

History of Kremenets

Kremenets

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Kremenets (Pol. Krzemieniec), town in Volhynia, Ukrainian S.S.R. from 1944; under Lithuania until 1569; Poland-Lithuania until 1793; Russia until 1918, and again under Poland until 1939. Kremenets was occupied by Nazi Germany in June 1941. Jews are first mentioned there in 1438, when they were granted a charter by the Lithuanian grand duke. They were expelled in 1495 along with all other Jews in Lithuania, returning in 1503. The number of Jews in the town rose from 240 (10.6% of the total population) in 1552 to 500 in 1578 and 845 (15% of the total) in 1629. The community developed and prospered in the 16th and 17th centuries, up to 1648. It was a center of Arenda activity and the related trade. Among the rabbis of that period were Mordecai b. Abraham Jaffe and Samson b. Bezalel, brother of Judah Loew b. Bezalel of Prague. The community participated in the work of the Councils of the Lands. Outstanding among the scholars of the yeshiva at the beginning of the 17th century was Joseph b. Moses of Kremenets. In the Chmielnicki massacres (1648-49) and the Russian and Swedish wars soon after, many Jews were savagely murdered and many others fled. Subsequently the community was unable to regain its former importance. In 1765 only 649 Jews lived there. The Jews were prohibited from rebuilding the houses burned down in the frequent fires that broke out in the town. At the beginning of Russian rule Kremenets was an impoverished community of petty traders and craftsmen.

Kremenets was within the range of 50 versts from the Russian border, which was prohibited to Jews, but the authorities did not apply this prohibition to the town. The number of Jews increased from 3,791 in 1847 to 6,539 (37% of the total population) in 1897. At the end of the 19th century they played an important role in the economy of the town, in particular the paper industry, and the Jewish carpenters and cobblers of Kremenets exported their goods to other towns in Poland and Russia. There was an active cultural life in the community with the Haskalah and Hasidism competing for influence. The Haskalah writer Isaac Baer Levinsohn lived there, as did the Hasid R. Mordecai, father-in-law of Nahum Twersky of Chernobyl. In 1918-20 Kremenets suffered from the attacks of marauding bands in the Ukraine. In 1921, 6,619 Jews lived there. In modern Poland the Jews faced both the need for reorganization of their markets, as they were cut off from Russia, and the anti-Jewish policies of Polish society and state. Cultural life continued, influenced mostly by Zionism. Two periodicals in Yiddish, which appeared at the beginning of the 1930's, merged in 1933 onto one weekly newspaper, Kremenitser Lebn.

Holocaust Period

The Soviet authorities took over the town on September 22, 1939. In the spring of 1940 the refugees from western Poland were obliged to register with the authorities and to declare whether they wished to take up Soviet citizenship or return to their former homes, now under German occupation. For family reasons, many refugees declared that they preferred to return; that summer they were exiled to the Soviet interior. All Jewish communal life was forbidden, and

Zionist leaders moved to other cities to keep their past activities from the knowledge of the authorities. By 1941 the Jewish population had increased to over 15,000 including over 4,000 refugees.

A few days after the German-Soviet war broke out (June 22, 1941) the Germans reached the area. Hundreds of young Jews managed to flee to the Soviet Union. A pogrom broke out in early July 1941, when Ukrainians, aided by Germans, killed 800 men, women and children. In August 1941 the Gestapo ordered all Jews with academic status to report for registration. All those who did so were murdered, and thus the Jewish community's leadership was destroyed. That month the Germans set fire to the main synagogue and exacted a fine of 11 kg. of gold from the community. They also imposed a Judenrat, headed by Benjamin Katz, but he was murdered for his refusal to collaborate with the Nazis. Eventually the Judenrat was comprised of a number of people whose influence was detrimental. At the end of January 1942 a ghetto was imposed and on March 1 was closed off from the rest of the city. The inmates endured great hardship and there was a serious shortage of water. On August 10, 1942, the Germans initiated a two-week long Aktion to annihilate the inmates, and at last set the ghetto ablaze to drive out those in hiding. Fifteen hundred able-bodied persons were dispatched to slave labor in Bialokrynicia, where they later met their death. The vast majority of the ghetto inhabitants rounded up in the Aktion were taken in groups and murdered over trenches dug near the railway station, near a former army camp. The local Zionist leader Benjamin Landsberg committed suicide at this time. Only 14 of the Kremenets community survived the Holocaust. Societies of former residents of Kremenets function in Israel, the U.S. and Argentina.