

# Siemiatycze

Ukr. Сім'ятичі, Bel. Семятычы, Yid. סעמיאַטיטש

*The Sabbath filled houses in Siemiatycze with angels and guests...*

Michel Radzyński, *Di megile fun mayn lebn* (Yid. The Scroll of My Life), Lima 1989

**Thursday Fair** ¶ Since 1542, Thursday has been a market day in Siemiatycze. Situated on the bank of Mahomet River, the town was granted the privilege of holding these Thursday fairs in the town charter issued by King Sigismund II Augustus. On a summer Thursday in 1934, one of these market days was captured in a photo by Jankiel Tykocki (1881–1941), a local photographer, cultural activist and town councillor. He opened his photographic studio in the early 1900s, and for many years took photos capturing the life of the town and its inhabitants. Tykocki and his whole family were killed on June 23, 1941 by the Nazis in the village of Wierceń, near Siemiatycze.

**Ban of Excommunication** ¶ Information about the first group of Jews to settle in Siemiatycze, who were brought there from Lithuania by the then owner of the town, Katarzyna née Tęczyńska, dates back to 1582. In the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the local Jewish community came under the kahal in Tykocin. However, as the town developed, this kind of relationship became more and more burdensome, and the community strove for independence. As a result, in 1691, during a session of the Council of Four Lands in Jarosław, the elders of the Siemiatycze kahal were publicly put under the ban of excommunication for insubordination:

“Listen, you entire holy community! The leaders and chiefs of the Four Lands announce and make it public to all those present at this grand session held on market day [that] they throw off the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven; they do not listen to the voices of their parents or teachers of the Grand Court of the Holy Kahal of Tykocin; they throw off the yoke of the royal power, and they fail to perform their tax duties. They do not share in the tribulations of the whole Israel during these hard times; they do not listen to any exhortations or warnings, which they consider ridiculous. Therefore, let them be excommunicated, isolated and separated from the entire community of Israel. [...] And, unless they come to the Grand Court of the Tykocin kahal to pay the poll tax they owe to the Grand Court, and unless they accept all the decisions concerning previous times, let them forever remain under a dreadful excommunication like this one. And let this statement and ban be announced in all the communities of the Four Lands, so that they are

Thursday market day in Siemiatycze, 1934. Photo by Jankiel Tykocki, private collection of Antoni Nowicki, made available courtesy of the Nowicki family ([www.siemiatycze.com](http://www.siemiatycze.com))



*punished in front of everyone and so that they do not dare to act like this again.* ¶ Abraham Gawurin, *Dzieje Żydów w Tykocinie 1522–1795* (The History of the Jews in Tykocin, 1522–1795), Warsaw, before 1939

In 1726, another ban of excommunication (herem) was issued against them (the reason, again, was tax matters). This was lifted after the rabbis of Siemiatycze expressed their apologies. Only four

years later, in 1730, with the decline of the power of the Council of Four Lands, the Siemiatycze kahal gained independence from the Jewish community of Tykocin.

In 1697, brothers **Gedalia and Moshe from Siemiatycze**, followers of the crypto-Sabbatean sect, set out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They were members of the so-called “Brotherhood of the Pious,” a group of several dozen supporters of a preacher and ascetic Yehudah the Hasid, who believed that Shabbetai Tsvi a Jewish pseudo-messiah who had converted in 1666 to Islam and died ten years later, was still fulfilling his messianic role in a clandestine manner and was about to resurrect to lead the Jews to the land of Israel in the wake of redemption. The group, convinced that Shabbetai Tsvi, the messiah they believed in, was soon to come, set off from Siedlce to Jerusalem. While wandering through Moravia, Germany, Tirol, and Venice, they were joined by several hundred of crypto-sabbatean supporters, and, on October 14, 1700, they reached Jerusalem. Later, Moshe became a teacher in a yeshivah in Jerusalem, while Gedalia returned to Europe as an emissary of the Ashkenazi Jewish community of Jerusalem. In 1716, in Berlin, he published a book in Hebrew titled *Sha’alu Shalom Yerushalayim* (Heb.: Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem), in which he described the history of Yehudah the Hasid’s pilgrimage as well as the living conditions of the oppressed and impoverished Jewish community in Jerusalem at that time.



[A] The synagogue in Siemiatycze, 1930s. Photo by Jankiel Tykocki, private collection of the late Antoni Nowicki, made available courtesy of the Nowicki family ([www.siemiatycze.com](http://www.siemiatycze.com))

[B] The synagogue and the Talmudic house in Siemiatycze, 2015. Photo by Monika Tarajko

[C] Inside the synagogue in Siemiatycze, early 20<sup>th</sup> century, collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

**The new order ¶** When, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Anna Jabłonowska née Sapieha became the owner of the Siemiatycze estate, she undertook intense efforts to rebuild and

re-order the town's spatial structure. One of her undertakings was to establish a new Classicist-style palace and to build an alleyway connecting her new residence with the town hall and market square.

The palace has not survived: it was burnt down during the January Uprising of 1863. The only remnant of the grand residence are two sphinxes standing on the sarcophagus-shaped plinths of what used to be the palace gate.

The alley (now Pałacowa Street) connecting the palace with the market square ran through the Jewish cemetery, which was still in use at that time but was abolished to make way for the alley despite dramatic protests by the Jews. Instead, Duchess Anna Jabłonowska marked out

a site for a new cemetery beyond the town, on the left bank of the Kamionka River.

**The Great Synagogue ¶** Situated in the southwestern part of the town, about 150 m away from the main market

Oil painting by Józef Charyton of the marketplace in Siemiatycze in the interwar period, 1974. Photo by Marcin Korniluk, collection of the Bioregion Association ([www.nawschodzie.pl](http://www.nawschodzie.pl))



square (today Jan Paweł II Square), the synagogue was established to replace the wooden synagogue destroyed during the 1797 devastating fire. Decades later, it was one of the few buildings that did not burn down during the battle of Siemiatycze at the time of the 1863 January Uprising. ¶ The synagogue is a two-storey, Classicist building with a rectangular plan (25×19.5 m) and a hip roof. It had a square, two-storey men's hall on the east side and a vestibule for men on the west side (with the entrance from the south). The upper part of the men's hall was surrounded on three sides (all but the eastern side) by open galleries resting on columns and posts. These served as women's galleries. The interior

of the synagogue was decorated with polychrome paintings, whose remnants were still visible as late as 1958. During World War II and afterwards, the building was used as a warehouse. In 1961–1964, it was renovated and turned into a local community centre and gallery. The original fittings and furnishings of the synagogue have not survived, except for the Torah scroll, which can be seen in the Diocesan Museum in Drohiczyn (20 km from Siemiatycze). On both the inside and outside of the synagogue, plaques commemorating the Jewish community have been placed. At present, the building is the property of the Municipality of Siemiatycze.

In one of the rooms of the former women's gallery there are paintings by **Józef Charyton** (1909–1975), a self-taught painter from Siemiatycze who, after the war, created a series of about 500 paintings and drawings that depict scenes of the Holocaust as well as document the everyday life of the Jewish community before World War II. Charyton was born in the village of Krupice near Siemiatycze, but the family moved to Wysokie Litewskie (Vysokaye) – a village situated a dozen or so kilometres away. His father had a mill there, and Józef worked as





The gate of the Jewish cemetery in Siemiatycze, 2014. Photo by Marcin Korniluk, collection of the Bioregion Association ([www.nawschodzie.pl](http://www.nawschodzie.pl))

a photographer, a local official, a portraitist, and a church painter. In 1938, he prepared the vault where the exhumed corpse of the last Polish king, Stanisław August Poniatowski, was deposited. More information about Józef Charyton can be found in Marian Brandys's short story *Strażnik Królewskiego Grobu* (The Guard of the Royal Tomb. A Story of Józef Charyton from Siemiatycze), Warsaw 1984.

“He grew up in a small borderland town, whose population was mainly Jewish. He went to school with Jews, a Jewish saleswoman sold him food. A Jewish tailor patched his clothes, he bought paint brushes and paints in a small Jewish shop. Dark-complexioned Jewish boys and Jewish girls with sweet black eyes posed for his first biblical paintings. He got used to and became attached to that noisy and industrious crowd of people. He had friends among them; they were part of his life. And then he became a silent witness to their tragic end. He saw how the Nazis exterminated them. He saw how inhumane humiliation and suffering were inflicted on them and how they died a sudden death or perished after constant torment and torture. ¶ He did not resume painting right after the war as he was busy doing other things and devoted himself to teaching. But one night the murdered Jews from his hometown came to visit him in a dream. And then they would come every night. They did not say a word but just stared at him, as if demanding something from him. So he bought some brushes and paints and started painting them. At first, he would paint only the ones he knew: Goldberg the tailor, Ruchla the dairywoman, Szmulowicz the shop owner, the beautiful Chana from the confectionery shop, who had once posed for his painting “Judith and Holofernes.” Later came the time when he began to paint those he did not know by name but whose appearance he still remembered... ¶ Following the events of 1968, when the Jews began to hastily leave Poland, painting Jewish portraits became a moral imperative for Charyton. ¶ A few weeks before his death, he wrote: ¶ “I have paid my dues with my Jews,” he wrote, “and they have stopped visiting me at night because I have already painted them all.”

[A] Donation certificate for the construction of the Hebrew Kadimah primary school in Siemiatycze, 1935, private collection of the late Antoni Nowicki, made available courtesy of the Nowicki family (www.siemiatycze.com)



[B] The Kaczy Dółek district in Siemiatycze, view from the church tower, 1930s. Photo by Jankiel Tykocki, private collection of the late Antoni Nowicki, made available courtesy of the Nowicki family (www.siemiatycze.com)



**Around the synagogue** ¶ Next to the synagogue stands the former Talmud-Torah, which used to house a school, a kahal meeting room, and the central office of the kahal court. The building was erected in 1893 in the neo-Baroque style with elements of Secession decoration. At present, it houses

a vocational training school. ¶ Other former Jewish prayer houses operated in Wesoła, Fabryczna, Drohiczyńska, and Małopolska Streets. There was also a prayer room in Belkies's tile works. In Ciechanowska St., by the Mukhavets River, there was a mikveh.

**THE TILE CAPITAL AND THE "CLAY ELDORADO"** ¶ That is what Siemiatycze used to be called before the war, because of the Jewish-owned tileries. The Jews of Siemiatycze contributed greatly to the development of the industry producing tile and functional pottery. The owners of these plants included people named Belkies, Radzyński, Gorfajn, Dajcz, Maliniak, Szyszko, and Małach. The first tile works opened in 1890, and eventually about 30 tileries operated, both in the town itself and in the vicinity: currently there are only three. Dajcz's tile works, which opened in 1906, was the biggest of its kind in Siemiatycze and, at one time, the

biggest tiler in Poland (five storeys tall, covering several hectares, and with an underground conveyor belt). Today, only its ruins remain, near the cemetery.

**The “Jutrzenka” kibbutz ¶** In the 1920s, Zionist organisations founded the Shaharia (Yid.: Morning Star) kibbutz-hakhsharah. It was a centre meant to prepare young halutsim (pioneers – agricultural settlers), through hard physical work, to emigrate and settle in the British-mandate Palestine. About 130 people (30 women and 100 men) underwent training there. Young Jews from Siemiatycze and the vicinity worked in the fields of Polish farmers and in the Wertheim brothers’ sawmill. They grew crops and raised animals on an independent farm created by the halutsim. Some of the hakhsharah (training camp) members earned a living by transporting goods and materials on horse-drawn carts or by working in tileries. Their earnings were collected into a common fund. The residents of the kibbutz lived on a frugal diet; for example, they ate meat only once a week. However, despite the tough living conditions, the *Memorial Book of Siemiatycze* recalls that the hakhsharah was filled with a joyous atmosphere.

Siemiatycze had several Jewish schools, both religious and secular. The most important one was the Kadimah, a Hebrew school belonging to the Tarbut Association. Its head was Yehudah Kohut, who managed to raise sufficient funds to have a modern school building established. The official opening ceremony took place in 1938. A few years later, Yehudah Kohut was murdered, together with his pupils, in the Treblinka death camp.

### **World War II and the Holocaust**

¶ Before the outbreak of World War II, some 4,303 Jews lived in Siemiatycze. In the autumn of 1939, this number increased to more than 7,000, after the influx of refugees from western Poland.

**The Jewish cemetery ¶** The cemetery was established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the eastern part of the town, in what is now Polna St. (The road leading to it is marked with a signpost in Wysoka St.). The cemetery is surrounded by a wall which still has its original gate made of so-called tsarist red brick. On it there are four brick Stars of David and memorial plaques commemorating the victims of the Holocaust. The dozen or so tombstones that have survived were used to build a lapidarium wall commemorating the Jews of Siemiatycze. The rest of the cemetery is overgrown with trees. Searching in and around town for Jewish gravestones, the Siemiatycze Bioregion Association has found dozens of fragments, which have also been built into the lapidarium. Members of the Kotler and Kramer families who survived the Holocaust have funded a commemorative plaque. Today, the cemetery is the property of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland.

In August 1942, the German occupation authorities created a ghetto in Siemiatycze (within the square formed by Górna, Wysoka, Koszarowa, and Słowiczyńska Streets) for the Jewish inhabitants of the town and neighbouring

### Surrounding area

areas. The ghetto functioned for a little more than three months. On November 2–9, 1942, all the inmates of the Siemiatycze ghetto were deported to the Treblinka II death camp (approx. 90 km away from Siemiatycze) and killed there.

¶ In July 1944, when the German occupation was over, the few Jews who had survived – about 100 people – began to return to the town. The time was far from peaceful, however, and there were cases of robberies and murders. After April 6, 1945, when 28 Jews were attacked in Yuda Blumberg's house in Berka Joselewicza St. by an armed group (probably associated with nationalistic anti-communist resistance movement NSZ), claiming that they are attacking Jews because the Jews allegedly cooperated with new communist government, all the remaining Jewish inhabitants of Siemiatycze left town. The history of the Jewish community of Siemiatycze, which had made up 60 percent of the town pre-war population, thus came to an end.

### Present day ¶

Present-day Siemiatycze is a county town in the Podlaskie Voivodeship, where about 15,000 people live. Each Thursday, market day, the area next to the Jewish cemetery is filled with people. If you are a Polish-speaker, the place is worth visiting not simply to buy something but, above all, to hear people speaking the beautiful Podlasie dialect. Another interesting fact is that, just beyond the wall of the cemetery, there is a small, dilapidated house built entirely from stove tiles. It is one of several buildings of this type in the town. ¶ Anyone wishing to explore this area may turn for help to the various tour guides at the Tourist Information Centre (3A Jana Pawła II Square, tel. +48 780 158 959), which is open from May to September. The centre offers information about accommodation and catering in the town and its vicinity, as well as about tourist routes and local cultural offerings.

**Sarnaki** (13 km): a Jewish cemetery (1742); a parish church (19<sup>th</sup> c.); Church of St. Stanislaus (wooden, 1816); the Podczaski manor house (2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> c.); Józef Szummer's brick brewery (1903–1905); historic crosses and chapels (about 250 examples). ¶ **Góra Grabarka** (Mount Grabarka) (14 km): St. Martha and Mary Convent (1947), 3 monastery Orthodox churches, more than 7,000 votive crosses. ¶ **Drohiczyn** (16 km): The Diocesan Museum with the Torah scroll from Siemiatycze; a Jewish cemetery with about 70 tombstones (16<sup>th</sup> c.); the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1682–1715) and the Franciscan monastery (1737–1751); All Saints' Church and the Benedictine Convent (1734–1738); St. Nicolaus Orthodox Church (1792); The Holy Trinity Cathedral (1696–1709); the Jesuit Monastery and the Jesuit College (mid-17<sup>th</sup> c.). ¶ **Mielnik** (20 km): a synagogue, currently an art gallery (1<sup>st</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> c.); a Jewish cemetery (19<sup>th</sup> c.); the castle hill with the remains of the castle's Holy Trinity Church (15<sup>th</sup> c.); the Church of the Transfiguration (1912–1920); the Orthodox Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God (1825); an Orthodox cemetery; the Chapel of the Protection of Our Lady (wooden, 1776). ¶ **Milejczyce** (23 km): a synagogue, now disused (1927); a Jewish cemetery (1865); St. Stanislaus Church (wooden, 1740); the cemetery; Orthodox Church of St. Nicolaus (wooden, 19<sup>th</sup> c.); Orthodox Church of St. Barbara (1900). ¶ **Łosice** (33 km):



a Jewish cemetery (17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> c.), renovated at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> c.; a lapidarium made from a few dozen matzevot retrieved from the town's squares and streets; Church of St. Sigismund (1906–1909). ¶ **Ciechanowiec** (38 km): a synagogue, now the head office of the Culture and Sports Centre in Ciechanów (2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> c.); the old Jewish cemetery with about 30 tombstones; the new Jewish cemetery (19<sup>th</sup> c.) with a memorial to Holocaust victims; the Orthodox Church of the Ascension of the Lord (1864); Holy Trinity Church (1731–1737); the monastery and hospital complex (18<sup>th</sup> c.); The Fr. Krzysztof Kluk Museum of Agriculture; the Mazovia and Podlasie Open-Air Museum. ¶ **Treblinka** (77 km): The memorial and Museum of Combat and Martyrdom in the former death camp. ¶ **The Podlasie Bug Gorge Landscape Park** encompasses part of the Bug Valley stretching from the Toczna River to the estuary of the Krzna River in the village of Neple – a perfect area for cycling and canoeing. ¶ **The Bug River** valley and the slightly undulating Drohiczyń Plateau are criss-crossed by tourist routes, such as the Moszczona Valley Trail, the Molotov Line Bunkers Trail, the Bug River Trail, and the January Uprising Trail.



Former **synagogue** (1797), now the gallery at the Siemiatycze Culture Centre, 1 Zaskólna St. ¶ Former **Talmud-Torah School** (1900), 10 Pałacowa St. ¶ **Jewish cemetery**, Polna St. (18<sup>th</sup> c.). ¶ **Roman Catholic Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary** with the former Missionaries' Monastery (1719–1727), 2a 3 Maja Street. ¶ **Orthodox Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul** (1866), 3 Gen. Władysława Sikorskiego St. ¶ **Statues of sphinxes** at the former entrance gate to the palace of Duchess Anna Jabłonowska and at the General Secondary School building. ¶ **Orangery** (1860), burnt down during the January Uprising of 1863, rebuilt in the 1980s. ¶ **Classicist houses**, Pałacowa St. (nos. 14, 19, 25, 28). ¶ **Ruins of the tilery complex** (19<sup>th</sup> c.). ¶ **Multi-denominational cemetery** (1805): Augsburg Evangelical Chapel (mid-19<sup>th</sup> c.), St. Anne's Chapel (1826–1827), Romana Rogińskiego St. ¶ **World War I cemetery**.

Worth  
seeing

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