

Szczebrzeszyn

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“What is the name of this place?” he thundered. [...] The old man started to mumble. The commander screamed: “Speak up! Speak up!” And when the old man still didn’t stop mumbling he was struck in the face, knocking out a tooth. The old Jew bent down to pick up his tooth and said sadly, in Hebrew, “Sheber-shin.” Broken tooth: Sheber-Shin.

Philip Bibel, *Why My Town Had Two Names*, in: *Tales of the Shtetl*, Elie Metchnikoff Memorial Library, 2004

Sheber shin ¶ In the Middle Ages, Szczebrzeszyn was one of the most important fortified settlements in the Principality of Galicia–Volhynia. When Red Ruthenia was annexed to the Polish Crown in the mid-14th century, Szczebrzeszyn was described as a “Ruthenian town.” At the end of the 14th century, Dymitr of Goraj, the new owner, granted the town Magdeburg rights. In the 15th century, Jews began to settle in Szczebrzeszyn, giving rise to one of the oldest Jewish communities in the present-day Lubelskie Voivodeship. In 1507, the Szczebrzeszyn kahal already paid coronation tax. In 1560, the then owner of the town, Andrzej Górka, confirmed the rights and duties of the Jews: this included the amount of tax they had to pay, as well as issues concerning the jurisdiction of the courts. Further documents, which mandated the same treatment of Jews and Christians, were issued by Stefan Báthory (1583), then by Stanisław Górka, and finally by Jan Czarowski (1593), who exempted the rabbi from the house tax and payments for the mikveh. These rights were confirmed in 1597 by the new owner of the town, Jan Zamoyski, who also exempted Jews

from paying rent for the shul and the cemetery. ¶ In the 16th century, Szczebrzeszyn became famous as the home of learned men, writers, and rabbis. Women were not neglected: Gumpekh of Szczebrzeszyn won renown thanks to his book for women covering various legal aspects of Purim and Pesach, published in 1555 in Italy. He also wrote poetic short stories that were included in prayer books for women. At the end of the 16th century, Isaiah Menakhem – son of Isaiah of Szczebrzeszyn – became the Rabbi of Cracow, the largest Jewish community in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Szczebrzeszyn kahal gradually declined in importance, giving way to the dynamically developing Jewish community in nearby Zamość.

The oppression of the times ¶ In the middle of the 17th century, the town sustained heavy damage from enemy armies. Notably, the devastating attack of the Khmelnytsky’s Cossack rebels was bemoaned by Meir, son of Samuel of Szczebrzeszyn, in a poem entitled *Tsok ha’itim* (‘The Oppression of the Times’), printed a year later in Cracow.



A view of Szczecbrzeszyn, before 1939, collection of the Szczecbrzeszyn of Cultures Foundation

It is a chronicle in verse based on the reports of fugitives and the author's own experiences. Meir of Szczecbrzeszyn had authored an earlier poem entitled *Shir Mizmor le-Yom ha-Shabbat* (A Psalm for the Sabbath, 1639). ¶ Szczecbrzeszyn's economic development was encouraged by a charter issued in 1673 by King Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki that allowed the Jews of Szczecbrzeszyn to produce and sell liquor. In 1676, the 216 taxed residents of the town included 61 Jews. In the first half of the 18th century, three sessions of the Va'ad Arba' Aratzot (The Council of Four Lands) were held in Szczecbrzeszyn. In 1749, the town council made an agreement with local Jews and issued a decree allowing them to produce candles in exchange for payments to the municipal budget. In the spirit of the rising enlightenment era, the document barred Jews from preparing written agreements in Hebrew – all provisions were to be written down in Polish. It also reaffirmed the obligation to pay taxes into the treasury of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In 1765, records show that some 444 people in the entire Jewish community (the town and nearby

villages) paid a per capita tax (two zlotys). At the time, the Szczecbrzeszyn kahal was medium-sized when compared to other kahals in the Land of Chełm: it was smaller than the kahals of Zamość (1905 taxpayers), Chełm (1418), Luboml (1226), Hrubieszów (1023), or Turobin (985). Similar-sized communities existed in Kryłów (470) and Rejowiec (437), and there were 11 kahals smaller than that of Szczecbrzeszyn.

The synagogue ¶ A wooden shul may have been erected in Szczecbrzeszyn already in the 15th century, but the earliest mention of the building dates back to 1588. The stone Renaissance-style synagogue with an attic and a butterfly roof that was built at the beginning of the 17th century was destroyed before 1770. In the 1770s, it was rebuilt in its present form – with a Polish tiered roof. The building, located southeast of the marketplace in today's Sądowa St., is an example of a synagogue with the main prayer room at its centre. The main men's room is adjoined by two-storey women's galleries on the northern and southern sides, by a two-storey annexe on the western side

[A] The synagogue in Szczepieszyn, present day seat of the Municipal Cultural Centre, 2013. Photo by Wioletta Wejman, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

[B] The synagogue in Szczepieszyn, first half of the 20th century, collection of the Szczepieszyn of Cultures Foundation



that once housed a men's narthex and a meeting room, and by a third women's gallery on the first floor, added later, and once reached by wooden stairs. In 1940, the synagogue was burned down by the Germans. After the war, it was partially demolished, and then, between 1957 and

1963, it was reconstructed to serve as the municipal cultural centre. It continues to function in this fashion. A stone aron h-kodesh and the Renaissance ornaments of the main room have survived inside the building.

“ We sat together. I held on to a new tallis [prayer shawl] given to me that morning. Grandpa adjusted the prayer shawl so it would be clearly visible. He told me to stand up straight, and when it was my turn to read the Torah, the hazzan (cantor) sang out: “Ya’amod, Pinkhas ben Boruch Ha-Kohen.” (Philip, the son of Boruch, the Kohen,

is called up to the Torah). I stepped up and proudly pronounced the blessing. ¶ Philip Bibel, *What Does it Mean to Be a Kohen?*, in: *Tales of the Shtetl*, Elie Metchnikoff Memorial Library, 2004

The Jewish cemetery ¶ The Jewish cemetery located on Cmentarna St. is one of the oldest and most interesting Jewish burial sites in Poland. Established in the first half of the 16th century, it has preserved its unique character. There are more than 3,000 matzevot dating from 1545 to 1939. In 2007, the cemetery came under the ownership of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage. ¶ Just behind the entrance to the cemetery, one can see two gravestones engulfed by a spreading elmtree. The inscriptions on them are completely effaced. According to popular legends – and even to a plaque placed here in the 1990s – these are the gravestones of two famous figures connected with Szczepieszyn but who lived in different periods, Issakhar Ber and Simkha ha-Kohen Rapoport. Prof. Andrzej Trzciński, who conducts research on the Jewish cemetery, discovered, however, that the matzevot of these two men actually stand in a different section of the graveyard. ¶ Issakhar Ber ben Naftali ha-Kohen was known to his contemporaries as Berman Aszkenazi of Szczepieszyn and was the author of religious works that were re-printed many times. These included *Matanot kehunah* (The Gifts of Priesthood), a collection of commentaries on the Midrash Rabbah (collection of rabbinical pedagogical narratives) published for the first time in Cracow in 1587, and *Mareh Kohen* (The Priest Watches), an alphabetical index of the



biblical motifs and quotations appearing in the kabbalistic *Sefer ha-Zohar* (The Book of Radiance), published for the first time in 1589. Artistic in both form and content, the inscription on his gravestone mentions his life's work; it does not, however, contain the date of the scholar's death – according to his biographers, he died between 1590 and 1608. ¶ Simkha ha-Kohen Rapoport died in Szczepieszyn in August 1718, at the age of 68, when he was on a journey from Lublin to Lwów (now Lviv) where he was to become the head of the rabbinical court. *The inscription on his matzevah reads: This is the grave of a famous teacher, the light of Diaspora, master of the sons of Diaspora, our teacher and mentor Simkha ha-Kohen Rappoport; may the memory of this just and holy man be for a blessing; the head of the rabbinical court of the communities of Dubno, Grodno, Lublin, he was later appointed head of the rabbinical court of the community of Lwów in place of the Hakham Zvi [a leading rabbinic authority in Brody and Lviv, stalwart opponent of Sabbateanism and*

A matzeva at the Jewish graveyard in Szczepieszyn, 2013. Photo by Wioletta Wejman, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

Yakov Reifman, portrait reproduction from *Sefer zikaron li-kehilat Shebreshin*, ed. Dov Shuval, Haifa 1984

the father of the illustrious rabbi Yaakov Emden – eds.]. *Here he departed from this world when they were on a journey, and it occurred on the 7th day of Av in 478 [1718]. He had sons and sons-in-law – rabbis, pillars of science, and the great ones of the generation. He promised that all the descendants of his loins to the tenth generation who come to his grave would be made happy.* ¶ The oldest gravestones in the cemetery can be found in the eastern section, near the northern wall. The oldest preserved matzevah marks the grave of Yekhiel, son of Moses. Its inscription reads: *This is the grave of a righteous man, our teacher Yekhiel, son of Moses, of the blessed memory. May his soul be bound in the bond of life. His soul departed from this world on Tuesday, 26 Nisan, year 305 (April 9, 1545).* Other 16th-century matzevot include, among others, the gravestones of Hannah,



daughter of Abraham (d. 1552); Roza, daughter of Menakhem (d. 1572); Hannah, daughter of Elijah (d. 1578); Isaiah, son of Meshulam Flavius (d. 1579 or 1580); Israel, son of Isaiah (d. 1588); [...] daughter of Joseph, wife of Israel (d. 1591); Sinai, son of Isaac (d. 1595).

“ *The cemetery was overgrown with tall grasses and fruit trees. The winds and birds had deposited seeds from nearby orchards. No one ever ate the fruit, as the roots reached deeply into the earth; it was said that they were nourished by the people buried there. When somebody was taken seriously ill, women visited the graves of their ancestors and prayed to their souls asking to intercede on her behalf with the Almighty, which Jews at the time regarded as the last resort. Their sobbing was so loud and plaintive that they could awake the dead – which they probably meant to do.* ¶ Philip Bibel, *Beth Olam*, in: *Tales of the Shtetl*, Elie Metchnikoff Memorial Library, 2004, (edited)

Men of the Haskalah ¶ Thanks to its location near Zamość, Szczecbrzeszyn became home to several significant representatives of the Jewish Enlightenment, or Haskalah. These included **Yakov Reifman** (1818–1895) – a teacher, polyglot, and author of numerous scholarly publications. He settled in Szczecbrzeszyn in 1834 when he was 19, after marrying a woman who lived there. In his father-in-law’s house, he found a rich library,

which helped him broaden his horizons and transformed a yeshivah student into one of the leading representatives of the Jewish Enlightenment. His works were published in Warsaw, Vilnius, Berlin, Vienna, and Saint Petersburg. They included a volume of critical Talmudic studies, *Takkanot ha-bait* (Household Regulations), and a book entitled *Toldot rabenu Zekharia ha-Levi* (Life of our Rabbi Zekhariah ha-Levi). Even though

Yakov Reifman lived in Szczecbrzeszyn until the end of his life and appeared to lead the life of a provincial Jew, his work was recognised around the world. The noted Jewish philanthropist Sir Moses

Montefiore presented him with a golden chalice with an engraved dedication, and the Hebrew poet Judah Leib Gordon wrote a poem dedicated to him:

*Wherever I turn, I see his ghost / which is looking for light and fire in the nooks of the Torah
/ I have not forgotten you, brother – who could forget you / how many Yakov Reifmans are
there in this Jewish world? / Very few*

But even though Reifman was recognised around the world, he died in poverty. Isaac Bashevis Singer contributed a beautiful text about him to The Book of Memory of the Jewish Community of Shebreshin. ¶ Another follower of the Haskalah, Lejb Szper, was one of the town's wealthiest residents. In 1853, he established an agricultural colony called Szperówka on the land he leased near Szczecbrzeszyn, where he employed farm workers.

The social life of the shtetl ¶ At the beginning of the 20th century, a number of social organisations began to develop in Szczecbrzeszyn and other towns. These included, for example, the “Bikur Holim”

Society for Caring for the Sick and the Savings and Loan Association, which helped petty merchants and craftsmen – Jewish and Christian – by providing them with free loans. Politically active groups included Zionists and socialists, among others. Members of the Jewish socialist party, the Bund, actively participated in the revolution of 1905, in cooperation with the Polish Socialist Party. During one illegal strike, Russian soldiers shot three demonstrators. ¶ In the 1931 elections to the town council, representatives of Jewish parties – mainly Zionists and the Bund – won 11 seats. Cultural life also developed in the town; a Jewish library, a drama circle, and a choir were all founded in 1917.

“A new wind began to blow in the shtetl. In 1914, with the beginning of World War I, a new society was beginning to take shape. Parties were founded, workers organisations and trade unions arose. Calls for equality, brotherhood and national revival were heard. ¶ An uprising occurred among the youth. Seeing a new way of life in the shtetl, young people abandoned the bet hamidrash and the shtibl, threw off the long kapote and the “Yiddish hitl”, and put on a suit and hat. [...] ¶ I remember that every Saturday, when we went out for a walk, the Bundists walked in one group singing the “Shvueh”(Yid. “The Oath”, which lyrics were written by S. An-sky), and the Zionists in another group, singing Zionist songs. When the two groups encountered each other, they quickly separated, as if they were enemy armies. [...] ¶ That is how Jewish youth lived and acted. Parents could not accept the new spirit of the times and rejected all new trends. ¶ Yehuda Kelner, *How We Have Thrown Away the Long Kapotas*, in: *The Book of Memory to the Jewish Community of Shebreshin* (trans. by Moses Milstein from: *Sefer zikkaron le-kehilat Shebreshin*), Haifa 1984, retrieved from www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor



World War II and the Holocaust ¶

The Germans were the first to enter Szczepieszyn on September 13, 1939. Then, after 27 September, the Soviets took over the town, but just for about two weeks. After re-entering Szczepieszyn on October 6, the Nazi Germans began to persecute Jews. From 1940, they forced Jews to work on the construction of a military airport in nearby Klemensów. In November 1940, the Germans set fire to the synagogue and the surrounding houses. In May 1942, mass executions at the Jewish cemetery began. As the result, more than 1,000 people were killed during these mass killings. Deportations began

at that time, too. In March 1942, trains crammed with Jews being transported to the extermination camp in Belzec started passing near Szczepieszyn. Several hundred Jews from Szczepieszyn were sent there in transports in August and October 1942. The last transport to Belzec took place on 21 October 1942. After that day, many Jews hiding in and near Szczepieszyn were caught and shot at the Jewish cemetery. ¶ Zygmunt Klukowski, director of the hospital in Szczepieszyn, kept a diary in which he documented everyday life at the time of mass murder; it formed a day-by-day account of unspeakable horrors.

“**October 21, 1942 ¶** *I intended to go back to Zamość. I got up early to get ready for the journey. Suddenly, I heard and saw through the window some strange commotion in the town, even though the streets were virtually empty. It turned out that the “relocation” of Jews – or, more precisely, their liquidation in Szczepieszyn – began at six o’clock. [...] Armed military policemen, the SS, and the Navy-Blue Police were chasing, tracking, and discovering Jews around the town. Jews were herded into the market and grouped in front of the town hall. They were found in the most diverse of hideaways; gates and doors were broken, shutters were destroyed, hand grenades were dropped into*



A drama circle, under the auspices of the Jewish library in Szczeczeszyn, presenting a performance entitled *Two Worlds: A Drama in Four Acts* by Max Nordau, 1928, reproduction from *Sefer zikaron li-kehilat Shebreshin*, ed. Dov Shuwal, Haifa 1984

some basements and flats. Revolvers, rifles, and machine guns located in various places were fired. People were beaten, kicked, and abused in an inhuman manner. ¶ Zygmunt Klukowski, *Zamojszczyzna 1918–1943*, Warsaw 2007

On the initiative of the Szczeczeszyn Jews Landsmannschaft in Israel and the Diaspora, a memorial to the Jews of Szczeczeszyn and the vicinity murdered by the Nazis during World War II was erected at the Jewish cemetery in 1991. After 2011, the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage erected another monument there and built a stone wall along Cmentarna St.

The last Jew of Szczeczeszyn

¶ After the war, many Jews of Szczeczeszyn who survived the Holocaust emigrated to the Israeli city of Haifa, where, to this day, one can meet former residents of the shtetl and their descendants. Only one Jew chose to remain in Szczeczeszyn: Jankiel Grojser, born in 1904, a soldier of the Polish Armed Forces and a participant in the September Campaign, defending Poland from

the Nazi invasion. He was sent to Siberia, which he left with Anders' Army (Polish Armed Forces in the East created in the Soviet Union and then passed under British command). ¶ With this army he fought against Germans in the Battle of Monte Cassino (17 January–18 May 1944). After the war, he came back to Szczeczeszyn and – despite the destruction of the Jewish community in the Holocaust – he decided to stay. Grojser found a job in an agricultural cooperative, distributing beverages to local clients. He also took it upon himself to care for the Jewish cemetery. After his death in 1970, due to the lack of rabbi, he was buried in the Catholic parish graveyard but his grave bears the Star of David. ¶ Today, Szczeczeszyn has a population of 5,000. Its attractive location near the Roztocze Landscape Park has made it a local tourist centre. The memory of the

Jews from Szczepieszyn is preserved by the cultural centre located in the

synagogue, and by local teachers and local non-governmental organisations.

Numerous short stories by Nobel prize-winning author Isaac Bashevis Singer are set in the Lublin region. One of his best-known characters is Yasha Mazur – the Magician of Lublin and protagonist of the book by that name. His characters live in the region's small towns. It is thanks to them that Biłgoraj, Goraj, Frampol, Tyszowce, Szczepieszyn, Józefów, and Piaski have become familiar names to readers worldwide. And what do present-day residents of these towns know about their history and lore? Do they remember the Jewish neighbours who lived among them for hundreds of years? These are some of the questions that have inspired the artistic and educational project called "Following I.B. Singer's Traces" carried out by the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre. The "Magician's Friends" – artists from various countries and various artistic disciplines – travel on a special bus (like a modern circus wagon) to meet people in a number of different places in the region. They entertain, teach, and evoke a world that no longer exists. The project is supported by local authorities, schools, and cultural institutions. ¶ For more information, please visit www.sladamisingera.teatrnn.pl

Worth seeing

Jewish cemetery (16th c.), Cmentarna St. ¶ **Former synagogue** (17th c.), currently a cultural centre, 3 Sądowa St., tel. +48 84 6821060, mdk@szczepieszyn.pl ¶ **Church of St. Nicholas the Bishop** (1610–1620), 1 Wyzwolenia St. ¶ **Filial Orthodox Church of St. George Parish** (late 12th c.), 4 Sądowa St. ¶ **Franciscan monastery** (17th c.), currently a hospital, 1 Klukowskiego St. ¶ **Christian graveyard** (18th c.) with the Chapel of St. Leonard (1812), Cmentarna St.

Surrounding area

Klemensów (3 km): the Zamoyski Palace (1744–1747) – this is where parts of the Oscar-winning film *Ida* were shot (2012). ¶ **Zwierzyniec** (11 km): a Jewish cemetery (circa 1928),





"Following I. B. Singer's Traces" Festival in Szczepleszyn, 2011. Photo by Joanna Zętar, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrn.pl)

158 Monopolowa St.; the Church of St. John of Nepomuk "on the isle" (1741–1747); buildings that belong to the managing body of the Zamoyski Family Fee Tail (Trust), 1. Browarna St.; the plenipotentiary's villa (1880–1891), 1 Plażowa St.; brewery (1806), 7 Browarna St.; the only monument in the world commemorating success in combatting a plague of locusts; the "Borek" estate of wooden houses (1920s and 1930s); The Educational and Museum Centre of the Roztocze National Park; Echo Ponds; the Polish Konik breeding centre in Florianka. ¶ **Nielisz** (15 km): an artificial lake on the Wieprz River (1990s); the wooden Church of St. Adalbert (1859). ¶ **Radecznica** (16 km): the Basilica of St. Anthony of Padua with a Benedictine monastery (1685); the "on the water" chapel near the spring of St. Anthony (1824). ¶ **Guciów** (16 km): the private "Zagroda Guciów" Ethnographic and Nature Museum. ¶ **Zamość** (21 km): much of the former Jewish quarter with buildings from the 16th and 17th c.; the former synagogue, 9 Zamenhoffa St. / 14 Pereca St. (17th c.), recently restored and currently the Synagogue Centre managed by the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage; buildings of the former mikveh and the kahal house with a cheder, 5 and 11 Zamenhoff St.; the former shul in Reja St., currently a kindergarten; the new Jewish graveyard (early 20th c.) at Prosta St. with an obelisk built of preserved gravestones (1950); the Zamość Museum; the town hall (1591); the Grand Market; the Water (Wodny) Market; the Salt (Solny) Market (the original Jewish quarter); Armenian town houses (mid-17th c.); a complex of city walls with gates and bastions (16th c.); The Zamoyski Academy (1639–1648), currently the Jan Zamoyski General Secondary School No. 1 (1579–1586); the Cathedral of the Lord's Resurrection and St. Thomas the Apostle (1587–1598); the Church of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1637); the Stefan Miller Zoological Garden. ¶ **Turobin** (26 km): St. Dominic's Church (circa 1530); a bell tower–crypt (18th c.); an old presbytery (1921); graveyard chapels of St. Elisabeth and St. Mark. ¶ **Łabunie** (35 km): the Church of Our Lady of the Scapular and St. Dominic (1605); the Zamoyski Palace (1735); castellan's residence (kasztelanka), a pavilion, a park with a monastery graveyard, currently the seat of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary; the palace and park complex in Łabuńki Pierwsze (19th c.): a palace, two outbuildings and park; "Ecomuseum – Christmas oil mill" of the Kostrubiec family, Ruszów ¶ **The Roztocze National Park**: 9 nature paths, hiking and cycling routes, canoeing on the Wieprz River.