

Wojślawice

Ukr. Войславичі, Yid. וואַיִסלאַװיץ

Wednesday was a market day in town.

The Jews usually prepared for that day all week.

David Eines, *Yizker-bukh tsum fareybikn dem ondenk fun der horev-gevorener Yidisher kehile Voyslavits* (The Memorial Book of Wojślawice), Tel Aviv 1970

Origins ¶ In the early 1440s, Wojślawice was granted municipal rights. Shortly afterward, in 1445, Judka, a Jew from Wojślawice, acted as one of the litigants in a case registered at the court in Lwów. An independent Jewish community, however, was not established in Wojślawice until several decades later. In 1564, the list of poll-tax payers in Wojślawice comprised 125 Jewish residents. The first Ashkenazi Jew who is known to have obtained permission to settle in Zamość – in 1584 – was one Abraham of Wojślawice. In 1616, the Jewish community of Wojślawice applied for permission to build a new wooden synagogue in place of the old one, which had been destroyed in a fire.

Scandals, thefts, and fires ¶ The central figure in the first sex scandal reported in 16th-century rabbinic responsas was one Moshe Haim from Lithuania, who left his pregnant wife at home and married another woman in Wojślawice. Another case discussed in the early modern responsa focused on a Jew who joined the army as a dragoon and died in battle. Wojślawice suffered as a result of the invasions of

Khmelnitsky's Cossacks in 1648 and the Cossack and Muscovite forces in 1658. Not only Ukrainians and Swedes, Polish troops also committed abuses, sparking riots. These abuses were documented, for example, in a lawsuit filed on February 24, 1670, at the Crown Tribunal in Lublin. In this court case, Wojślawice Mayor Mikołaj Hupała and local townspeople, including Jews such as the inn-keeper Majer, as well as individuals named Mendel, Mendeluk, Zusman, Abraham, and Lejba, sued Royal Cavalry Captain Mikołaj Andrzej Firlej as well as other commanders unit headed by Feliks Potocki, the Voivode of Sieradz, for the damage that troops had caused to the town traders during the trade fair on June 23, 1668. According to the attached record, several homes were set on fire and, in addition, the soldiers violently attacked local Jews, demolishing and robbing the stores. ¶ Over the centuries, fires devastated Wojślawice regularly, once every few years. These are documented by numerous surviving records regarding the sites that were burnt. Despite these disasters, Wojślawice has one of the region's largest number of surviving architectural monuments



Market day in Wojślawice, 1931. Photo by Kazimierz Czernicki, digital collection of the Panorama of Cultures Association

in proportion to the size of the town. Sacred buildings of three faiths can be seen here – a 16th-century Roman

Catholic church, a 17th-century Orthodox church, and a synagogue built in the 19th century.

A FALSE MESSIAH ¶ **Jacob Leibovitz Frank** (1726–1791), the last great leader of the Jewish messianic movement inaugurated in the 1660s by pseudo-messiah Shabbetai Zvi in the Ottoman Empire, arrived in Poland in December 1755, to begin his prophetic Sabbatean mission. In 1756, he was expelled from Poland and, together with other followers of Sabbateanism, placed under the ban of excommunication by the rabbinical courts across Europe. Frank’s crypto-sabbatean sect, after the death of Shabbetai Zvi, rejected the Talmud, preached redemption through sexual orgiastic behavior and sinning in general, and encouraged its members to undergo baptism to redeem the fallen divine sparks in the shards of Christianity. In 1760, following a denunciation and accusation of insincere conversion, Frank was arrested, tried, and sentenced by the consistory court to 13 years of imprisonment at the Jasna Góra Monastery. Frank left Poland in 1773, and in 1786 moved to Offenbach am Main. His story as a sectarian and heretic served as the basis for Olga Tokarczuk’s 2015 novel *Księgi Jakubowe* (Jacob’s Books) and Adrian Panek’s 2011 film *Daas* (Knowledge). ¶ While, as a heretical Jewish sect, Frankism was not of great significance in the history of Judaism, some descendants of its followers, already assimilated and integrated into Polish society, played an important role in the history of Polish culture. This is because some members of the Catholic Church hierarchy saw in Frankism an opportunity to convert the “infidel” Jews. Some magnates also used Frankism as a proselytising tool – including a branch of the Potocki family that was connected with Wojślawice.

Marianna Potocka (née Daniłowicz) was the owner of the Wojsławice landed estate and a Catholic supporter of Frankism. In 1760, she invited family and followers of Jacob Frank to settle on her property. Potocka allotted the land steward's house situated on the road to Uchanie to Hannah Frank, the wife of Jacob, who at that time was held prisoner by Jesuits at the Jasna Góra Monastery. In addition to Hannah, several hundred Frankists came to live in Wojsławice. However, they were not welcomed in the town, where a traditional Jewish community fiercely opposed their presence. Indeed, the presence of the Frankists did provoke tragic events. In order to compromise the Jewish community and take control of the town, the Frankists were reported to have sent a Jewish woman one night to the Roman Catholic parish priest of Wojsławice. She falsely presented herself as the local rabbi's wife. She accused her supposed husband, and other rabbis, and the communal

leaders, and the entire Jewish community of the ritual murder of Mikołaj, the two-and-a-half-year-old son of a couple named Marcin and Katarzyna from the village of Czarnołozy. ¶ Adam Rojecki, the hereditary ruler (burggrave) of a Wojsławice that belonged to the Potocki family, lodged a complaint against the rabbis and elders of the community. They were arrested, imprisoned in Krasnystaw, and sentenced to death after a trial with testimony extracted under torture. The punishment was for them to be drawn and quartered, but – at the intercession of the Jesuits from Krasnystaw – the Jews who declared willingness to be baptised had their sentence changed to beheading and were subsequently buried with honours at the municipal cemetery. Rabbi Herszko Józefowicz managed to hang himself in jail. His body was tied to a horse's tail, dragged across the town, and burned at the stake; his ashes were scattered in the wind.

“[...] Then the bodies of all of them were handsomely laid in coffins, carried to the Church at the public cemetery in the suburb, where they reposed till the second day. As to the vile rabbi who strangled himself with a cord found in prison, his corpse, as ordered by the decree, was tied by the executioner to a horse's tail, dragged across the town, and burnt at the stake, and the ashes were scattered in the wind. ¶ The following morning, on the orders of the Most Honourable Pastor, who arrived from his estate specifically for that day, the bodies were carried to the cathedral in a crowded and candle-lit procession of schools, townsfolk, guilds, and fraternities; and after a wake of singing and many a Holy Mass, at the special request of one of the newly-baptised, upon the will of the Most Honourable Rt. Rev. Bishop and the Most Honourable Castellan and Chatelaine of Słońsk, they were transferred to the Church of Jesuit Frs; and after the usual rites performed by the same Most Honourable Rt. Rev. Bishop, were duly entombed there. ¶ Processus judiciarius in causa patrati cruenti infanticidii per infideles judaeos seniores synagogae wojslavicensis Ac Alios In Officio Castrensi Capitaneali Crasnostaviensi Definitus Anno Domini 1761.

The Jews of Wojsławice were then faced with a choice: either to undergo baptism

or to be banished from the town. As a result, Orthodox Jews fled, and about

300 Frankists accepted Christianization in the church in Wojsławice. The memory of these events was preserved in the local community and the phrase “the dissenters of Wojsławice” (Yid.: *voislavitzer meshumedim*) became a Yiddish idiom. After these events, an epidemic broke out, which Jacob Frank himself described in *The Collection of the Words of the Lord*, writing: [...] *In Wojslawic smallpox prevailed among the children of our people. Anyone who fell ill with it was doomed to die, and before someone caught it, a black bird flew to his house and stood [there]. That was a sure sign that someone in that house would fall sick.* The town’s citizens were seized with terror: they were convinced that the

unjustly accused rabbi had cursed them before his death. Decimated by the disease, the Frankists soon left Wojsławice, and Marianna Potocka had five roadside chapels dedicated to five saints built at entry points to the town and the palace. To this day, Wojsławice is thus protected by them: Chapels to St. John of Nepomuk, standing near the pond and protecting it from flood; to St. Florian, protecting it from fires; to St. Thecla, offering protection from fire and poor harvest; as well as to St. Barbara and St. Michael the Archangel – patron saints of good death. The bodies of the baptised Frankists who died in Wojsławice were buried at the local churchyard.

“Our house stood between the Catholic and Orthodox churches; I used to see the old Orthodox parish priest every day, and the young Catholic priest would even visit us and joke with my dad, who was a Hasid. He tried on my dad’s coat one day and said that he would come to pray in the vestibule of the synagogue. One day, that priest took me to the church crypt, where I saw glass coffins, and inside them I saw figures of rabbis that looked as if they were made of wax and had grey beards. They were lying there, wearing *shtreimels*, dressed in satin coats, wrapped up in silk straps.” ¶ Yakov Tenenbojm, *In the Town of My Parents and Grandparents*, in: *Yizker-bukh tsum fareybikn dem ondenk fun der horev-gevorener Yidisher kehile Voyslavits* (The Memorial Book in Memory of the Jewish Community of Wojsławice), Tel Aviv 1970

“For the Lord will rebuild Jerusalem” ¶ The inscription – “For the Lord will rebuild Jerusalem” – is visible at the top of the synagogue’s eastern wall. The numerical values of the Hebrew letters used in this inscription add up to 5663 – the Jewish year that corresponds to 1902/1903 of the Gregorian calendar, when the new synagogue building was finally completed: its construction had begun in 1890, after the fire that had destroyed its wooden predecessor. In the 1940s, during the

German occupation, the synagogue was converted into a stable and a grain storehouse, and therefore, survived the war. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the local authorities of Wojsławice renovated the building and converted it into a library and registry office. Today, the building houses a memorial room with exhibits evoking the town’s multiethnic past. It is worth going inside to see the wooden vault over the main hall.

Former synagogue in
Wojślawice, 2015. Photo
by Paulina Kowalczyk,
digital collection of the
Panorama of Cultures
Association



“ *The synagogue was beautiful, colourful inside, and full of handmade ornaments.*
” Irving Raab – a fragment of an oral history account from the collection of the USC Shoah Foundation, 1997.

Next to the synagogue stands an inconspicuous wooden house, which in fact used to be one floor higher. In this house the rabbi of Wojślawice, Rabbi David London lived. He served as the rabbi for more than half of the 19th century. His sons, Berko and Arie Leib, took up rabbinical posts too – in Wojślawice and in Luboml. Historical records also record that his grandson, David Weitsfrucht-London, became the mayor of Luboml in 1915, during the Austrian occupation. Other local rabbis were Pinkas Bodenstein, Meir Weinsztein, and Shyia Kleinmintz. The last rabbi of Wojślawice, Yakov Tsitrinboim, died in October 1942 in the Sobibór extermination camp, together with most of the town's Jewish population. ¶ A bet midrash (house of study and prayer house), once stood in what is now an empty square on the west side of the synagogue. It was built in 1780, under an unprecedented favorable privilege allowing Jews to reenter the town that was granted by Marianna Potocka's daughter, Humbelina

Kurdwanowska, nearly two decades after the sharp economic decline caused by the expulsion of the Jews and the departure of the Frankists. It read: [...] *seeking to turn this decline so great [...] into a restoration of the town of Wojślawice, I see fit not only to permit the merchants, proprietors, traders, and artisans of all crafts who are of Jewish faith and wish to become my subjects, live in my domain, and adopt my rule in [...] Wojślawice not only to purchase plots of land and houses [...] and to build them up, but also to give them assistance to do so most easily and commonly. [...] I hereby grant and proclaim, in the above areas, a privilege to establish a synagogue and clergy with authority and power of other towns; to elect one from them to serve as a rabbi with the same privileges as in other neighbouring towns; [...] to build a school in the designated location. [In addition] cemeteries in the old location are instantly permitted; [...] and] the maintainance of fairs and markets is allowed, in accordance with the old law,*



Jewish cemetery in Wojślawice, 1931. Photo by Kazimierz Czernicki, digital collection of the Panorama of Cultures Association

for all wares to be sold freely and without restriction. Unlimited licence is granted to make all kinds of alcoholic beverages and liquors in any quantities and to serve those, as well as to provide feed for horses and hay at inns. The old Jewish cemetery established in the 16th century that is mentioned in the privilege (okopisko) has not survived. At present, only the devastated site of the new cemetery, established in the 19th century and located on a hill about 200 metres from Grabowiecka St., can be visited. Only a few remnants of gravestones can be found there.

Arcaded houses ¶ To this day, a row of arcaded houses is lined up around the western side of the market square – the only surviving complex of buildings of this kind in the Lubelskie Voivodeship. The buildings in their present form were established in the early 1920s, but we know from documents that arcaded houses had stood here, on the same building plots, since the early times of the town in the mid-15th century. The arcades provided protection against sunlight and rain; they also served as a showcase, the place for craftsmen and merchants living in these houses to display their wares and meet clients.

The last in the row of arcaded houses is the so-called “Fawko the shoemaker’s house,” where the family of Fajwel Szyld – a shoemaker, bootmaker, and hide trader – lived until 1942. Currently, this wooden house is maintained by the Panorama of Cultures Association, which since 2005 has initiated events that evoke the centuries of the town’s multiethnic past and hopes to establish a “Panorama of Cultures Meeting House” in the building.

According to the map included in the Yizkor Book in Memory of Wojślawice,

one of the arcaded houses housed a cheder.

“ In melamed Dawidek’s heder stood two long benches on which children would sit while the rebbe would teach them to read in Hebrew and to pray. He had two

assistants who helped him bring the children there every day. On rainy days, when the town was covered with deep mud, the assistants would carry the children on their backs. At the heder, they also helped teach the first-graders, indicating letters on the alphabet board with a pointer, and teaching them capital letters. It sometimes happened that, when an assistant proceeded to explain to us what segol alef [sound “e”] and segol mem [sound “me”] were, we would suddenly hear the piercing sound of a goat bleating outside: meeeeeeh! We felt sympathy for the assistant, who had to struggle with all his might to out-cry the goat. And so, we learned vowel signs in no time at all. The goat helping them became engraved in our memory. ¶ In those days, there was not a single child in the town who did not learn at melamed Dawidek’s heder. ¶ Mendel Schaffer, *My Sixty Years of Life in Wojsławice*, in: *Yizker-bukh tsum fareybikn dem ondenk fun der horev-gevorener Yidisher kehile Voyslavits* (Yid.: *Yizkor Book in Memory of the Jewish Community of Wojsławice*), Tel Aviv 1970.

Around the town square ¶ The building that currently dominates the central square of Wojsławice is the new town hall, opened in 2014. Its form and location resemble that of the old Renaissance town hall destroyed in 1915 by the Russian army, which used scorched

earth tactics while retreating from the Kingdom of Poland. Until World War II, the town square was a marketplace that would fill up every Wednesday with people wearing different types of clothing and speaking different languages: Polish, Yiddish, and Ukrainian.

“Wednesday was a market day in town. The Jews usually prepared for that day all week. Peasants from the entire vicinity would arrive, each of them bringing something for sale, and with the money they earned from this they bought the goods they needed from the Jews. This kind of fair had been a custom for many years. The peasants would usually come with a horse and cart and bring sacks of grain. Young and old men and women carried woven baskets, bags, tin egg holders, and bundles of onions. On their carts they had sacks of potatoes, hens, and all kinds of fruit. By hand or by cart, everyone carried something for sale. ¶ The marketplace where the fair was held was a large square in the heart of the town. It was there that horse, cattle, and pig trading took place. Racket and tumult would rise up to the sky. Horses neighed, cattle mooed, sheep lay bound on carts with hay, bleating and growling. Trade continued all day long, everyone bought or sold something. ¶ David Eines, *Fairs, Thieves, and Jewish Rich Men*, in: *Yizker-bukh tsum fareybikn dem ondenk fun der horev-gevorener Yidisher kehile Voyslavits* (Yid.: *Yizkor Book in Memory of the Jewish Community of Wojsławice*), Tel Aviv 1970

According to the 1921 census, the population of Wojsławice included 1,187 Catholics, 444 members of the Orthodox Church, three Evangelicals, and 835 Jews. Both Christian and Jewish residents recall their coexistence in the

town as generally peaceful. ¶ The houses around the town square were mostly inhabited by Jewish craftsmen and merchants. On the northern side of the square there was a bakery, run by Hannah Erlich. During World War I her son,



Haim Jankiel, joined the Third Brigade of the Polish Legionnaires at the age of 17 and went through the entire combat campaign with it. He was awarded the

Cross of Independence and the Cross of Valour and served in the Polish Army until 1932.

A panorama of Wojsławice, 2012. Photo by Dariusz Kostecki, digital collection of the Panorama of Cultures Association

“ In our town, in Wojsławice, when it was May 3rd before the war, people would gather near the community office. With the firemen’s band, we would march together to the [Catholic] church for a mass, and from that church we would go to the Orthodox church – for there were all kinds of people there; from the Orthodox church we would go to the synagogue and there again we attended a celebration. Then, from the synagogue, we would go to listen to the speech at the statue of Kościuszko, and then back to the community office. ¶ The account by Stanisław Burda – Oral History Archive of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre, Wojsławice 2004

World War II and the Holocaust

¶ In October 1939, Soviet troops entered Wojsławice, and German troops took the town over two weeks later. The synagogue and prayer houses were desecrated, and the Jewish residents were routinely humiliated. In the autumn of 1942, the Jews living in Wojsławice were forced to walk to Chełm, where they were to be deported to the Sobibór

extermination camp. The deportees were led by the last rabbi of Wojsławice, Yakov Tsitrinboim. Several dozen people avoided deportation, but they were soon discovered and shot in the meadow behind the bakery. In 2015, thanks to cooperation between the Society of Enthusiasts of Wojsławice and the Jewish Cemeteries Rabbinical Commission, the exact place of their burial was found.

Present day ¶ Currently, about 1,500 people live in Wojsławice. After the nationalization in the post-war period, the Orthodox church building has been returned to the Orthodox parish in Chełm and occasionally serves various religious purposes. At the synagogue, the local authorities have established a memorial room. The local heritage is

evoked at the Meetings of Three Cultures festival, organised since 2007 by the Society of Enthusiasts of Wojsławice. Several agritourism farms function in the vicinity, such as Dom Gościnniej in Stary Majdan, which was awarded the title of “The Tourist Gem of the Lublin Region” in 2013. As in the past, an open market takes place every Wednesday.

Worth seeing

Former **synagogue**, currently a museum (1890–1903), 20A Rynek St., tel. +48 82 5669153, wojslaw-gci@o2.pl ¶ **Jewish cemetery** (19th c.), Grabowiecka St. ¶ **The town’s urban layout** (15th c.). ¶ **Parish church complex**: the Church of St. Michael the Archangel (1595–1608), a belfry (1763), and a presbytery (1840); 100 Rynek St. ¶ **Prophet Elijah Orthodox Church** (1771); the bell tower next to the Orthodox church (1914); Rynek St. ¶ **Votive chapels** dedicated to St. Barbara, St. Michael, St. Thecla, St. John of Nepomuk, and St. Florian (1762). ¶ **Arcaded houses** on the town square, the one of few last surviving complex of arcaded houses in Poland (1920s), Rynek St. ¶ **Parish cemetery** (1793–1803), Chełmska St.

Surrounding area

Uchanie (8 km): the castle hill; the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1625); the Jewish cemetery in Podgórze St. (16th c.). ¶ **Bończa** (10 km): a Calvinist church, currently the Church of St. Stanislaus (1577); the Orthodox Church of Our Lady of Good Protection (1877–1881); an early medieval fortified settlement; a palace and park complex, currently a residential care home (18th/19th c.). ¶ **Grabowiec** (13 km): the remains of a medieval castle; a wooden house, formerly the Municipal Culture Centre (1898); the Church of St. Nicholas (1855); the parish cemetery (1792–1798); a mass grave of 30 Jews murdered in 1942, located in a gorge outside the town; the local Regional Museum; grave of Władysław Czachórski in the churchyard. ¶ **Sielec** (15 km): the remains of the Uhrowiecki Castle (14th c.); the manor house of the Rzewuski family, currently a primary school (2nd half of the 19th c.); a column with a figure of the Mother of God (2nd half of the 17th c.). ¶ **Kraśniczyn** (15 km): a Jewish cemetery (mid-19th c.); remains of manorial buildings at the curve of the Wojsławka River; an inn, currently a private house, Kościuszki St. (1895). ¶ **Surhów** (22 km): the Cieszkowski Palace with wall paintings by Nicola Monti, currently a residential care centre (1st half of the 19th c.); the Church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Luke (1820–1824). ¶ **Chełm** (29 km): Chełm Hill (Górka Chełmska): a hill fort (14th c.); foundations of the Orthodox Church of Sts. Cyril and Methodius (1884); the cathedral complex on the Castle Hill (Góra Zamkowa): the Basilica of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1735–1756), the Basilian monastery, the Uniate Bishops’ Palace, Uściługaska Gate (1616); the beth midrash, 8 Kopernika St. (1914); a Jewish cemetery (15th–16th c.); tenement houses in Lubelska St., incl. Majer Bronfeld’s print shop; the former Piarist Church of the Dispersion of the Apostles (1753–1763); the Orthodox Church of St. John the Theologian (1846–1849); the Kretzschmar Palace, currently the Registry Office (circa 19th c.); Chełm Museum; Chełm Chalk Tunnels. ¶ **Strzelce** (24 km): the Du Chateau family manor (1908–1911); the hunting palace of the

Zamojskis in Strzelce-Maziarnia (1903). ¶ **Hrubieszów** (32 km): the 13-dome Orthodox Church of the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1873); “Du Chateau” manorial complex, currently housing the Staszic Museum (circa 18th c.); the Gołachowski family manor (19th c.); the Kiesewetter family manor (19th c.); the cloth hall, known as sutki (mid-19th c.); the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help (1905); Dominican monastery complex (18th–19th c.); a Jewish cemetery (16th c.); the Jewish hospital building, 31 Partyzantów St. (1844). ¶ **Horodło** (35 km): Dominican monastery complex (17th c.); the wooden Polish Catholic Church of the Resurrection of Our Lord (20th c.); the former Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (20th c.); the Union of Horodło Mound (1861); Jagiellonian Bulwarks, a fortified settlement on the Bug; remnants of the new Jewish cemetery (1st half of the 19th c.). ¶ **Dubienka** (37 km): the town hall (1905); a Byzantine (Ruthenian) Catholic church (19th/20th c.); the Church of the Most Holy Trinity (1865); a Jewish cemetery with the tomb of tsaddik Uri Feivel (16th/17th c.). ¶ **Dorohusk** (42 km): the Suchodolski Palace (18th c.); the Church of the Mother of God and St. John of Nepomuk (1821). ¶ **Strzyżów** (42 km): the Lubomirski Palace (1762–1786); the former wooden Uniate Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1817); a complex of sugar mill buildings (1899). ¶ **Komarów-Osada** (43 km): a Jewish cemetery near the road to Tyszowce (1st half of the 18th c.); a memorial to 248 Jews murdered in the local ghetto; Holy Trinity Church (1904–1911); the Chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows and St. John the Evangelist (circa 18th c.). ¶ **Świerże** (46 km): the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul (early 20th c.); remnants of the Jewish cemetery (2nd half of the 18th c.). ¶ **Kryłów** (52 km): remnants of the Ostroróg Castle (16th/17th c.); the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1859–1960); a Jewish cemetery (17th c.). ¶ **Tyszowce** (54 km): Church of St. Leonard (1865–1869); craft-related buildings (2nd half of the 19th c.), Zamłynie St. and Jurydyki St.; a memorial to the Confederation of Tyszowce; the new Jewish cemetery (19th/20th c.). ¶ **Volhynian Polesie**: a belt of land east of Chełm as far as Ukraine, with three landscape parks and 12 nature reserves.

