

Krynki

Bel. КРЫНКІ, Yid. קריניק

From Krynki, I brought wine and mead brewed by widow Yocheved to my inn, a beverage famous for miles around.

Yekhezkel Kotik, *Meyne zikhroynes* (Yid.: My Memories), vol. 1–2, 1913–1914

In the Grodno Forest, among freshwater springs near the former Jagiellonian trade route that extended from Vilnius through Grodno and Lublin to Cracow, lies the town of Krynki.

Travellers' stopover ¶ At the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, a manor house belonging to the Grand Duke of Lithuania was built in Krynki – one of the stops on the route from Vilnius to Cracow. The advantageous geographical location of the town attracted settlers as well as travellers who needed places to stay. As a result, in the second half of the 16th century, the small town boasted 43 inns! The first Jews who appeared in Krynki came from Grodno and Brest, and they took up the occupations of inn-keeping and running breweries. ¶ According to the 1639 privilege issued by King Władysław IV, the Jewish community of Krynki was given the right to buy plots of land; build houses, inns, and taverns; and work in trade, craft, alcohol production, cattle slaughtering, and agriculture, as well as sell meat. The king's privilege also granted the Jews of Krynki the right to have a “public display” of Judaism – that is, to establish

a cemetery and build a synagogue and a mikveh (ritual bath). ¶ One of the town's characteristic features is its market square: hexagonal, with twelve streets radiating from it. This unique shape, which replaced a rectangular market that was destroyed by fire, was designed by the Italian architect Giuseppe de Sacco during the rebuilding of the town in 1775. The work was commissioned by the Court Treasurer of Lithuania, Antoni Tyzenhaus, the then lessee of the Grodno economy (royal table lands). It is the only market square of this kind in Poland and one of only a few in Europe.

Places of prayer ¶ The first wooden synagogue in Krynki burned down in 1756 and was replaced by another wooden synagogue, also destroyed in a fire. In 1787, the construction of a stone synagogue began. This synagogue partially survived to this day. The Great Synagogue was a huge building made of granite with a beautiful wood-carved aron ha-kodesh. The Nazis turned it into a repair shop for tanks during World War II. In 1944, it was partially destroyed by withdrawing German troops and, eventually, blown up in the 1970s by local



communist authorities who claimed it

The **Belarusian Triologue** Festival, which has been held since the 1990s, is organised by the “Villa Sokrates” Foundation established by Sokrat Janowicz (1936–2013), a Belarusian writer who grew up and lived in Krynki for many years. The crux of the festival is Belarusian culture – in Poland, in Belarus, and in the diaspora – but local Jewish culture and heritage is also in the focus. The event attracts distinguished Belarusian and Polish artists and intellectuals. In 2014, Triologue featured an artistic happening under the guidance of Mirosław Bařka – a noted Polish sculptor – during which the area surrounding the foundation of the Great Synagogue was cleared of vegetation. Despite this, the ruins were quickly overgrown again by weeds and bushes.

In the second half of the 19th century, Jenta Rafałowska-Wolfson, a Grodno merchant, founded a two-storey brick synagogue for the Slonimer Hasidim (10 Czysta St.). It was called the Yentes Beth Midrash, after its founder. The building also housed a religious school. The followers of the tsadik of Stolin had a house of prayer in Krynki, and Hasidim from Kock and Kobryń also lived in the town. ¶ In the neighbourhood called “Kaukaz” (Caucasus), which was inhabited mainly by poor Jewish workers, a square-based



was in danger of collapse. Today, all that remains of the building are the ruins of the foundation (5 Garbarska St.).

[A] The aron ha-kodesh (holy ark) in the main synagogue in Krynki, before 1939; collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

[B] The synagogue of Slonimer Hasidim in Krynki, currently a warehouse, 2015. Photo by Monika Tarajka, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” (www.teatrnn.pl)

one-storey brick synagogue with a hipped roof was built in 1850 (5 Piłsudskiego St.). This house of prayer, known as the Caucasian beth midrash, owes its name (as does the neighbourhood as a whole) either to Jews who came to Krynki from the Caucasus (the so-called Mountain Jews) or to merchants importing hides from the Caucasus for local tanneries. Destroyed during World War II, the building was renovated and converted into a cinema and cultural centre that is still functioning.



[A] The "Caucasian" synagogue in Krynki, at present the Municipal Cultural Centre, 2015. Photo by Monika Tarajko, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" (www.teatrnn.pl)

[B] Jewish cemetery in Krynki, 2015. Photo by Monika Tarajko, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" (www.teatrnn.pl)

The cemetery ¶ Generations of Jews from Krynki were buried in the cemetery (Zaułek Zagumienny St.). Today, it is one of the biggest and best-preserved Jewish graveyards in Podlasie (around 3,000 matzevot in an area of more than 2 ha). It consists of two parts: new and old, separated by an alley several metres wide. The oldest identified tombstones date back to the 18th century. The cemetery is enclosed by a stone wall. The original wooden entrance gate has not been preserved. In the western part of the new cemetery, there are two unmarked graves from World War II.

Tanneries ¶ In the first half of the 19th century, Krynki experienced an industrialization boom that started with the expansion of textile, and later (thanks to the nearby springs and watercourses) the tanning industries. Already in 1827, Josif Giel, a Jewish entrepreneur, opened a manufactory processing sheep wool and producing flannel. He was followed by other entrepreneurs, mainly Jews and Germans. Towards the end of the 1870s there were, in Krynki: eleven textile factories, six tanneries, four dye houses, two distilleries, three mills (including one bark mill), and a brewery. Berek Kryński



owned the only spinning mill in the county, and it processed 800 puds (12,800 kg) of yarn in 1872. ¶ In the eastern part of the town, along Graniczna St., an industrial quarter with factories was created. In 1913, Krynki had 9,000 residents and nearly 100 tannery workshops. Most of them were destroyed during World War II; only the ruins of one building have survived until today.

"Crooked pipe" ¶ Several dozen metres from the fork of Pohulanka and Graniczna streets, there is a tube well that the residents of Krynki call "the crooked pipe." Out of about a dozen pre-war deep-water intakes, this is the only one that still functions. Wells were drilled for the needs of tanneries by a company that belonged to Gendler Ponta. High pressure water flowing from "the crooked pipe" has a low mineral content and is very tasty. Legend has it that it has medicinal properties: indeed, water from Krynki is rumoured to have healed Queen Jadwiga's stomach



Three tanners at work. The elderly man in the foreground is wearing traditional Jewish clothes. Photo by Alter Kacyzne, published in *Forverts* daily (*Yid. Forward*, January 1, 1927), collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

complaints in the 14th century. It was brought to her in Cracow by the future king, Władysław Jagiełło, who stopped at the court in Krynki on his way from Vilnius to Cracow, then the royal capital, and drew miraculous water from the local springs to take with him.

“The Republic of Krynki” ¶ The tough living and working conditions in industrial Krynki sparked the early development of the socialist labour movement. The first strikes occurred in the mid-1890s, when Jewish and Christian tanners from Krynki demanded pay rises and a reduction of the working day to 10 hours. Towards the end of January 1905, protesting workers took control of the town, an episode remembered as “the Republic of Krynki.” The clashes lasted for four days. Outraged by the bloody suppression of demonstrations in Saint Petersburg by the Tsarist police, the residents of Krynki, led by Jewish tanners, seized control of a police station, a post office, and the seat of local authorities. They encountered some resistance when trying to take over the depot where vodka was stored, but they managed to

chase away a guard and poured barrels of vodka down the drains. A strike committee was formed which established what came to be known as the first Soviet. The tsarist police could not curb the workers’ resistance and had to summon the regular troops. After a few hours of fighting, the protesters were forced to surrender. Many participants in the strike were sent to prison or to Siberia.

“Mother Anarchy” ¶ Some of the town’s young Jewish residents shared not only socialist but also anarchist views. These activists organised protests, marching through the town dressed in black clothes and carrying black flags, but they were met with the disapproval of a majority of residents. Violent incidents took place. During the festival of Pesach, 1906, a group of anarchist teenagers shot Shmul Weiner, a factory owner, on his way back from the synagogue in Krynki. The same year, on a separate occasion, 15-year-old Niomke Fridman threw a bomb from the women’s gallery on the main room of the beth midrash, where a meeting of local entrepreneurs was in progress. He was arrested but managed to escape and

shortly thereafter assassinated the chief of the prison in Grodno. Cornered by the police, he shot and killed himself. ¶ **Yosl Kohn** (1897–1977) became an anarchist activist and a newspaper columnist. In Krynki, he attended a cheder and a Russian school. In 1909, he emigrated to the United States, where he published with *Fraye Arbeter Shtime* (Yid.: Free Workers' Voice). As a poet, he published his works in the almanac *In-zikh* (the name inspired one of the most distinguished modernist poetry groups, "Inzikhistn" – the Introspectivists, whose members were, among others, Aaron Leyeles and Jacob (Yankev) Glatstein). ¶ Another figure brought up in the revolutionary atmosphere of Krynki at the beginning of the 20th century was the educator, social activist, and writer **Sarah Fell-Yellin** (1895–1962), the daughter of a local blacksmith. Before she emigrated to the

United States in 1920, she taught at a Jewish school and organised aid for children who had been orphaned and deprived of their homes as a result of World War I. She started a women's self-defence group against pogroms and worked in left-wing organisations. She continued her educational and social activity as an émigré in the United States, teaching at the Yiddish socialist Arbeter Ring schools (Yid.: Workers' Circle). She also established a periodical called *Kalifornier Shriftn* (Yid.: Californian Notes). Her poems were published in the communist gazette *Morgen Fraykheit* (Yid.: Morning Freedom) and in *Yiddische Kultur* (Yid.: Jewish Culture). She published nine volumes of poetry, including *Af di fligl fun hoylem* (Yid.: On the Wings of Dreams), printed in Poland by the Jidysz-Buch publishing house.

A shy sky-blue violet / peeks from a snowy garden – / should it come out now from the shadow / or wait a little longer? // A much-loved sunray is already wandering, / over the sky bright and warm, / it's wandering, pensive, over the roof, / over the garden, where the sky-blue violet is waiting. // A caress – snow is already melting, / and a kiss – the flower is already happy: / This is how the sky-blue violet became one / with the sky's limpid breath. //

Sarah Fell-Yellin, From the volume *Likhtike vayzer*

A shrinking town ¶ World War I and its aftermath brought the economic development of Krynki to a halt. The town suffered serious damage, and redrawn borders cut tanneries off from their traditional markets. According to the census of 1921, Krynki had only 5,206 residents. ¶ Social and cultural life flourished in the town, however, and seats in the board of the Jewish religious community were held by Orthodox Jews, Zionists, and socialists from the Bund. The presence of Jews who were illegal

communists and anarchists also made its mark on the town. Such activists, however, dissociated themselves from the Jewish religious community.

World War II and the Holocaust

¶ In September 1939, Krynki was seized by the Soviet army. German troops marched into the town in June 1941 and that autumn set up a ghetto. The ghetto consisted of two parts that extended between the Krynka River, the market square, and Kościelna, Cerkiewna, and

1 Maja Streets. About 6,000 people were pushed into the ghetto, including those transported from other locations (such as Brzostowica Wielka). The liquidation of the ghetto began on October 2, 1942; 5,000 Jews were deported to the camp in Kolbassino. During the liquidation, some people attempted armed resistance. In his book *The Struggle and Annihilation of the Warsaw Ghetto*, Bernard Mark reports: “Jews from Krynki (according to one Polish policeman), contrary to the usual docile behaviour of the masses, responded to the German action with salvos of rifles and revolvers fired by the Jewish self-defence.” Only 260 Jews were left in Krynki after deportation; more than three months later, on January 24, 1943, they were transported to the extermination camp in Treblinka.



Present day ¶ Air raids and the military campaign of 1944 destroyed two-thirds of Krynki’s urban area. Once a dynamic industrial centre, Krynki, depopulated, was downgraded to the status of an ordinary communal village after 1955 and did not regain city rights until 2009. Today, it is a town of 2,500 people very close to the Polish-Belarusian border. There is a restaurant in the centre of Krynki and agritourism farms function in the vicinity.

Remains of the Great Synagogue at Garbarska street in Krynki, 2015. Photo by Monika Tarajko, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” (www.teatrn.pl)

Remains of the **Great Synagogue** (19th c.), 5 Garbarska St. ¶ Former **prayer house of Slonimer Hasidim** (2nd half of the 19th c.), 10 Czysta St. ¶ Former “Caucasus” **Beth Midrash** (1850), currently housing the Municipal Cultural Centre, 5 Piłsudskiego St. ¶ Spatial layout of the town (18th c.). ¶ **Church of St. Anne** (1913), a bell tower (19th c.), a wooden presbytery, 1 Nowa St. ¶ **Orthodox Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary** (19th c.), 5 Cerkiewna St. ¶ **St. Anthony’s Chapel** (wooden, 1872) in the Orthodox cemetery, Grodzieńska St. ¶ Remains of the **manor complex** and the **park** of the de Virion family (18th–19th c.), Kościelna St.

Worth seeing

Kruszyniany (11 km): a wooden mosque (18th c.); a Muslim graveyard – mizar (2nd half of the 17th c.); the Orthodox Church of St. Anne (1984–1985); an Orthodox church (17th–18th c.); the Polish Tatar Centre of Education and Muslim Culture. ¶ **Sokółka** (26 km): a Jewish graveyard with around 1,000 matzevot and 27 sarcophagi (mid-18th c.); a former mikveh in Sienna Street; the Museum of Sokółka Land; St. Anthony’s Church (1848); St. Alexander Nevsky Orthodox Church (1853); St. Paul’s Graveyard Chapel (1901); an Orthodox graveyard (19th c.), a wooden presbytery at the corner of Józefa Piłsudskiego St. and Ks. Piotra Ściegiennego St. (1880). ¶ **Palestyna** (34 km): established in 1850; one of three Jewish colonies near Sokółka inhabited by settlers preparing themselves to live and cultivate land in the Land of Israel (1918–1937). ¶ **Jałówka** (35 km): a Jewish graveyard (19th c.); an Orthodox church (1956–1960); ruins of the Church of St. Anthony (1910–1915); the

Surrounding area

Church of Transfiguration (1859); a parish graveyard (19th c.). ♣ **Sidra** (44 km): a Jewish cemetery (19th c.); Holy Trinity Church (1705); a church bell tower (1780); ruins of a fortified castle (1566); ruins of a Calvinist church (2nd half of the 16th c.); ruins of a watermill (1890); the Eynarowicz family manor house (early 20th c.). ♣ **Królowy Most** (45 km): a holiday village located on the Świętojańskie Hills Trail and the Napoleonic Trail; the Orthodox Church of St. Anne (1913–1939); the Roman Catholic Chapel of St. Anne (1857). ♣ **Michałow** (41 km): Film, Sound, and Old Photography studio; a Jewish graveyard in the forest, two km from the town (mid-19th c.); the wooden Orthodox Church of St Nicholas (1908); the Church of Divine Providence (1909). ♣ **Janów** (50 km): a Jewish cemetery (19th c.). ♣ **Dąbrowa Białostocka** (56 km): a Jewish cemetery (17th c.); a stone tower mill (1924). ♣ **The Sokólskie Hills**: a protected area of postglacial landscape with unique diverse landform and a picturesque moraine wall stretching from the village of Jałówka to Podkamionki. Amid this picturesque landscape are a trail of wooden Orthodox churches as well as the Tatar Trail, which features sites related to centuries-old local Muslim communities. ♣ **Grodno, Belarus** (64 km): the Choral Synagogue (1905); a Jewish cemetery with approx. 2,000 gravestones; a Tarbut school, the seat of the former Jewish community, a hospital and a former yeshiva; the Grodno Museum of the History of Religion; the Museum of the History of Jews from the Grodno Region (or Museum in Troitskaye, due to be opened in the synagogue); the Orthodox Church of Saints Boris and Gleb (12th c.); the Church of the Discovery of the Holy Cross (17th c.); the Church of the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Bridgettine monastery (mid-17th c.).

