

Early Settlements

Jews came to Gomel around the end of the 16th century. Gomel used to be a trading center. At that time it was the eastern most town of the Polish empire so it was the edge of where the German Jews went. They were Ashkenazi Jews.

Jews were better off in Gomel compared to other places. During the Russian period, Gomel wasn't run by the Russian authorities. It was a town that belonged to Duke Paskevich and his family. They were relatives of the Polish crown. Paskevich didn't discriminate against the Jews. It was understood that Jews brought money to the area and were a persecuted people so they were allowed to carry weapons.

Although there were laws that gave preferences to the Jews, there were also discriminatory laws. For example there was a law that didn't allow synagogues be higher than a church and the synagogue had to be situated in a way that the Christians didn't notice it.

The local authorities encouraged Jews to assimilate. Jews who converted to Christianity were given preferences.

Beilica and early Jewish settlements

There were many Jews that couldn't get permission to live in Gomel who lived across the river in a place called Belica (now it's part of Gomel but it didn't use to be). The Jews living in Gomel didn't want more Jews to come: the more people, the less work. In order to come and settle in Gomel you had to have permission from Paskevich. Paskevich was a very clever man. He lived near some swampland and he told the Jews in Beilica that if they dried out the swampland they could live there. So they dried out the swampland and settled there. This was around 1750's or 1760's. The Jews were living right next to Paskevich. It was an old tradition that the Jews lived next to the owner because he was the one who protected them.

Jewish Neighborhoods

There were no ghettos in Gomel like there were in Europe. But there were 4 parts of town that used to be Jewish parts.

One part was known as “Gagal Moat.” It was where the poorest Jews lived. This was where the first Jews in Gomel lived.

Another Jewish part was called “Caucas.” It was named after the Georgian mountains. After the Russian army beat the Turkish army, Paskevich liberated Yerevan (1827), an Armenian town and brought more than 100 families to Gomel and the area they settled in became known as Caucas. It is known that they were Jews because one of the first documents from those families was a letter asking to build a synagogue in Gomel.

Another part of town became known as “America.” When the Jews living in Caucas started making money they moved to this area, nearer the center of town. Many of the Jews that were living there were artisans. The Jewish orthodox also lived in this part of the town. It became known as “America” because in the early 1900s many of the Jews living there left for America because of the pogroms. People still know this area as “America.”

The fourth part of town was “Rumiantsevskoe.” It was a couple blocks in the center of town and it was where the wealthy and well known Jewish families lived. Famous doctors and lawyers lived there. Important people.

Askenazi and Sepharadim lived in separate areas and each had their rich and poor sections.

There was a street called “Bayaray” (sp?) where the rich Sephardim lived. The name is for noblemen who were descended from kings.

Pogroms

The pogroms in Belarus didn't take place until after Belarus became part of the Russian federation which was at the end of the 18th century. Anti-Semitism existed before this but it didn't have the same character that it did after becoming part of the Russian federation.

The pogrom in 1903 started in a market where horses were traded.

Rabbis

There were 2 kinds of rabbis in Gomel. One that was paid and served in the community and one that the government appointed. He was chosen by the government because of his popularity in the community and his ability to work with the authorities. He was a liaison between the non Jewish authorities and the Jewish community. He didn't have to have studied in yeshiva. The last appointed Rabbi in Gomel was named Meintz (sp?). He was a self employed businessman. In the pogrom of 1903 he put up his own money to buy weapons for the Jews. The authorities were very upset because they had appointed him and he was arming the Jews.

Conscription

All males, Jews and non Jews, had to serve 25 years in the Army, except for the first male born of a family. Men who were 19 years old could be taken into the army but from Jewish families they took them when they were 13 year olds. Since the Jews considered a boy mature at 13 they considered them old enough to take. But they didn't take them straight into the army. First they took them into special schools where they lived and studied called "canton." The conditions were very bad. Many died during that period because of the poor living conditions. They were encouraged to convert to Christianity. Those that converted were moved to better places and would be made officers in the Russian army. Those that wouldn't convert had to stay there until they were 19 and then they had to go into the army for 25 years. Even with the promise of better conditions most did not convert. They decided they would rather die. The government cancelled the program because it wasn't working.

People who were married with 2 children didn't have to go into the army. In documents you will sometimes see a 13 year old Jewish boy marrying a 30 year old Jewish widow with 2 kids!

(PZ note: Jews were not allowed into the Russian army until 1827)

Factory of Frumkin



The building was a factory. The owner was a Jewish man named Frumkin and it was called the factory of Frumkin. Many Jews worked here. It was the biggest industrial factory in town and they were doing all sorts of stuff with metal. The red part was the main office of the factory.

. Cemeteries



One of the oldest Jewish cemeteries used to be in this location. This is the actual fence of the cemetery. One hundred years ago this was the edge of the town. The cemeteries were not part of the town. On the other side of the road was a Christian cemetery.



This stadium was the location of the first and oldest Jewish cemetery in Gomel. The oldest graves were from the late 17th century. The most recent were from the pogrom in 1905. After World War II the Soviets took the graves out and made it a stadium. The only reason the Soviets kept the cemetery as it was up until the war was that some of the people who died in the pogrom of 1905 were the victims of the Tsar. During the reconstruction of this stadium workers found some bones. They asked the police about these bones and after a little investigation they remembered that before the war this was the location of a big Jewish cemetery. The Jewish community was allowed to dig out most of the remaining bones and rebury them.



This is the building of the hevra kadisha, the brotherhood of people who work in the cemetery and prepare the bodies for burial. The last prayers were taken here. The Jewish community asked the authorities to give them back or buy this building. But the authorities said that according to documents the building didn't exist and they refused to give back something that didn't exist. For more than 120 years there were no documents on this building but up to 5 years ago people were living in it.

Doctor Alexander House



This building was built in 1903. In it lived a very famous man named Nachum Alexander. Alexander was a very famous eye doctor. He was from a very poor Jewish family. In order to earn some money he started working in a large hospital just as a regular nurse serving in a very low position. But he was a good worker and the Paskevich family gave him money to go to school to become a doctor. He became the most famous doctor in the Belarus area but he was probably the poorest person on the street. The house was given to him.

There is the story of a rich man in Gomel who had eye problems and went to Warsaw to see a doctor. The doctor looked at him and asked where he was from and when the man said Gomel the doctor said, are you crazy!? Why are you coming here? You have an outstanding doctor in Gomel!

Dr. Alexander was so famous that when the Soviets came they didn't make him move out of his house, even though he was a Jew.

He lived here until 1923. Today it is used as a wedding house.
