

Orla

Bel. Вуорля, Ukr. Орля, Yid. אָרלע

Once a week, peasants from nearby villages would come to the fair in order to sell and buy goods in little stalls at the market in Orla.

Sylvia K. Kaspin,
Memories of Things from the Past, 1986

Under the eyes of magnates ¶

Jews lived in Orla from the 1650s. It was probably the Tęczyńskis – the owners of Orla at the time – who brought Jews here. The Radziwiłłs, the subsequent owners of the town, also supported Jewish settlement. In the 1614 privilege, Krzysztof Radziwiłł permitted “people of all estates, Christians of all denominations as well as Jews,” to settle in the domain of Orla. The 1616 inventory notes the existence of 17 Jewish houses and a wooden synagogue. Favourable conditions resulted in the growth of the town Jewish population, especially as the nearby royal towns – Bielsk, Kleszczele, and Brańsk – prohibited Jews from settling within their walls. ¶ The Jews of Orla experienced prosperous times in the 18th century. It was then that – like Tykocin – Orla became one of the most important trade centres in the Podlasie region. Merchants from Orla maintained direct relations with numerous towns in Poland-Lithuania and with towns outside its borders, such as Breslau (now Wrocław), Königsberg (Pol.: Królewiec, now Kaliningrad, Russia), and Frankfurt on the Oder. The Orla Jews had their own merchant vessel in Mielnik on the

Bug, 60 km away, and used the river network as a reliable freight trade route. In 1780, Izabela Branicka, the wife of the hetman, King Stanisław August Poniatowski’s sister, then owner of Orla, promulgated a special statute regulating disputes between Jews. The statute specified the competence of the rabbi and kahal authorities, including the manner of their election. It is one of the few surviving legal acts on the functioning of a Jewish community in the Old Polish period.

Orla 350-year-old synagogue

¶ The old synagogue building, surviving to the present day, bears witness to the high status held by the local Jewish community. Until the mid-20th century, the synagogue was one of only a few stone buildings in Orla. One legend has it that it was converted from the building of a Calvinist church that once existed in the town. Princess Radziwiłł is rumoured to have enabled the Jews to purchase the building provided they collected 10,000 three-groszy coins overnight. The Jews were so determined that they collected that amount within an hour. This tale, however, bears no



A The Great Synagogue and wooden prayer houses, 1930s. Over the entrance to the synagogue, an inscription from the Book of Genesis is visible: "How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." Photo by D. Duksin, collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research



B Participants in a training workshop for *Shtetl Routes* tourist guides inside the synagogue in Orla, 2015. Photo by Monika Tarajko, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

relation to the historical reality. ⁴ The stone synagogue was built in the second quarter of the 17th century, but archaeological research has revealed that a small wooden synagogue had stood in the same place earlier. About 100 years after the foundation of the synagogue, women's galleries were added on each side of the building: wooden at first, and then made of brick. The synagogue combines Renaissance and Baroque

styles. In the 19th century, the building was given a classical facade with a frieze resting on two columns. Unfortunately, the furnishings of the synagogue, including the large aron ha-kodesh, have not survived. Still, preserved to this day are remnants of colourful polychrome wall paintings with vegetal and animal motifs, as well as four columns surrounding the place where the bimah stood. Before the war, the square in front

of the synagogue was called the school square, and the synagogue complex also included two wooden houses of prayer, the rabbi's house, and a mikveh. All the buildings burned down in a great fire that swept Orla in 1938. Although this priceless example of Jewish heritage has survived the turmoil of wars, it still awaits full scale repair after incomplete renovation work in the 1980s. The owner of the synagogue since 2010 has been the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODŻ).

In the interwar period ¶ In the early 1920s, Orla was still a predominantly Jewish town, with Jews constituting about 70 percent of its population. They owned nearly all of the local trade and

services: Henach Werbołownik served as the local doctor, Moshe Rabinowicz was the local pharmacist, and Dawid Lacki was the local dentist. There were several Jewish organisations, including a branch of the youth organisation He-Halutz, as well as a Jewish financial institution, the Jewish Popular Bank. What unfolds in the accounts of Orla's eldest residents is a picture of peaceful coexistence between Christians (a minority in the town) and Jews (the majority), without serious trouble. Contacts between the two communities, however, were usually commercial, though a common school helped them become closer. The town was very poor, and poverty was an experience shared by its inhabitants of all faiths and nationalities.

“One day, on a Saturday, mother was washing clothes. Suddenly, blood gushed forth from her. Daddy was not at home because he had gone to play cards. I thought Mummy was dying. I ran to my neighbour Herszek's place, knowing that his wife was a nurse, of sorts. I said mother was having a hemorrhage. She took her bag right away, put some ice in it, and ran to see my mother. I went to fetch Daddy, and he ran to fetch the doctor, who was a Jew. He put ice over the wound, and then he gave me 10 zlotys, which was a lot of money at that time, and said, “Go to the chemist's and get injections.” The chemist was also a Jew and opened the shop even though it was already night. The doctor later said that we could pay when we had the money. ¶ Memories of Maria Odziejewicz – an account from the Oral History Archive of the History Meeting House and the Karta Centre (AHM-1901). Fragments are available for listening at www.audiohistoria.pl

In the interwar period, the main employers in Orla were the four Wajnsztejn brothers, who owned a tilery. The landed estate they had bought towards the end of the 19th century was the largest non-parcelled-out part of the legacy left by the Radziwiłłs. The tilery employed more than 100 people, both Jews and Christians. After the Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Wajnsztejns were deported to Siberia, and their company

was nationalised. Almost all of them managed to survive the deportation and left for Palestine after the war. Interestingly, the head of what was then a Soviet tilery was another Jew, who came from the distant regions of the Soviet Union. Tiles continued to be produced in Orla until the early 1990s, but the factory no longer played the same important role in the town's life.

A Men studying the Torah at the house of learning (beth midrash), Orla, 1930s. Photo by D. Duksin, collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research



B A pre-war prescription by pharmacist M. Rabinowicz from Orla. Collection of Wojciech Konończuk



C Members of the Orla branch of Hashomer Hatzair. Digital collection of Wojciech Konończuk, archive of the Agricultural Club in Orla



“Getting a job in Wajnsztein brothers’ tilery meant considerable promotion. There was no better employment in Orla. All the workers called themselves “fabricants,” as they were a head above peasants in the hierarchy. They had better work conditions and earned more. Wajnsztein was very much respected because he was good to the workers. In 1937, he went to a bicycle factory and bought each of his employees a bicycle. Some of them commuted to work from villages near Orla. ¶ Memories of Eugenia Chmielewska – an account from the Oral History Archive of the History Meeting House and the Karta Centre (AHM-1873). Fragments are available for listening at www.audiohistoria.pl

THE GREAT FIRE OF ORLA IN 1938 ¶ On May 18, 1938, in a wooden house near the market square, a local Jewish woman was boiling linseed oil to make oil varnish. She interrupted that for a moment, as someone came into her shop to buy horseradish. The wind, strong that day, knocked over the boiling oil. This set the house on fire, and the flames quickly spread to neighbouring houses. Almost the entire densely built-up centre of Orla burned down within a few hours. Fire consumed 550 buildings, including 220 Jewish houses, 25 houses belonging to Orthodox Christians, and 3 belonging to Catholics. For months afterwards, many Jews with no roof over their heads lived with their Christian neighbours. The current urban layout of Orla differs from what it was before the fire. The former high-density housing, typical of a Jewish shtetl, was replaced by newly marked-out streets. The market square remained, but there is now a park where the Jewish trading stalls once stood.

Christians in defence of Jews ¶

An incident that attested to the friendly coexistence of Jews and Christians (mainly Orthodox ones, as only a dozen or so families were Catholic) in pre-war Orla took place in about 1937 and recurs in the recollections of several of the town’s eldest citizens. It was then that a group of between 10 and 20 members

of endecja (a right-wing political movement), armed with clubs and probably from the region of Łomża, arrived in Orla. Their intention was to destroy Jewish stores. Local Orthodox Christians stood in defence of “their” Jews and effectively stopped the assailants, who never returned to the town.

“I used to know Jewish girls: Haya and Bluma. We were friends. On the Sabbath, I would often go with them for a walk to the Black Forest near Orla. When the Soviets came, a few of our boys married Jewish girls. My family was the only Christian family living in the Jewish quarter. We lived on close terms with our neighbour Liba, who ran a shop. When we were in need, she would never refuse to help us. When the ghetto was established, we were resettled to a different part of Orla. ¶ Memories of Aleksandra Dęboróg – a fragment of an account from the Oral History Archive of the History Meeting House and the Karta Centre (AHM-3036). Fragments are available for listening at www.audiohistoria.pl

“Jewish oil tycoon” ¶ **Haim Kahan** (Kamieniecki) was born in Orla in 1850. His father was a local melamed (teacher in an elementary Jewish school) and at the same time a fishmonger. As a teenager, Haim left his native town and moved to nearby Brest-Litovsk, and later to Königsberg. Kahan began to work in the oil trade, taking advantage of the period of prosperity for this raw material. He quickly became one of the major figures in this line of business in Russia. His main competitors were the famous Nobel brothers. Kahan traded in oil extracted from under the Caspian Sea; he had his own oilfields, too. His company, “Petrol,” had branches in Baku, Kharkov, Warsaw, Brest, and a number of cities in Western Europe. When Kahan died in 1916 he was one of the richest entrepreneurs in the Russian Empire, with a reputation, too, as a philanthropist who generously supported Jewish organisations. After his death, in an article entitled “Jewish oil tycoon,” the Warsaw daily *Nasz Przegląd* wrote: “He was a truly remarkable man and an exceptional type of person. A restless spirit with inexhaustible energy. A head always full of projects and ideas.”

The tsaddik of our times ¶ Aryeh Levin was born in Orla in 1885, into a large traditional Jewish family. From his earliest years, he was very eager to learn and was initially taught by Orla’s rabbi. As in the case of Haim Kahan, the hometown quickly became too small for Levin. At the age of 12, he left for the famous yeshiva in Slonim and then went on to study at yeshivas in Volozhyn and Brest. At 20, he emigrated to Eretz Israel. He continued his education in Jerusalem and became a rabbi there. Levin quickly became famous as a charismatic teacher and a protector of Jewish political prisoners held by the British. In the independent State of Israel, he came to be regarded as one of the greatest spiritual authorities and was nicknamed “the tsaddik of our times.” Even though he was an Orthodox rabbi, he also enjoyed respect among non-religious Jews, as attested by the title of “an honorary citizen of Jerusalem,” which he was granted. He died in 1969, and his funeral was attended by thousands of people,

including the President and the Prime Minister of Israel.

“Little Orla” over the Ocean ¶

In the second half of the 19th century Orla’s Jews began to emigrate in large numbers, mainly to the United States. In 1891, they set up a compatriots’ association in New York – the Independent Orler Benevolent Society, with a membership of several hundred people. Emigrants helped their compatriots in the old homeland, for example, after the fire that swept Orla in 1938. The organisation existed until 1984.

The Jewish cemetery ¶ There were two Jewish cemeteries in Orla. The older one was located directly behind the synagogue. By the mid-19th century, it became too small, and the Jewish community obtained permission from the Russian authorities to establish a new, larger one. It was located about 700 metres north of the old cemetery, on a small hill off the road to Szczyty-Nowodwory. During World War II, the



[A] Young people in front of the school in Orla, 1920s. Digital collection of Wojciech Konończuk, archive of the Agricultural Club in Orla



[B] Members of the "Jedność" Eggs and Poultry Cooperative packing eggs, Orla, 1930s. Photo: D. Duksin, collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

[C] Aryeh Levin – a 1982 Israeli postage stamp, collection of Wojciech Konończuk

old cemetery and a part of the new one were destroyed by the Nazi Germans, and matzevot were used to build roads, with Jews as a slave workforce. Even after 1945, local inhabitants used some of the surviving tombstones for construction. Just a few matzevot – overgrown with vegetation and partly covered by soil – have survived to this day. The area of the former cemetery is not fenced or walled in, or marked in any way.

World War II and the Holocaust

¶ On the eve of World War II, more than 1,500 Jews lived in Orla. After September 17, 1939 (Soviet invasion of Poland), many Jewish refugees arrived from central Poland. During the Soviet occupation, several of the richest Jewish families were deported to Siberia, and in 1940 some young people were conscripted into the Red Army. The beginning of the end of Jewish Orla was the outbreak of the German-Soviet war

on June 22, 1941. Apart from the recollections of many Christian inhabitants, what helps reconstruct the history of that period is a miraculously preserved account by Orla's last rabbi, Eli Helpern. Only a few pages long, it was written in 1943 in the Białystok Ghetto, just a few days before Helpern was murdered. The rabbi described the reign of terror set up by the Nazi Germans after they entered Orla on June 22, 1941: The Jews had to shave off their beards and the women had to have their braids cut off. We all had to wear round yellow signs on our breasts and backs. Jewish houses were marked with yellow signs [...]. Every day, 400 Jews would go to work for which they received no remuneration, having to do humiliating activities and tasks. A tribute of 500 grams of gold, 3 kilograms of silver, and 40,000 roubles was also imposed on the community. In March 1942, the entire Jewish population was segregated in a ghetto, a small area in the centre of Orla surrounded by a wooden fence. Cramped conditions, hunger, and disease caused high mortality. The rabbi concludes his memories as follows: We did not expect that which

would happen – the liquidation of the town in November 1942. On Monday, November 2, the Jewish quarter was surrounded. We were told we would be deported to the Black Sea coast or to the Caucasus to work: it was no use grieving over the houses and goods left behind, for we would find the same there, left by the evacuated inhabitants of those areas. As a result, some of the women hiding in the Christian part of the town reported voluntarily. We were transported to the ghetto in Bielsk – 1,450 people, in peasants' wagons. It was there that the truth about the evacuation became clear to us: until then, we had still believed the tale about the Black Sea. On Friday, 1,450 Jews of Orla were marched to the railway station and severely beaten on the way. They were forced into freight cars, 150 people per car. A little more than 100 Jews were transported to the Białystok Ghetto; the others were sent to the Treblinka extermination camp, where they were murdered. The rabbi was right in writing about the “liquidation of the town” – more than 70 percent of Orla's residents vanished in just a few hours.

THE LAST JEW OF ORLA ¶ **Józef (Josel) Izbucki** was a member of a family who had lived in Orla for generations. His father ran a bakery in the market square. In 1940, he was drafted into the Red Army, a fact that saved him from the Holocaust. He returned to these parts after the war, settled in the nearby town of Bielsk Podlaski, and worked as a coal trader. He never emigrated, even though his children left Poland after the governmentally-orchestrated antisemitic campaign of 1968. On one occasion, when visiting a shoemaker in Bielsk, he saw a Torah scroll from the synagogue destroyed by Germans which was used for the shoe manufacturing. He bought it and gave it to a Bielsk Jew now living in Israel who visited the town of his birth in the 1980s. The Torah was restored by the descendants of Bielsk's Jews, who presented it to a new synagogue in Efrata, in Gush Etzion region to the south from Jerusalem. ¶ Józef Izbucki is one of the people featured in *Jewels and Ashes* (1991), a book of memory and reportage

by Arnold Zable, a noted Australian writer who is himself a descendant of Orla's Jews. In 1945, [Izbrucki] had returned to a shtetl that was Judenrein. It was as if all those he had known had vanished overnight. [He] moved to Bielsk, married a Polish woman, and became wedded also to the streets of the town. Decade upon decade he had followed a familiar route, in horse and cart, delivering coal [...]. Meanwhile, one by one, the few remaining Jews had left to begin life anew, in lands far removed. ¶ Arnold Zable, *Jewels and Ashes*, New York 1991.

Present day ¶ In present-day Orla it is difficult to find many traces of its one-time numerous and influential Jewish inhabitants. Only the old synagogue, the key to which is kept at the community office, majestically towers over the former market square. Inside the building, visitors can see a small photographic exhibition prepared in 2007 by the Association of Friends of the Orla Land. Cultural events are occasionally held in the synagogue, and several local history enthusiasts explore the history of Orla's Jews. Students – members of the Regional Club functioning at the Orla Land School Complex – recorded the memories of several dozen of the

local eldest citizens about life in Orla before the war. Short videos made by the students, based on the memories they collected, have won prizes at several national competitions. The Oral History Archive of the History Meeting House and the Karta Centre has a collection of several dozen in-depth accounts by Orla inhabitants covering predominantly pre-war times. On the basis of these recollections, a memorial book is in preparation that seeks to portray life in the town in the interwar period and during World War II. ¶ Accommodation can be found at several agritourism farms in Orla and in nearby villages.

Former **synagogue** (17th c.), 2 Spółdzielcza St., (Information about the keys in local cultural center, tel. +48 857392059, gok-orka@wp.pl). ¶ **Jewish cemetery** (19th c.), Polna St. ¶ **Wooden Orthodox Church of St. Michael the Archangel** (1797) with a bell tower (1874), Kleszczelowska St. ¶ **Wooden Orthodox Church of Saints Cyril and Methodius** at the cemetery (1870), A. Mickiewicza St.

Worth seeing

Szczyty-Dzięciołowo (5 km): the larch-wood Orthodox Church of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist (18th c.); "Szczyty" Centre for Education and the Promotion of Belarusian Culture ¶ **Bielsk Podlaski** (13 km): a medieval hill fort; a Jewish cemetery with about 100 tombstones; the town hall (18th c.), the Basilica of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1784); the former Carmelite church and monastery (1779–1794); the wooden Orthodox Church (17th/18th c.). ¶ **Hajnówka** (21 km): Rabbi Yehuda Leib's wooden house; wooden buildings in Kosidłów, Warszawska, and Ks. Ignacego Wierobieja Streets; a railway crossing guard's house (circa 19th c.); remnants of the Ordan reservoir (reportedly built by Jews under the name of "Jordan"); Holy Trinity Orthodox Church (the venue of concerts during the annual International Orthodox Church Music Festival); modern Catholic and Orthodox churches. ¶ **Kleszczele** (22 km): a Jewish cemetery; the wooden Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas

Surrounding area

(1709); a railway station building (1900); the Orthodox Church of the Dormition (circa 1870); the Church of St. Sigismund (1907–1910). ♣ **Bocki** (25 km): an old mikveh on the Nurzec River (mid-19th c.); remains of a Jewish cemetery (fragments of matzevot embedded in the fence of the Catholic cemetery); the Church of St. Joseph and St. Anthony (1726); the Orthodox Church of the Dormition (1819–1824). ♣ **Narew** (32 km): the wooden Church of St. Stanislaus (1775); a wooden bell tower (1772); the Orthodox Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (1882); a cemetery chapel (mid-19th c.); a Catholic cemetery (19th c.); an Orthodox cemetery (18th c.); a Jewish cemetery (in the forest, about 2 km from the village). ♣ **Teremiski** (38 km): the Jan Józef Lipski Open University and the Jacek Kuroń Educational Foundation. ♣ **Narewka** (39 km): a Jewish cemetery on a hill beyond the town, with more than 100 tombstones (19th c.); the Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker (after 1860); a wooden Baptist church; a Catholic church (the 1970s); the Tamara Sołowieicz Gallery. ♣ **Białowieża** (43 km): an obelisk on the palace embankment, commemorating King Augustus III's hunting lodge (1752); the palace park (19th c.); the Museum of Nature and Forest of the Białowieża National Park; a railway station (1903); a wooden manor house (2nd half of the 19th c.); a porcelain iconostasis in the Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas (1895);

the Church of Saint Therese (1927); remains of the foundations of a wooden synagogue (1910). ♣ **Zabłudów** (46 km): a Jewish cemetery; the Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul (1805–1840); the Orthodox Church of the Dormition (1847–1855); a Catholic cemetery and St Roch's Chapel (1850); St. Mary Magdalene Chapel (2nd half of the 18th c.). ♣ **The Białowieża National Park**: Europe's last primeval forest and Poland's oldest national park, included in the UNESCO List of Biosphere Reserves and in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

