. The card said "Get ready, the shoijet is ready to come! On the night before the invasion happened in the film a movie about the life of Chmielnicky Bogdan. At the end of the film one of the attendees, possibly a German infiltrator who spoke Russian, stopped suddenly and said: "Is not it a nice movie? See a more beautiful tomorrow." On June

22, 1941 the Germans launched [Operation Barbarossa](#), invading Russia. Domachevo, being a border town, suffered the first attack of the Germans. In the attack that day half the town was burned to the right of the main street. Oddly enough, the soldiers of the Wehrmacht did not cause problems for people on their way to Russia. Rather, they warned people to beware of SS units that were dangerous and murderous. On the third day of the occupation came a special unit of the SS: "The totenkopen, or skulls as their logo was a skull cap, units were more brutal and murderous SS. Since their arrival in the village, they started kidnapping and people panicked. SS fear caused people to disappear from the streets. In a few days Melobartov Rabbi was caught with a large group of his Chassidim. All were killed immediately on the banks of the River Bug. The news of the killings shocked the townspeople. Weeks after the occupation, the SS established the ghetto in the town that was burned during the invasion. They fenced with barbed wire and fences. Thus all communication with the outside world vanished.

From June 22, 1941, until September 20, 1942, the Nazis caused a living hell in Domachevo. Daily massacres, hunger, cold and disease were constant in the 15 months that followed. On September 18, 1942, arrived at a village totenkopen unit. This unit selected a group of men and took them to a sports field near the Catholic church where they were digging two huge pits for burying, telling them it was a regiment of Russian soldiers who had rebelled. The ghetto I panic. Two days later, on September 20 was the eve of Yom Kippur, all the people who had survived the inferno were carried by the totenkopen, assisted by Ukrainian units on the outskirts of town, near the Catholic Church. The all denuded men, women and children, were killed at the edge of the giant graves. Only about 10 escaped, of whom 5 survived. All my immediate family: grandmother, uncles, cousins, etc. were killed. The few who survived, either hiding or fleeing, were delivered by the farmers in exchange for a kilo of sugar or flour. The very few who survived did so because they were lucky to join a group of Russian partisans. There were groups hostile to the Jewish partisans and groups that were not. There were also Jewish partisan groups. Ben-Zion Blushtein survived as a partisan and immigrated to Israel from war deposed. He wrote a book in Hebrew, entitled "One From the Flock", in which he recounts his experiences during the war. The book is extraordinary. It describes all the details of village life during the Russian occupation (1939-1941) and the Nazi occupation (1941-1942) and his odyssey as partisan and as a survivor.

## THE RETURN

Last year, on Tuesday, 11 April 2006, I visited the village. It had been 68 years, one month and three days since I left there, on Tuesday, 8 March 1938. We found a town without Jews and sad. Some houses, the main school building, the Orthodox and Catholic churches are the same as they were in 1938. Domachevo looks like a ghost town compared to how it was before the war. No one hears the cries of children playing in the streets or the idische Mam doing their shopping. Idish not hear the story that became old or was removed from the town's history. Everything seems to have disappeared in the cataclysm that race was "superior." Getting there after so long it becomes a journey through a tunnel of time traveling to the past. Already the night journey from Warsaw to Brest (Brisk) is an incredible experience. The passing seasons in low light, the monotony of the noise of the train on the tracks produce an impression of a journey to the extermination camps or travel to a distant past and the memories indicate that there was something that no longer exists. You are one with something that seems familiar but is not. Feel the excitement of childhood memories, not finding one

and only seeing familiar names in Russian, my family recorded in a few monuments from the mass graves of almost 4,000 Jews killed is indescribable. It is an experience not to be repeated in life. It is an encounter with the killer dead without being able to explain why it happened so great tragedy. The question that immediately arises is, What fault had children and old to be subjected to so many unimaginable physical and psychological torture? Hunger, cold, humiliation, isolation and murder, all in the name of a superior race and an ancient hatred that ended in the largest tragedy suffered by the Jewish people throughout its history. All the peoples of Eastern Europe, one way or another, had a similar tragedy. There is no why but if a never say never and as the great German philosopher, Karl Jaspers, after the war, "a duty to remember and forget is a sin".

### THE GATHERING

On Sunday, 16 April 2006, I met with Blushtein in Tel Aviv. I remembered Domachevo. He recognized me instantly. He was aged 82 years and was a friend of my brother. During our meeting, at home, I confirmed many details of the suffering of Jews during the German occupation of Domachevo.

When the Russians arrived in 1944, in their advance toward Germany, they built some monuments bearing the names of almost all killed. In these monuments are, in Russian, the names of most of my family mentioned earlier.

Peace to their remains.