

Włodawa

Bel. Уладава, Ukr. Влодава, Yid. וולאָדאַווע

Eyes keep looking, they want to capture everything, to resurrect everything; everything as it used to be?

Haim Kliger (Kiryat Giora), *At the graves of the fathers*, in: *Sefer zikaron Włodawa*, Tel Aviv 1974

Located at the meeting point of the Polish, Ukrainian, and Belarussian lands, Włodawa attracts visitors with its nostalgic atmosphere of a borderland shtetl, the rich natural scenery of Polesie, and the town's multi-ethnic history, which appeals to the imagination especially during the annual Festival of Three Cultures. At the beginning of the 20th century, Włodawa was still a bustling and crowded town. A vast array of traders' wagons rolled through its marketplace, languages from around the world could be heard at the stores and trading stalls, and – after dark – young people would gather to engage in (among other things) heated debates on revolution. The town was an important trade centre and a river port on the Bug. In 1819, it was the fourth largest city in the Lublin region. Today, it has around 13,000 residents.

The town development ¶ The first mention of Jews in Włodawa dates back to the early 16th century. The town location at the intersection of land and water routes facilitated trade with Volhynia, Podolia, and the port of Gdańsk. At first, local Jewish community reported to the Jewish community in Brest; the main

occupations of local Jews were forestry production (wood, tar, wood tar, charcoal, lumber), grain trade, and freight trade down the Bug River. The development of crafts began towards the end of the 16th century. In the mid-17th century, the town was destroyed during the Cossack and Swedish wars. The Jewish community suffered significantly, particularly during the 1648 Cossack Revolution. During the reconstruction of the town, its owner Rafał Leszczyński (the father of Polish King Stanisław) granted the Jews numerous privileges as a means of stimulating the redevelopment of trade and services. In 1684, he allowed the Jewish community to build a cheder, a wooden synagogue, and a butchery (Pol.: jatka) "on the court's lands." Four years later, he passed statutes regulating inhabitants' privileges vis-à-vis the court. Like other residents of Włodawa, Jews were required to keep night watch and provide financial support to the army quartered in town. The 1693 inventory indicates that about half of the 197 houses belonged to Jews. The community was big enough to separate from Brest and establish its own independent kahal. Soon, however, the town was destroyed



again, during the Northern War (1700–1721), and, in 1716, it encompassed only 75 plots of land, of which 41 belonged to Jews. ¶ After the Congress of Vienna (1815), Włodawa, included in the Kingdom of Poland dependent on Russia, was located on the border with the Russian Empire. Generally, Russian regulations limited the development of border cities, but this was not so much the case with Włodawa. Włodawa became a central county town and by 1819, it became the fourth largest town in the Lubelskie Voivodeship (Palatinate) – after Lublin, Hrubieszów, and Tarnogród, and ahead of Chełm and Zamość. In subsequent years, its population increased from approx. 3,300 in 1809 to approx. 15,200 in 1913. This increase was a direct result of the growing number of Jews, from 1,079 to 12,557 (83 percent of the total population). Jews were attracted to the town by Włodawa's famous market fairs, the border crossing, and its customs house, all of which provided considerable opportunities in trade with the

Russian Empire. ¶ Towards the end of the 19th century, a railway line between Chełm and Brest was laid through Włodawa. Brick buildings began to dominate the town architecture; streets and the market square were cobbled; and the first kerosene and then electrical street lighting was installed. Tube wells were also built, and the town saw the beginnings of a small industrial base. The outbreak of World War I halted this development. In 1922, the Jewish Synagogue District of Włodawa consisted of only approx. 6,000 people, of whom 1,200 had active voting rights. The kahal managed a synagogue, a beth midrash, two prayer houses, a mikveh, a Talmud Torah school, a cemetery, a poorhouse, and the plot of land where there had been a hospital. There were also a dozen or so private – often Hasidic – prayer houses. ¶ After World War I, a committee to support war refugees was established, as well as an orphanage, which functioned until 1939. Educational, sports, and cultural organisations began to develop.

A street stage in Włodawa, the photo published on 8 November 1931 in *Forverts* (Forward) daily, collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

The first drama club was established at the end of World War I. For some time, there were also a choir and two klezmer bands. The majority of the local Jews were fairly traditional and reluctant to endorse any innovative trends; nonetheless, with the secularization process Włodawa gradually came under the influence of Zionism. In 1922, the first Zionist scouting organisation, Hashomer Hatzair, was established; it was replaced by a more militant Beitar in 1928. In 1925, young people created a hakhsharah (training) kibbutz in the nearby village of Tomaszówka to prepare volunteers to go to Palestine. Young people met in a place belonging to a Zionist organisation in Wyrkowska St. (now Tysiąclecia St.), where lectures, heated debates, literary meetings, and Hanukah performances and Purim balls were held. There was also a library with a collection of 1,000 items. Towards the end of the 1920s, a Włodawa-Chełm weekly, *Unzer Shtime* (Our Voice), began to be published.

Trade ¶ The main occupations of Włodawa's Jews were trade, lease-holding, and crafts. Since the 16th century, people traded in horses, sheep, and various other types of cattle imported from the Ukraine during annual trading fairs organised specifically for this purpose. In 1673, the town had four butchers, three tailors, and two of each: goldsmiths, furriers, and barber-surgeons. In the following years, Jews ran 18 distilleries, breweries, and malt houses. At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, timber processing and trade developed, with the first steam-powered sawmill built at the end of the 19th century. There were also flour mills, groat mills, and a power

plant located near Zabagonie St. (now Kraszewskiego St.). Most workshops and shops were located around the market square and the building containing marketplace stores known as the "Czworobok" ("Quadrangle"), dating from the 18th century and referred to by Jews as "Habrum" (probably meaning "unification" or "fraternity"). Erected on a square plan with a courtyard in the middle, this building can still be found in the centre of Włodawa. ¶ Almost 85 percent of locally sold goods comprised food, textile products, metal products, and essential machines. A typical feature of Włodawa was the way sales around the "Czworobok" were separated: to the west, there were stores retailing clothing and sewing supplies; to the north, stores with heavy-duty tools; to the east, wholesale cloth and fabrics; and to the south, stores with pre-cooked ready-to-go foods and Israel Shmuel Grizpan's restaurant, popular in the 19th century. Craftsmen were united into guilds, and from the end of the 19th century, into corporations and trade unions. The kahal did not have extensive financial resources. Pre-war Jewish houses were mostly made of wood, placed next to one another. In each of them there were several apartments of one/two rooms. Only a few wealthier residents owned brick tenement houses and stalls around the market square. Trade revenues were the main source of income for the kahal, which is why its authorities favoured local merchants and introduced special regulations concerning, for example, the salt or fish trade. Purchasing larger amounts of these products was punishable by the kahal law, and violators could even be denied burial at the graveyard or excommunicated.

Transport and port on the Bug ¶

Today, the Bug River is used mainly for recreational purposes; however, until the 18th century, the river served an important trade route for freighting grain, honey, and lumber from Podolia and Volhynia to other parts of the country. Carrying, among others, a famous ecotype of pine called *sosna matczańska* (mast pine), Jewish rafts with timber floated downstream to Gdańsk. On the way back, they transported textiles, craft goods, and colonial commodities. Rafts could float on the river from Busk, and the river was navigable from the mouth of the Rata. Until 1939, passenger ships – the “Bug Flotilla” – plied between Dorohusk, Włodawa, and Brest. Trade flourished along the river; granaries, warehouses, river ports, and harbours were built. The remains of a port can still be seen in the nearby village of Kuzawka (23 km). ¶

The Jews of Włodawa were also involved in land transport. In 1937, 14 private droshkies owned by Jews were stationed along the way to the railway station. To transport goods, the Jews used 4 carts for long distances and 23 for short distances. The railway, the nearby border crossing, and the customs house facilitated trade with Russia. A railway line between Chełm and Brest (on the Polish side) operates to this day. On the other, eastern side of the Bug, there is a pre-war railway station called “Włodawa,” which is part of the still functioning Belarusian railway line to Brest.

The synagogue complex ¶ Jewish cultural heritage in Włodawa is represented by the important synagogue complex west of the marketplace. This consists of a brick prayer house founded



A courtyard in a Jewish quarter in Włodawa, 1918–1939, collection of the National Digital Archives, Poland

by the town owner Jerzy Flemming as well as two 20th-century beth midrash buildings – an old one and a new one, both of which currently house the Łączna–Włodawa Lakeland Museum. The synagogue was built in the second half of the 18th century, in a Baroque style, with two corner annexes and a unique mansard roof. The older beth midrash was erected in 1915–1916 incorporating some walls of a former building. The interiors of both buildings were partly damaged, but both have retained some of their initial design and survived World War II as warehouses. The newer beth midrash was added in 1928, and at present it is used as an office and a venue for temporary exhibitions organised by the Museum. ¶ The synagogue in Włodawa features a polychromatic, neo-Baroque, stucco aron ha-kodesh – the holy ark – one of the best-preserved artefacts of this type in Poland. The rich three-storey framework of the Torah ark is covered



Former synagogue in Włodawa, currently the residence of the museum, 2014. Photo by Monika Tarajko, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" (www.teatrnn.pl)

at the bottom with images of musical instruments and quotes from Psalm 150: Praise Him with the blast of the horn; praise Him with the psaltery and harp, Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; praise Him with stringed instruments and the pipe. Its central part features a bas-relief of a menorah and a quote from Psalm 5: I will bow down toward Thy holy temple in the fear of Thee. On the right, the hands of a kohen (Temple-serving priest) in the blessing gesture

can be seen; on the left, there is a basket of fruit symbolising Shavuot. The frieze is topped with the date of construction of the aron ha-kodesh (1934) and two griffins flanking the tablets of the Ten Commandments, which were originally designed as windows through which "the light of the Torah" could shine. Seventeen concrete steps lead up to the niche for the Torah scroll, where today a Hanukkah eight-branch candelabrum lit during the holiday of Hanukkah also stands.

THE FESTIVAL OF THREE CULTURES ¶ Each year in September, the centre of Włodawa – between the Church of St. Louis, the synagogue complex, and the Orthodox Church of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary – fills with people who come here to attend the Festival of Three Cultures. Organised by the Łęczna–Włodawa Lakeland Museum and held since 1995, the three-day festival offers a rich roster of cultural events: concerts, scholarly meetings, arts-and-crafts workshops for children, food and wine tastings, exhibitions, and theatrical performances. The festival symbol is a tree with three colourful branches growing from one trunk, symbolising the town's Catholic, Jewish, and Orthodox traditions.

Cemeteries ¶ Over the centuries, Jewish burials took place in three locations in Włodawa. The oldest cemetery – believed to have been established as early as the 16th century – was located west of the

synagogue. According to the town Yizkor Book, the Jews killed at the hands of Cossacks during the Khmelnytsky Uprising in 1648–1649 were buried here. This is how Alexander Cohen, enormously



[A] The interior of the synagogue in Włodawa, before 1939, collection of the National Library (www.polona.pl)

[B] The neo-Baroque aron ha-kodesh in the synagogue in Włodawa, 2014. Photo by Monika Tarajko

exaggerating the magnitude of the events but perhaps accurately conveying Jewish feelings about it, commented on these events in a chapter of his book *The Legends of Włodawa*: Blood streamed down the streets of Włodawa in 1648–1649. Tens of thousands of Jews left this world, which was filled with hatred and sheer venom. In this graveyard, there are bones of saints killed by murderers and blood spilt in broad daylight before everybody's eyes. Another cemetery, mentioned in the 18th century, was located between Wiejska, Krzywa, and Podzamcze Streets. It was completely devastated during the Nazi occupation during World War II, and then it was used as a storage area by a local cooperative. The third cemetery,

established in the 19th century was shaped like an irregular quadrangle and encompassed three hectares. Matzevot from this cemetery were destroyed during the war, and some were used by the occupation authorities to pave squares and roads and to regulate the Włodawka River. Located between present-day Mielczarskiego, Jana Pawła II, and Reymonta Streets, it now functions as a town park, and a monument commemorating the Jewish community of Włodawa was recently erected there. At the edge of the park, there is also one gravestone: that of a Jewish partisan, Hersh Griner, who died in the 1960s and asked in his will to be buried in the Jewish cemetery in Włodawa.

THE MACCABEE ORCHESTRA ¶ In 1922, a wind orchestra was formed at the newly established Maccabee sports club. Initially, it consisted of only 12 musicians, led by bandmaster Shmuelke Feldman. The number of musicians soon increased to 42, and the band was led by Josef Minc. Wearing navy blue and white uniforms, the orchestra performers appeared at events such as the town parades during the holiday of Lag Ba-Omer (in Jewish tradition, the 33rd day after Passover,



Members of the Maccabi Orchestra, 1927, reproduction from *Sefer zikaron Włodawa ve-ha-seviva Sobibór*, ed. Shimon Kanc, Tel Aviv 1974

when mourning regulations are lifted, three-year old children can have their first hair-cut and young pairs can get married), the consecration of a new synagogue in Parczew, and a visit to Chełm by Yitzhak Grünbaum, a Jewish Member of the pre-war Sejm (parliament). In 1927, during the meeting of the Beitar (Zionist youth movement of Revisionist trend) in Warsaw, the Włodawa section won a national competition of musical orchestras. The orchestra existed until the end of the 1930s.

World War II and the Holocaust

At the beginning of the war, the Jewish community consisted of 5,600 people (60 percent of the population). In the first days of September 1939, the town was bombed twice, and it came under German occupation from October 1939 to July 1944. The new authorities created a forced labour camp in 1940 and, a year later, a ghetto, where Jews from the Netherlands, Austria, and other cities of the General Government also were confined. Over the two years of the ghetto's operation, its population varied from a few hundred to 9,000 people. They were forced to work on land drainage and forest management. Deportation to the Sobibór death camp began in May 1942, during the holiday of Shavuot.

Further round-ups and transports were organised by the Germans in July, October, and November 1942. The last transport – which put an end to the Jewish community in Włodawa – took place on May 1–3, 1943. The town holds anniversary ceremonies each year at the beginning of May to commemorate these events and their victims.

Sobibór The Museum of the Former Nazi Death Camp in Sobibór is located 16 km south of Włodawa. Sobibór was one of three death camps built exclusively for extermination of Jews in Operation Reinhard (Nazi plan to exterminate Jews in the territory regulated by the General Government), among Belżec, near Zamość, and Treblinka,

north of Warsaw. At least 170,000 people were murdered here in 1942–1943, including most of Włodawa's Jews. The camp also received transports from the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Bohemia, and Slovakia. On October 14, 1943, a group of 260 people – led by Leib Feldhendler and Aleksander Peczerski – staged an uprising and managed to kill some of the SS personnel, seize arms, and escape to the forest.

Most were captured or killed by search squads. Thomas Blatt – one of the few survivors – kept a diary and later wrote his memoirs. He worked with the author Richard Raschke to locate and interview other survivors and participants in the revolt. Raschke's 1983 book *Escape from Sobibor* was used as the basis of a 1987 TV movie by the same name, which Blatt also worked on as a writer and which won two Golden Globe Awards.

“ I spent half a year in Sobibór. Finally, on 14 October, in one hour, we killed all the Germans with knives and axes, we took away their weapons and started an open uprising. ¶ Polish Jews knew they would be killed, but those who came from abroad did not realise this and, when they got off the train, they were told that they had been brought to a beautiful place, a forest, where they would receive flats, but first they had to undress and take a bath for sanitary reasons. Not suspecting anything, people entered the gas chambers voluntarily and, once they did so, it was too late to get out. ¶ As soon as the Germans came, I started to write. I knew the situation was getting worse. Initially, I wrote everything, but then I realised it didn't make sense. I lost my notebook once, then I burnt another and then I started to write again. Later, when I was taken to Sobibór, I began to write again. Once a German threw it into a well full of water, all the pages were destroyed. When I left the camp – I started to write again. I asked my Christian friends to keep it for me and, after the war, I managed to collect some 40 percent. Then I wrote a book. ¶ Thomas Blatt — fragments of Oral History from the collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre, 2004

MENDELE MORGERNSTERN ¶ He was the last rabbi of the town of Włodawa. He was elected at the age of only 23, in 1939, after the death of his father Moshe Baruch, who died of wounds received during the German bombardments. Together with other Jews, Morgenstern was confined to the ghetto in Włodawa, where – despite the difficult conditions – he continued to perform his religious duties. He was one of the people who initiated the collection of the bodies of Jews who died in the transports to Sobibór from railway embankments, and he personally supervised burials at the Jewish cemetery. In July 1942, by order of the Germans, he brought his children to the assembly point for people transported to Sobibór. He declined the offer to leave them and return to the ghetto. He was killed in August 1942, in Sobibór.

ARNOLD BOGUMIL EHRLICH ¶ The distinguished biblical scholar and researcher Arnold Bogumil Ehrlich was born in Włodawa in 1848. Well-versed in the Bible and the Talmud, he worked in the Berlin Royal Library and, at the age of 30, emigrated to the USA. Reportedly, he could speak 39 languages.

Memorial Mound located in the Museum of the Former Nazi Death Camp in Sobibór, 2015. Photo by Monika Tarajko, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" (www.teatrnn.pl)



In 1899–1901, he published a three-volume work, *Mikra Ki-fshuta* (The Bible Literal Meaning), a critical analysis of the Bible. Together with a German professor, Franz Delitzsch, he translated the New Testament into Hebrew. He also translated the *Book of Psalms* into German. He died in New York in 1919.

Surrounding area

Adampol (6 km): the hunting lodge of the Zamojski family, currently a clinic (1913–1928); a monument commemorating the labour camp and several executions of Jews in 1941–1943. ¶ **Różanka** (7 km): the remains of a palace and manor complex (18th–19th c.); the Church of St. Augustine (1908–1913); a former centre of folk weaving. ¶ **Luta** (13 km): a memorial to Jews murdered in a forced labour camp. ¶ **Sobibór** (18 km): The Museum of the Former Nazi Death Camp in Sobibór, a branch of the State Museum at Majdanek. ¶ **Sławatycze** (25 km): The Care of Our Lady Orthodox Church (1910–1912); an Orthodox graveyard (19th c.); the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary (1913–1919); a Jewish cemetery, Polna St.; a mass grave of people killed during the deportation of the Jewish community in 1942. ¶ **Hola** (29 km): the wooden Orthodox Church of St. Paraskeva and St. Anthony of the Caves (1702); the bell tower of an Orthodox church (1898); the Skansen of Material Culture of Chełm Land and Podolia. The Hola fair is held in July. ¶ **Romanów** (29 km): a manor house, currently the Museum of Józef Ignacy Kraszewski (early 19th c.); St. Anne's Chapel (early 19th c.). ¶ **Jablęcna** (31 km): a monastery complex: An Orthodox monastery (1838–1840) with a miraculous icon of St. Onuphrius (15th c.), a gate bell tower (1840), a monastery building (around 1840), the former house of the monastery governor (19th/20th c.); wooden chapels of the Dormition of the Theotokos and the Holy Spirit (1900–1908); a wooden Uniate church, currently the Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord (1752); two post mills (Pol.: koźlak) (1889, 1926); a granary (1889). ¶ **Sawin** (31 km): a Jewish cemetery (18th c.); the Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord (1731–1740); a hospital with a poorhouse (1757). ¶ **Sosnowica** (35 km): the Sosnowski family manor (18thc.); Holy Trinity Church (1797); the Orthodox Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul (1891–1893); cemeteries: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish (19th c.). ¶ **Wereszczyn** (37 km): a monument commemorating the execution of approx. 150 Jews; a wooden manor house (early 20th c.); the wooden Church of St. Stanislaus the Bishop and Martyr and the Holy Trinity (1783); the tomb of the Rulikowski family (2nd half of the

19th c.). ¶ **Uhrusk** (39 km): The Church of John the Baptist (1672–1676); the Church of the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1849); a RomanCatholic cemetery (18th c.); an Orthodox cemetery (2nd half of the 19th c.); the former palace of the Niemirycz family, currently a branch of the University of Life Sciences in Lublin (19th c.). ¶ **Kodeń** (44 km): The Shrine of Our Lady of Kodeń, Queen of Podlasie and Mother of Unity, located on the site of the former residence of the Sapieha family: the Calvary of Kodeń, an Orthodox church – currently the Church of the Holy Spirit (16th c.), the Basilica of St. Anne (1629–1635); a monastery complex of Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, with rose gardens; Placencja Palace (18th c.). ¶ **Kostomłoty** (50 km): the wooden neo-Uniate Church of St. Nikita (1631); the wooden Orthodox Church of St. Seraphim of Sarov (mid-20th c.). ¶ **The Polesie National Park** ¶ **The Bug River Cycling Path**

Former **synagogue complex** (18th c.), currently the Museum, 7 Czerwonego Krzyża St., +48 82 5722 178, poczta@muzeumwlodawa.pl ¶ **Pauline monastery**: The Church of St. Louis (1739–1780), the monastery building (1711–1717), 7 Klasztorna St. ¶ **Orthodox Church of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary** (1840–1842); an Orthodox graveyard (19th c.); an Orthodox presbytery (19th c.), 11a Kościelna St. ¶ **Cemeteries: Uniate and Roman Catholic** (18th c.), Wyzwolenia Ave. ¶ The building housing a complex of stalls known as the “Czworobok” (2nd half of the 18th c.), in the middle of the market square. ¶ **The panorama of the town** as seen from the bank of the Bug River.

Worth
seeing

