

Belz

Pol. Belz, Ukr. Белз, Yid. בעלז

*Belz, my little town of Belz
The little house where
I spent my childhood!*

*The song *My Little Town of Belz*
(version sung by Adam Aston,
written by Jacob Jacobs)*

Princely town ¶ Belz is located near the border with Poland between two tributaries of the Bug River – the Solokiya and Richitsa. According to the most widespread hypothesis, the town's name comes from the Old Slavic *belz* or *bewz*, meaning a muddy, damp area. In the Boyko dialect, the same word means a muddy place difficult to get through. Another theory links the town's name with an Old Ruthenian word *бѣлузѣ* (a “white place,” a lawn, or clearing, in the midst of a dark forest). ¶ Belz is one of the oldest towns not only in Ukraine, but also in Eastern Europe. Its first mention dates to the Old Rus chronicle *Tale of the Bygone Years* (also known as the primary Chronicle), which mentions that, in 1031, the Prince of Kiev (now Kyiv) Yaroslav the Wise defended the town against the Poles. At the time, Belz was a typical fortified town on the western frontiers of Kievan Rus. In 1170, the town became the capital of the independent Principality of Belz, which pleaded allegiance to the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia. In the mid-14th century, after the Rurikid dynasty had come to an end, Belz – together with the whole Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia – became

the focus of dispute between the rulers of Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania. In 1377–1387, the town came under Hungarian rule. In 1377, Duke Władysław of Opole – the governor of the Palatinate of Ruthenia appointed by King Lajos I of Hungary and Poland – granted the town with the Magdeburg law. In 1387, Queen Jadwiga (Hedwig) of Poland removed Hungarian palatine from Ruthenia and incorporated that territory into the Kingdom of Poland. A year later, her husband Władysław II Jagiełło handed that land over to Siemowit IV, Duke of Masovia. In 1462, the town became the capital of Belz Palatinate, created after the incorporation of the Land of Belz into the Polish Crown.

The Jews of Belz ¶ Most probably a Jewish community existed here already in the times of the Principality of Halych (called Galicia after this town), which emerged as the Duchy of Volhynia-Galicia following the collapse of Kievan Rus' in the 13th century. The oldest reference to the Jews of Belz is dated to 1469 when a court case regarding debt recovery involving Jews took place. Initially, the Jewish community



A view of Belz, circa 1931, collection of the National Library, Poland (www.polona.pl)

lived in the Przedmieście Lubelskie (Lublin Suburb) district, but due to the growth of Belz, in 1509, the Jewish quarter was included within the town walls and formed the northwestern part of the town centre. In 1570, about 20–25 Jewish families lived in Belz. In 1587, the Dominicans sold a plot of land to the Jews for the construction of a synagogue, which means that the town magistrate acknowledged the presence of the Jews and legalized Judaism as a tolerated religion. The first *shul* (prayer house) was built of wood, like most of buildings in the town. Later, another synagogue was erected next to it. At the beginning of the 17th century, Joel Sirkes (1561–1640) served as the rabbi of Belz. Rabbi Sirkes was a renowned Talmudic scholar and rabbinic authority known as the BaH, an acronym of the title of his work, *Bayit Hadash* (Heb.: New House), a four-volume legal commentary that adapted many rulings by key Sephardic scholars to the Ashkenazic realities. Originally from Lublin, Joel Sirkes also served as a rabbi in Pruzhany, Lublin, Łuków, Luboml, Medzhybizh

(Mezhibizh), Belz, Szydłów, Brest, and Cracow. ¶ In 1648, during the Cossack Revolution, Belz was besieged by the Cossacks, who demanded a significant ransom from the town dwellers. The wars of the mid-17th century destroyed Belz almost completely, a fact attested to by the 1667 document recording an inspection of the town. To accelerate rebuilding, the municipal council of Belz granted Jews the same rights that other burghers had enjoyed. In 1704, during the Great Northern War, Belz was destroyed by Swedish troops. With the First Partition of Poland in 1772, the town was incorporated into the Habsburg Monarchy and became part of the Province of Galicia. The town lost its political and administrative significance and became a small craft and trade centre. On May 7, 1789, Emperor Joseph II issued the Edict of Tolerance, under which most of the legal and residential differences between Christians and Jews were abolished and the existing restrictions on building synagogues and establishing Jewish cemeteries were lifted. The Jews of Belz settled throughout the

entire town centre, including the market square. After the great fire of 1806, when most of the wooden buildings, including the prayer houses, burnt down, a new synagogue sponsored by the influential Adler family was established.

The Hasidism of Belz ¶ In 1816, Belz became one of the centres of Hasidic movement in Galicia and home to the famous Hasidic dynasty of Rokeakh. The dynasty was founded by the tsaddik **Sholom Rokeakh** (1779–1855) from Brody, who was a disciple of Jacob Isaac Horowitz, known as the Seer of Lublin. After the death of his teacher in 1815, Rabbi Rokeakh was recognised as a tsaddik, the head of the Hasidic court, whom people called Sar Shalom (Heb.: Prince of Peace). He served as the rabbi of Belz from 1817 to 1855. On Sholom Rokeakh’s initiative, in 1843, the Great Synagogue and a *beth midrash* (prayer house) were established. In 1874, the Rokeakh family sponsored the construction of a Talmud Torah school and a new building for the rabbinic families which were built to the southeast of the Great Synagogue. ¶ Due to the charisma of Sholom Rokeakh, Hasidic ideas spread wide through northern Galicia, Volhynia, and Hungary. As the legend has it, Rabbi Rokeakh was able to heal people, and his fame as a healer who helped Jews and Christians in difficult times reached far beyond the borders of Galicia, Volhynia, and Bukovina. Hundreds of Jews came to Belz for a personal blessing of a tsaddik. Sholom Rokeakh died in 1855 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Belz. Today his grave site has turned into a site of pilgrimage for people in dire straits. ¶



Sholom Rokeakh was succeeded by his fifth and youngest son, Rabbi Yehoshua Rokeakh (1825–1894), who – unlike his father – was active not only communally, but also politically. In 1878, the famous tsaddikim (Hasidic leaders) of Eastern Galicia led by Yehoshua Rokeakh established the first political organization of the Orthodox Jews called “Mahazikei ha-dat” (Heb.: “Upholders of the Faith”), which sought to combat the spread of the Haskalah in Galicia and to defend the Hasidic Orthodoxy. The members of Mahazikei ha-dat published one of the first journals of the rising Orthodox movement and participated in the elections to the Austrian Parliament. ¶ When the rabbi was taken ill with a mysterious disease, his followers, the Hasidim decided to take him to Vienna, where he was examined by specialists in

Jews in Belz, 1916–1917, a photograph taken by a German soldier during World War I, collection of *Beit Ha-tfutsot*, The Museum of the Jewish People, Photo Archive, Tel Aviv; courtesy of the Polish Academy of Sciences

Synagogue in Belz, 1924,
collection of the Institute
of Art of the Polish
Academy of Sciences
(PAN)



one of the best hospitals in Europe. Doctors concluded that he needed an immediate surgery, but nobody could predict the result. The operation was performed without any complications but, on his way back from Vienna to Belz, the rabbi died. ¶ In 1894, Issachar Dov Rokeach (1854–1926), son of Yehoshua became the third Admor (acronym of Heb.: *adoneinu, moreinu, rabeinu* – our teacher and master) of Belzer Hasidim. Rabbi

Issachar continued to teach Hasidic traditions, promoted education, and enjoyed a widespread authority among Jewish leaders in Galicia and Hungary. He was also believed to be a miracle-worker. Thousands of pilgrims from various countries visited Belz to receive his blessing. ¶ Like his predecessors Shalom and Yehoshua, he too was buried at the Belz Jewish cemetery, where pilgrims come to pray at their graves.

” Dr. Arthur Ruppin, an outstanding German Jewish sociologist and economist and one of the leaders of Zionist movement – A Visit to Belz in the Year 1903.

¶ *I came by train to Belz on the eve of the holiday of Shavuot. The train was completely packed with Jews who were traveling to the Rebbe. All of them had long earlocks and wore black velvet round shtreimels on their heads and some were wearing sandals. We arrived in Belz in the afternoon. The long line of Jews who were walking towards the town reminded me of a nation being in constant motion. Normally, Belz had 6,000 residents, of whom half were Jewish. On that day, it was like Belz was populated by Jews only, since thousands of Jews came to visit the Rebbe from out of town, even from Hungary and Russia. ¶ I went to synagogue for the evening prayer. There was no place to sit. There were thousands of Jews standing, crowding and swaying during prayer, like sheaves of grain in the wind. The Rebbe appeared and the congregation immediately started to pray. Everyone is pushing, attempting to get close to the Rebbe. The Rebbe walks to the podium and prays with a crying voice. It seems as though the voice awakens ardent admiration among the congregants. They are*

closing their eyes and swaying their bodies from side to side in devotion. Their loud prayer reminds an uproar of a storm. Whoever sees these Jews in their prayer would have to admit that these people are still the most devout of all. ¶ Based on: *Sefer zikaron Belz* (Belz Memorial Book), Tel Aviv 1974, trans. Gila Schecter, retrieved from www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor

The synagogue ¶ In 1839–1849, a new stone synagogue and a beth midrash were built. The construction was most probably initiated by Rabbi Sholom Rokeakh. The following legend explains how the new synagogue emerged. Rabbi Sholom together with his two friends promised not to sleep for one thousand nights and devote his entire time to the Torah study. After a few hundred nights, the friends gave up while Rabbi Rokeakh persevered. On the last night, Prophet Elijah appeared before Rabbi Rokeakh – they studied the Torah together until the dawn. The prophet revealed to Rabbi Rokeakh all the details of a synagogue

and Rabbi Rokeakh promised to build the synagogue exactly according to the instructions of the prophet. For 15 years, the rabbi was personally involved in the building of the synagogue. It was a tall stone structure with one-meter-thick walls, resembling the fortified synagogue in the nearby Zhovkva. Established on a rectangular foundation, it comprised a square-shaped prayer room, a narthex, and a women's gallery. The building was topped with an attic decorated with gilded copper spheres. The synagogue had excellent acoustics and a capacity of 5,000 people.

After the Holocaust, the surviving Belzer Hasidim with their leader relocated to Jerusalem and elsewhere. In the 1980s, the fifth Belz Hasidic leader Rabbi Issachar Dov (II), grandson of Issachar Dov (I) and nephew of Aaron, proposed a plan for the establishment of the Great Synagogue in Jerusalem which would be an enlarged copy of the Belz Great Synagogue demolished by the Nazis. This new synagogue, one of the biggest in the world, was opened in 2000. It has a spacious prayer room with a capacity of 10,000 people, study rooms, a banquet hall, and various facilities. Located in Northern Jerusalem, it took 15 years to build – as long as it took to build the old synagogue in Belz.

The early 20th century ¶ In 1880, Belz had 2,135 Jewish residents (52 percent of the general population). At the beginning of the 20th century, another synagogue – founded by certain Feivel Taub – was erected near the Lwowski Przedmieście (Lviv Suburb) quarter. In 1909, Feivel's son – also Feivel – established a philanthropic society Yishrey Lev (People of Straight Will) that helped the sick and the poor. In 1910, this

charitable society built a shul to the south from the market. ¶ In 1914, Belz boasted 3,600 Jewish, 1,600 Ukrainian, and 900 Polish residents. World War I had a significant impact on the town: it disrupted the normal life of the Jewish community. In 1914–1915, Belz was occupied by Russian troops and became part of the Governorate-General of Galicia and Bukovina. During the first days of the occupation, Russian troops burnt

The synagogue of the Yishrey Lev Philanthropic Society in Belz, 2014. Photo by Viktor Zagreba, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre" (www.teatrn.pl)



down nearly all the Jewish houses in the market and nearby streets. The burnt-down walls were the only reminder of the Yishrey Lev prayer house, of the *beth midrash* and of the Talmud Torah school. In 1916–1918, the Great Synagogue housed an Austrian military hospital. After the collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918, Belz was for a short time a central county town in the West Ukrainian People's Republic, and then, in 1919, it was incorporated into the re-established Poland. ¶ During World War I, Rabbi Yissachar Dov Rokeakh had to leave Belz and move to Mukachevo. He did not return home until after the end of the war. He died in 1926, and after his death, Aaron Rokeakh (1880–1957) became the leader of Belz Hasidim. While by the late 1930s, the Rokeakh family sponsored the reconstruction of all the destroyed Jewish buildings in town. Rabbi Aaron spent his childhood in his family house. He was known as a Torah genius already

in his young age. From his early years, he led an ascetic lifestyle, which affected his health, and became known as a reserved and mysterious person. Many of his disciples told stories of his mysterious behaviour and his miracle-working and compared him to the Baal Shem Tov, the legendary founder of Hasidism. ¶ At the beginning of the 1930s, Isaac Mautner, Shmul Spindel, and Isaac Teller established a Zionist organisation called Torah va-Avoda (Heb.: Learning and Working), first in Sokal and then in Belz. Later, a youth Zionist organization Bnei Akiva (Heb.: Son's of Rabbi Akiva) appeared in town. It consisted of two groups with a total of 20 members. Its leading activists were Moshe Hadari and Mirel Ziefert. The members of this youth Zionist group organised secular cultural events with nationalist flavor, taught Hebrew language, and cooperated with the Hit'akhdut (Heb.: Unity) and other Jewish political parties.

a prototype of the town in the song remains unclear. Aleksander Olszaniecki composed the music for the song, and Jacob Jacobs, a towering figure in American Yiddish Theatre life, penned the lyrics. The song appeared in 1932, commissioned for a New York stage production entitled *The Song from the Ghetto*. The song became a hit as a nostalgic reminiscence of the vanished world, it was translated into other languages, and with the destruction of Belz acquired elements of prophecy. ¶ There has long been an ongoing discussion which town that song immortalized: the old Polish Belz or the town of Bălți in Moldova. The former version is more widely held true in Poland, and one of the first translations of the song was made for the famous Warsaw cabaret singer Adam Aston. Still, it must be remembered that the singer Isa Kremer – for whom the song was written – came from the Moldovan town of Bălți (Yid.: Belts, Ukr.: Byeltsi, Pol.: Bielce). Be that as it may, both towns were doomed and the lyrics also depict the fate of hundreds of other towns, not only of these two with similar names.



Jewish cemetery in Belz, 2017. Photo by Christian Herrmann, www.vanishedworld.blog

World War II and the Holocaust

¶ In September 1939, Belz was occupied by the Red Army; then, after October 10, it was taken over by German forces and incorporated into the General Government (1939–1944). Together with the retreating Soviet troops, many Jews fled east, into the USSR mainland. The German occupation authorities, meanwhile, herded Jews from the nearby towns to Belz and created in town a forced labour camp. In May 1942, there were approx. 1,500 Jews in town. On June 2, 1942, about 1,000 of them were forced to walk some 60 km to Hrubieszów, from where they were transported to the death camp in Sobibór. In September, 1942, about 500 Jews who had remained in Belz shared their fate.

The last rabbi ¶ In an attempt to save himself from the Nazis, the last rabbi

of Belz, Aaron Rokeakh, moved in the fall of 1939 to Peremyshliany. In July 1941, the Nazis surrounded the Jewish quarter, herded all the Jews into the synagogue and set it on fire. They were rescued by a Greek Catholic clergyman Omelyan Kovch (the famous “parish priest of Majdanek,” who Pope John Paul II proclaimed a blessed martyr in 2001). He persuaded SS officers to let him into the burning *shul*. Taking advantage of the confusion, Kovch opened the doors of the synagogue and let the people out. He noticed a body near the entrance, which he picked up and carried from the fire. The person he rescued was Rabbi Aaron Rokeakh, who ended up surviving the Holocaust. Unfortunately, not everybody was able to flee the synagogue. Among the dead was Rokeakh’s only son, Moshe. ¶ In 1943, with the help of a Hungarian counterintelligence officer,

Rabbi Rokeakh and his stepbrother Rabbi Mordechai of Biłgoraj managed to escape to Hungary. The brothers shaved off their beards and side-locks: they were supposed to pretend to be two Soviet generals captured by the Hungarians and escorted to Budapest for interrogation. Later, the runaways recalled that miracles accompanied them at each and every step. During their 200-kilometre journey through Galicia and Slovakia to the Hungarian border, thick fog surrounded their car so that it was virtually invisible. When they finally reached the Hungarian border, they were pulled over at the border crossing. In a decisive moment, three high-ranking officials from Budapest appeared and ordered that the car be allowed to pass. The Hasidim of Belz sincerely believe that these were three Belzer tsadikim sent from the Heavens to secure Rabbi Aaron's escape. ¶ After the war, Rabbi Aaron Rokeakh recreated the Belzer Hasidic centre in Israel, where he lived until his death in 1957. Though he himself had survived the war under dramatic circumstances, the death of his son Moshe, in Belz, brought the direct dynastic line of the Rokeakh rabbis to an end (the current Admor of the Belzer dynasty is the son of Rabbi Aaron's cousin). In Israel, the court of the tsaddik of Belz was joined by other Hasidim whose tsaddikim (leaders of the Hasidic courts) were killed in Europe. Thus, the Belzer Hasidim became one of the largest present-day Hasidic communities.

Post-war Belz ¶ In 1944, the town again was incorporated into Poland and remained Polish for just a few years. During a forced “population exchange” (which historians nowadays consider

“ethnic cleansing” on both sides) between the communist Poland and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, as well as during the Operation “Vistula” (forced resettlement of Ukrainian ethnic minority in 1947 by the Polish government), all Ukrainians were moved from Belz and its surrounding areas further east. But then, under the 1951 Border Adjustment Treaty, Belz was incorporated into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, while the neighbouring region of Ustrzyki became part of Poland. In a yet another forced population transfer, the Poles living in Belz were transported out of the town, which was in turn resettled by Ukrainians transferred here from the Ustrzyki region and by people displaced from other regions of Ukraine and USSR. Since 1991, Belz remained within the borders of independent Ukraine. ¶ In 1945, 220 Jewish survivors returned to Belz. Using their pre-war Polish status, some of them moved to Israel and other countries, but a small Jewish population remained in town. It was only towards the end of the 1990s that almost all Jews emigrated from Belz in the wake of the post-communist economic turmoil. ¶ The most precious landmarks of Jewish cultural heritage – including the Great Synagogue, a *beth midrash*, and the Talmud Torah school – the Nazis demolished in 1942. In 1951, the Soviets levelled and cleaned the ruins which still remained after World War II. The former *mikveh* building is the only element of the synagogue complex that has survived. The building of the Yishrey Lev Philanthropic Society and the remnants of the Jewish graveyard with partly preserved matzevot, particularly those of the Rokeakh family, have also survived.

A pilgrimage destination ¶ Belz remains an important pilgrimage destination for Hasidim from all over the world who want to visit the graves of the famous tsaddikim. To satisfy the needs of visitors, a new synagogue, a mikveh,

and a pilgrims' hostel have been built on the opposite side of the cemetery in the northern part of the town. The cemetery was circumscribed by a wall in 2007. Keys to its gate can be obtained at: +380325752417.

Jewish cemetery (16th c.), 106 Mitskevycha St. ¶ **Former prayer house of the Yishrey Lev Society** (1910), Torhowa St. ¶ **State Historical and Cultural Reserve in Belz**, 1 Savenka St., tel. +380325754157. ¶ **Arian Tower** (1606), the town's oldest surviving monument, Gogola St. ¶ **Ruins of the Dominican monastery** (mid-16th c.), Savenka St. ¶ **Town hall** (18th c.), Savenka St. ¶ **Former church and convent of the Dominican Sisters** (second half of the 17th c., currently the Church of St. Nicholas – Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church), Savenka St. ¶ **Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary** (1906–1911) and St. Valentine's Chapel, Savenka St. ¶ **Wooden Greek Catholic Church of St. Paraskeva** (15th–17th c.), Mitskevycha St.

Worth seeing

Chervonohrad (18 km): the Potocki Palace (1762), currently a branch of the L'viv Museum of Religious History; the Basilian Monastery of St. George (1673); the former Bernardine church (1692–1704), currently Orthodox Church of St. Vladimir. ¶ **Velyki Mosty** (20 km): ruins of the synagogue (early 20th c.), inside: matzevot from the local Jewish cemetery; a church (1837); an Orthodox church (1893). ¶ **Uhniv** (21 km): the former synagogue building (early 20th c.); a church (1695); an Orthodox and Greek Catholic church (19th c.). ¶ **Sokal** (28 km): The Orthodox Church of St Nicholas (16th c.); the former Bernardine monastery (17th c.), now a correction colony; ruins of the synagogue (1762); a devastated Jewish cemetery with the remains of matzevot. ¶ **Radekhiv** (52 km): a former synagogue (19th c.); the wooden Greek Catholic Church of St. Nicholas (early 20th c.).

Surrounding area

