

SPEECH ON UKRAINIAN POGROMS (in outline form)

My speech today is about a tragic episode of Jewish history -- the pogroms in Ukraine from 1914 to 1920.

My speech will focus on 2 Ukrainian villages

One village is Tetiv.

Many founding members of our shul years ago came from Tetiv.

Including Lester Taven's father.

And including Violet Spevak's late husband.

In fact, Violet Spevak's late husband witnessed the pogroms personally and wrote a memoir about it.

120 mi west of Tetiv is the village of Yarmolinitz where my grandmother was born and raised.

She described me, in detail, what life was like, and what the pogroms were like, in that village

Between these 2 villages is a city called Vinnitsa,

where my wife Svetlana grew up. It was also the home of the famous novelist Shalom Alaichem

Despite the 120 mi separation between these 2 villages,

eye-witness testimonies about what life was like and what pogroms were like are amazingly identical for the 2 villages.

To give you an idea what life was like before the pogroms started, in 1914,

each village had several thousand Jews living in the center of the village, running businesses,
surrounded by several thousand gentile peasant farmers.

Essentially all Jews were orthodox, and literate in Yiddish and Hebrew.

All Jewish boys, and some girls, attended cheder (Hebrew school) 6 days a week, from morning till evening,
with just 1 hour per day for secular subjects.

Ukraine was ruled by Russia, and Ukrainian Jews were drafted into the Russian army, where they had to abandon their religious traditions.

So my greatgrandfather was desperate to avoid the draft.

So disqualified himself from the draft by chopping off his left thumb with a hatchet.

That was common thing to do in those days.

The Jews had no police protection.

The Jews nevertheless got along well with their gentile neighbors

That changed in **1914** with the start of WWI.

When word reached the Jews in this area that WWI had started,

and they realized that the war started on Tisha B-Av, they considered it a bad omen.

All the Jews visited the cemetery to pray, at the graves of their ancestors, that Gd spare them from harm.

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During the WWI, the Russian army suffered a series of defeats, which was blamed on the Jews.
which resulted in periodic pogroms.

After the Russian czar was murdered in 1917, the pogroms increased in frequency and severity.

The pogroms were perpetrated mainly by 5 groups – red army, white army, Ukrainian national army, Polish army, and Cossacks.

I'll describe each one individually as follows:

The **red army** was pro-communist and pro-Russia.

It usually protected Jews from pogroms, but its soldiers sometimes participated in pogroms.

The **white army** was pro-Russia too, but ANTI-communist and anti-Jews. A war correspondent embedded with the white army reported that the white army officers had (in his words) "an obsession" with hatred of Jews, and encouraged pogroms.

The **Ukrainian National Army** fought for Ukrainian independence from Russia.

It made a deal with the Polish government to give part of western Ukraine to Poland if the Poles help defeat the red army and white army.

So the **Polish army** entered Ukraine, fighting off the other armies and killing Jewish civilians.

The 5th group perpetrating pogroms were **Cossak militias**, each under its own warlord

Most Cossaks carried sabers, with which they stabbed and mutilated Jews.

One gang of Cossaks would enter a Jewish village, and kill and steal until they got it out of their system and leave.

And a week later, another gange of Cossaks, under another warlord, would enter the village and do the same thing.

During the worst pogroms, from 1918 through 1920,

gentiles stopped doing business with Jews, so Jews were literally starving.

Starvation caused their bodies to swell, and also caused a typhoid epidemic which killed many.

Common ways that Jews were killed in pogroms was by

slitting throats,

cutting off limbs,

burning Jews' homes where the inhabitants would be either incinerated or shot to death while trying to escape.

A Cossak demanded a ring from my grandmother's girlfriend, and when she could not get the ring off her finger fast enough because her finger was swollen from starvation, the Cossack cut off her finger to get the ring.

Cossaks would cut off ears to get earrings.

Children were killed by being bashed on the ground.

Girls were raped and then killed.

In winter, girls were chased into the river, where they froze to death.

Eye-witnesses testified that when they were hiding from attackers, they saw family members being killed and did nothing to help

because coming to their family member's aid would entail being killed themselves.

Jews, being held at gunpoint, would pay large ransoms to attackers to spare their lives,

And sometimes, after paying the ransom, they and their families would be killed anyway

Jews paid peasants to hide them in their homes --

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But some peasants killed the Jews that they were hiding or handed them over to the Cossaks to be killed.
Most of the Jewish population of Tietiv was killed
The Jewish community ran out of shrouds, so corpses were buried with their street clothes on.

The last pogrom of Tietiv started on 3/26/20.

Cossaks went through the village, burning every house and killing every Jew they could find.
Cossaks burned down a large synagogue, in which 1500-2000 Jews had taken refuge, and shot every Jew who fled the flames.
Jews who evaded the attackers, including Violet Spevak's husband (at age 8), were fleeing along the road that led out of the village.
As they were running, they were being shot at by local peasants.
Some Jews literally ran themselves to death out of terror.
So the road leading out of town was strewn with dead bodies.

In June 1920, the Joint Distribution Committee sent 2 emissaries from New York to this region of Ukraine to distribute aid and negotiate with gentile leaders to end the violence.
The situation was so dangerous that those 2 emissaries were murdered and buried in Yarmolinitz.

In my wife's city, Vinnitsa, Ukrainians tried to perpetrate pogroms,
but Jews in his city (including my wife's greatgrandfather) stood with rifles on rooftops and fought off the attacking Cossaks.
The village of Tietiv, too, initially formed a self-defense militia of about 100 men and boys, but it was too small to succeed

The pogroms ended by 1921, with the red army took control of the country and ended the violence.

This episode of Jewish history provides a lesson of what the consequences were for Jews lacking a state of their own and therefore lacking the means to defend themselves.

It is also a lesson in sacrifice the Ukrainian Jews made to maintain their faith, when abandoning their faith could have saved them from hardship.

Epilog:

Petlura, who led Ukrainian National Army that murdered tens of thousands of Jews, was never brought to justice for his war crimes. He instead immigrated to Paris where he lived in peace. While taking a stroll one day, Petlura was assassinated by a Ukrainian Jew whose family was murdered by Petlura's soldiers. The Jewish assassin was put on trial for murder, but was found not guilty.

Similarly, Anton Dinikin (pron. Deneekin), who led the white army that murdered tens of thousands of Jews, was never brought to justice for his war crimes. He immigrated to the United States, and died of a heart attack in 1947 while vacationing in Ann Arbor Michigan.