

JEWISH LIFE IN TELZ LITHUANIA

The following information is gleaned from 3 books, entitled “The world that was - Poland” and “The world that was - Lithuania” and “The Road from Letichev”. These books cover the history of Jewish life in Eastern Europe from 1870 through the end of WWII (or the 80 years preceding WWII). These books include memoirs of Jews who lived through this period of history, describing what life was like during this period down to a personal level. Describing the food they ate, their finances (poverty), their homes, their problems and relationships they had with their Jewish neighbors, with their gentile neighbors, and with the government. So that the reader can feel the flavor of Jewish life in that time in Eastern Europe.

Whereas Lithuania and Ukraine were ruled by Russia, Poland was an independent country. Jewish life was similar in all 3 countries. For example, in all 3 countries, the Jews tended to the craftsmen, and the gentiles tended to be the farmers. In each village, the Jewish homes tended to be concentrated in the village center, and the gentile homes were spread out in the suburbs. The Jews all spoke Yiddish in the home as their first language, and spoke the secular language (Russian or Ukrainian) with an accent. The central government gave the Jews a certain amount of autonomy, in which an elder rabbi of the community would represent the village to the central government. Only a small minority of Jews were nonreligious, but they respected the Orthodox hierarchy and enjoyed good relations the Orthodox community, and did not mind religious affairs being decided by the religious rabbis. Jews had close friendly relations with many of their gentile neighbors. However, they did not have the same citizenship rights and protections as their gentile neighbors. They were often oppressed by the central government, and often oppressed and even killed by their gentile neighbors.

Focusing on Lithuania, and more specifically on a Lithuanian city called Telz by Jews and Telshai by non-Jews. It yeshiveh, called Telz Yeshiva, started 130 yrs ago, in 1870. At that time, the city of Telz had about 6000 residents, half of them Jewish and half of them gentile. The Jews lived within the city limits, and the gentiles lived outside the city limits. The yeshiva had about a dozen rabbinic teachers and about 330 students. The book “The world that was - Lithuania” has a class picture of the faculty and

students from 1932. It is interesting that none of them were Chasidim, none of them had beards, their hats were generally not black in color and were secular in shape.

When the yeshiva was founded, the smartest, wisest and most respected person in the city was Rabbi Eliezer Gordon. He wore many hats. He was the rosh yeshiva in that he was both dean of the yeshiva and gave a daily class in Talmud. He was also head rabbi of the town. He also represented the town to the central government. Each successive rosh yeshiva was a son-in-law of the previous Rosh Yeshiva. Some years before WWII, the Russian government, which ruled Lithuania, outlawed regular-sized yeshivas. It allowed only small yeshivas of 20 students or less. To avoid closing the yeshiva altogether, the yeshiva opened up several branches in neighboring towns, and split up its student body among the branches, so that each branch yeshiva would have less than 20 students and would therefore be legal.

In 1940, the yeshiva decided that to survive, the yeshiva, along with its entire student body, would have to move en-mass to America. It sent two of teachers, Rabbi Bloch and Rabbi Katz, as emissaries to the U.S. to make the arrangements. But, while the rabbis were in the U.S., the Nazis invaded Lithuania and massacred all the Jews of the city. They forced the Jewish men to dig their own graves and then shot them. A half year later, they killed all the women of the city. Rabbi Katz, one of the emissaries, lost his wife and 10 children.

Some rabbis and students of Telz survived by being fortunate enough to be out of the city when the Nazis came. They immigrated to the US and founded Telz Yeshiva in the 105th St neighborhood of Cleveland. They later moved the yeshiva to Wickliffe.

At its height, in the 1960s, Telz Yeshiva in Cleveland had about 400 unmarried students and about 100 married students and rabbis.