

# Pidhaitsi

Pol. Podhajce, Ukr. Підгайці, Yid. פֿידײַץ

*Pidhaitsi grows like big cities do,  
following the direction of progress  
and the way of the Haskalah.*

David Polisiuk, *Ha-Maggid*, 1876

**By the grove** ¶ Most likely, the town's name comes from the expression *pod gajem* in Polish, *pid hayem* (*niḏ zaem*) in Ukrainian (meaning "by the grove"). The village of Stare Misto, a suburb of Pidhaitsi, has grown around the place of the earliest local settlement. The first written mention of the town is dated to 1397, and its first known owner was the Kniehinicki magnate family; they were followed by the Buczacki family, who in the 15<sup>th</sup> century built a castle and founded the first Catholic parish here. In 1539, Pidhaitsi (then Podhajce) was granted Magdeburg rights. The castle was also rebuilt at that time. In 1544, the town was mentioned as an *oppidum-castrum* (Lat.: town-castle). In the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, a Catholic church, a synagogue, and Orthodox churches were erected. The first mention of a rabbi who was the leader of the Jewish community in Pidhaitsi dates back to 1552. ¶ In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the town grew in the direction of the nearby hill, at the top of which the new market square was set up; new houses appeared around the marketplace, and a complex network of underground tunnels and passages was created. The castle was fortified with

mighty towers. A triangular marketplace was unusual for the towns under Magdeburg laws but quite common for the Ruthenian towns. ¶ The first coat of arms of Pidhaitsi has been known since 1554. Approximately at that time several trade and craft guilds were established, among them the furriers' guild, the first statute of which dates back to 1590. Blacksmiths, coopers, carpenters, and others had their guilds as well. In 1590, the town received a privilege allowing weekly Saturday fairs. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the town had the only musicians' guild in Galicia. ¶ In 1641, Pidhaitsi became the property of the Potocki family. Their rule marked the town heyday. The new owners rebuilt the castle and established the town hall and other administrative buildings. Apart from the church and the synagogue, there were six (and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – seven) Ruthenian/Ukrainian Orthodox churches. There was also a 1664 reference to an Armenian (Armenian-Gregorian) church, most likely wooden. In 1650–1653, the Ruthenian community built the Dormition of the Holy Mother of God Orthodox Church, which has survived to this day. ¶ In 1667, in the wake of the bloody Cossack revolution



Town hall in Pidhaysi, 1905–1906, collection of the National Library, Poland ([www.polona.pl](http://www.polona.pl))

and peasant war, King John III Sobieski defeated the Tatar and Cossack forces under Petro Doroshenko, the Hetman of Right-Bank Ukraine. A peace treaty was signed in the church in Pidhaysi, under which Right-Bank Ruthenia (that is, Ukraine to the west from the Dnieper river) was to remain under the control of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. ¶ On 9–11 September 1675, Cossack forces completely destroyed Pidhaysi. In order to rebuild the town, Feliks Kazimierz Potocki ordered that all residents be tax-exempt for the next 12 years. ¶ As a result of the First Partition of Poland (1772), the town became part of the Habsburg monarchy. At the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Austrian authorities had the castle in Pidhaysi and the municipal fortifications pulled down; some parishes were closed, and hospitals and Orthodox graveyards were liquidated. A large part of the Jewish population left the town. In order to stimulate local economy, permission was granted in 1820 to have 11 annual fairs. ¶ During World War I, about 200 buildings

were destroyed and about 10 percent of the town's residents were killed. Pidhaysi became a frontline town, where the sick and wounded were taken care for at the local hospitals. In November 1918, the revolutionary masses and troops proclaimed at the local marketplace the authority of the West Ukrainian People's Republic. Subsequently, the Ukrainian administration was established here. During the Polish-Ukrainian War of 1918–1919, the town changed hands several times. In August 1920, Pidhaysi was occupied by the Bolsheviks, and on 21 September 1920, it was finally captured by Polish troops and became part of the independent Poland. ¶ In 1924, the County Association of Cooperatives was founded here, and in 1925, the organisation called "Płast" was established. In the 1930s, several football clubs appeared, among them the Jewish "Maccabee" and the Polish "Klub Sportowy." Four youth organisations functioned in the town: "Sicz," "Sokół," "Beta," and "Strzelcy" ("Shooters"). In 1928–1934, the



[A] Pidhaisi, town hall and houses in the market square, 2015. Photo by Monika Tarajko, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre ([www.teatrnn.pl](http://www.teatrnn.pl))

[B] Pidhaisi, 1920s, a 3D model prepared by Polygon Studio as part of the Shtetl Routes project, 2015, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre ([www.teatrnn.pl](http://www.teatrnn.pl))

Ukrainian community established the Ukrainian Folk Community Centre.

**The Jews of Pidhaisi** ¶ The earliest mention of the Pidhaisi Jews dates back to 1552 and refers to a 20-zloty poll tax imposed on the members of the Jewish community. At that time, the Jews lived in the area south of the marketplace. Local Jews worked mainly in trade; some of them were leaseholders or craftsmen. In 1648, the Jews suffered severely during the Khmelnytsky Revolution and massive raids of the Cossack cavalry against Polish towns across Ukraine and in Galicia. In 1677, the Turks, who came to occupied Podolia at that time, considered Jews as a tolerated yet marginalized minority obligated to keep low profile and pay double taxes.

**The synagogue** ¶ The first mention of a synagogue in Pidhaisi is dated to 1552. The currently existing building was erected in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and is believed to be the oldest local building. The synagogue was located next to the town gates; it served as an additional defence edifice. ¶ The synagogue construction follows a rectangular plan of the Renaissance buildings (fashionable in Poland long after they became outmoded elsewhere in Europe), with narrow windows cut through the thick fortress-type walls; the eastern façade has been reinforced with buttresses. The upper section of the Renaissance-style main portal has partly survived. The base of the building is adjoined by single-storey women’s galleries. Inside, it was adorned with still preserved stone-carved floral ornaments and elaborate stucco work. Remnants of the stone carvings of the *aron ha-kodesh* (holy ark) also survived. Over the main entrance, there is still a visible Hebrew inscription “This is the Gate of the Lord, the righteous will enter it.” ¶ About 100 metres from the synagogue stands the building of the old *mikvah* (ritual bath). Opposite the Great Synagogue there was also an old *bet midrash* and two neighbouring buildings that functioned as prayer houses for the Chortkov and Belz Hasidim.

**The rabbis** ¶ Rabbi Moshe and his son Yehuda Leib served as the first rabbis of the town. They were referred to with the honourable title of *gaon*, granted to the most illustrious rabbis of the time. At the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Benjamin Aaron ben Abraham and his son Jacob served as the rabbis. They were succeeded by Rabbi David, who authored the famous

homiletic tractate *Tiferet Israel*. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the rabbi of Pidhaitsi was Rabbi Katzenelenbogen, who subsequently moved to Ansbach, Bavaria. In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Meshulam Zalman, son of Rabbi Jacob Emden, the famous leader of the anti-sabbatean and anti-Kabbalistic trend in rabbinic Judaism, lived and worked in Pidhaitsi. The last rabbi before 1772 was Simcha Rapaport, son of Rabbi Chaim ha-Kohen Rapaport of Lwów (Lviv). Pidhaitsi was the birthplace of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Rabbi David ha-Kohen Lilienfeld, who in the last decades of his life served as a rabbi and preacher in Frankfurt an der Oder. It was there that he published his books: treatises on the Sabbath, sermons for Saturdays and holidays, novellas on the principles of philosophy and Kabbalah, and commentaries on the Talmud.



One of the best-known rabbis of Pidhaitsi was **Binyamin Aaron** known as “**Solnik**” (1530–1620), one of the greatest authorities on Jewish law in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. His father, Rabbi Abraham, came from Thessaloniki (hence the nickname “Solnik”); he descended from Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508), Minister of Finance to the Spanish King Ferdinand, and one of the most famous Sephardic (post-expulsion) commentators of the major Jewish books including the Passover Haggadah. Binyamin Solnik was a disciple of Moshe Isserles (known as Rem’a, 1520–1572) of Cracow and Solomon Luria (1510–1573) of Lublin, the two highest Polish rabbinic leaders of that time. He briefly worked as a rabbi in Silesia and later held the post of a town rabbi (*rosh yeshiva*) and the head of the rabbinic court (*av bet din*) in Pidhaitsi. Binyamin Aaron Solnik was an active participant at the meetings of Vaad Arba Aratzot (Council of Four Lands). His son Jacob inherited the rabbinic position in Pidhaitsi; he also represented local communities in the Vaad Arba Aratzot. He wrote a book titled *Nakhalat Yaakov* (Heb.: Jacob’s Heritage). His other son, Abraham, became a rabbi in Ternopil (Tarnopol) and later the principal of the yeshiva in Brest. Solnik’s son-in-law, Menachem Mann, became a town rabbi and the head of the Talmudic academy in Vienna. ¶ Binyamin Aaron Solnik wrote an array of books, including the Yiddish halakhic digest *Mitzvot Nashim*, which became very popular in Europe and

[A] Synagogue in Pidhaitsi, circa 1920, collection of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN)

[B] Inscription over the entrance in the synagogue in Pidhaitsi, 2014. Photo by Emil Majuk, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre ([www.teatrnn.pl](http://www.teatrnn.pl))

was translated into Italian, English, and Hebrew. His most famous work was the collection of responsa *Masat Beniamin* (Heb.: *Beniamin's Gift*; Cracow 1633).

**Sabbateanism** ¶ In the 1680s, Haim Malakh, one of the leaders of Sabbateanism in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, came to live in Pidhaitsi. Thanks to his influence, the town became an important centre of the pseudo-messianic and schismatic movement that had a major disruptive impact on many Jewish communities in the diaspora. Followers of Sabbetai Zvi were also active in Pidhaitsi, among them Shmuel Yakow Falk (known as “Sokół” – Pol. “falcon” – or “der Falk,” 1708–1782) and Moshe David (born in Pidhaitsi in 1696). Those two adherents of Sabbateanism were eminent Kabbalists. After the bans of excommunication against Sabbateans were announced elsewhere in Europe, both of them were forced to leave Pidhaitsi. Subsequently, several of the local rabbinic leaders, particularly Meshulem Zalman Emden, son of the noted Rabbi Jacob Emden, were at the center of resistance to the activities of the local crypto-sabbateans and Frankists.

### **Hasidism and the Haskalah** ¶

From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of Jews in Pidhaitsi in this or that manner supported the revivalist religious movement known as Hasidism. They followed the rabbis (tsaddikim) of Stratyn, Belz, Ruzhin, Husiatyn, and Chortkiv. Some descendants of the Hasidim of Pidhaitsi still live in New York and Jerusalem. As elsewhere, there was also a group of *mitnagdim* in Pidhaitsi, who vehemently opposed Hasidim, and who were centered in the *bet midrash*; many adherents of the Haskalah came from

this group. In 1876, a Jewish club was founded, which ran a library and a reading room.

**Ups and downs** ¶ In the early 1800s, the Jews constituted a majority of the town population. In 1788, they owned 21 of the 33 houses in the market square. Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a considerable proportion of the Jewish population left Pidhaitsi and moved to new bigger trade centres. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the life of the town and the Jewish community experienced a revival. By 1910, about 6,000 Jews lived in the town. In the first elections of the municipal council, held in 1874, Jewish representatives won 18 out of 30 seats. In 1889, Izydor Lilienfeld became a deputy mayor. Also in 1889, Baron de Hirsch visited the town and donated 50,000 francs for the needs of its poor inhabitants. Modern institutions emerged in Pidhaitsi such as a Jewish reading room, schools, and a nursery school. ¶ In 1898, the local Palestinophile movement which had launched a new secular emigration to the land of Israel and the revival of modernized Hebrew gave rise to the town's first Zionist organisation, Syjon (Zion), with about 150 members; one of its leaders was the wealthy Benjamin Kutner, the head of the Jewish community. A branch of the Marxist-Zionist Po'alei Zion was established in 1906, and in 1918, a branch of the youth Zionist Hashomer Hatzair began operation. ¶ In 1905, Rabbi Shalom Lilienfeld (1857–1909), who served as a rabbi in

Pidhaitsi in 1887–1909, founded a Talmud Torah school, where all the town's *melamdim* – elementary school teachers – taught whose salaries came from the Jewish community council funds.

A well-known local activist promoting Jewish culture was **Michał Weichert** (1890–1967). Born in Pidhaitsi, he was the director of a Yiddish Jewish theatre, a theatre critic and historian, and the founder of one of the first Jewish performing arts schools. Toward the end of the 1920s, he organised and became the manager of the Jewish Experimental Studio “Jung Teater” in Warsaw, which was the first to use the experience of a “simultaneous” performance, a type of stage design that consists in placing all the scenery elements necessary for the performance simultaneously on the stage. He published a Yiddish-language modernist expressionist periodical in Warsaw, titled *Ring*, which gave rise to the noted Jewish modernist poetic group of the same name, later renamed “Chaliastre” (Yid.: “Rabble,” 1921–1925). Its members included such prominent figures as poets Uri Zvi Grinberg (1896–1981), Peretz Markish (1895–1952), and Melekh Ravitch (1893–1976). The group was also joined by prose writer Israel Joshua Singer (1893–1944), the elder brother of the future Nobel Prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer, as well as by the poet, playwright, director, and painter Moshe Broderzon (1890–1956).



Pidhaitsi, Jewish socio-cultural society “Ahva,” 1933, collection of Stepan Kolodnitski

Before World War II, the Jewish community made up about 53 percent of the town population. The last rabbi was Yitzhak Menachem Eichenstein (1879–1943) of the Zidichov Hasidic dynasty, who established a Hasidic court in Pidhaitsi in 1909. He died in the Pidhaitsi ghetto during the Holocaust in the spring of 1943.

### World War II and the Holocaust

¶ In September 1939, the town came

under Soviet rule. The day of 11 May 1941 was the so-called “bloody Sunday”, when the NKVD units performed a mass execution of young people of the conscription age. ¶ Pidhaitsi was the birthplace and hometown of Baruch Milkh, the author of the memoirs written in 1943 in a hiding place in Tovste (Tłuste), Galicia. Among other things, he described Pidhaitsi under Soviet occupation.

“The fate of nearly all of my family became critical immediately: their social standing was leveled. Their stores were closed, but taxes were still collected anyway. They loitered aimlessly, seeking work in vain, with a stain in their passports: social origins – merchant. ¶ Translated from: Baruch Milkh, *Testament*, Warsaw 2001



Jewish cemetery in Pidhaisi, 2015. Photo by Monika Tarajko, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre ([www.teatrnn.pl](http://www.teatrnn.pl))

On 4 July 1941, the German Wehrmacht occupied Pidhaisi. The Nazi Germans established a *Judenrat* and a ghetto in which more than 5,000 Jews were segregated. The first anti-Jewish *Aktion* took place on September 21, 1942, on Yom Kippur, when about 1,000 Jews were transported to the Bełżec death camp and murdered there. On October 31, 1942, about 1,200 people were also transported there. Around the time of the deportations, a group of 100 people led by Israel Zilber managed to escape from the Pidhaisi ghetto. In December 1942, after deportations and *Aktions*, only about 2,000 Jews remained in the ghetto. Altogether three mass executions of Jews – in the summer of 1942, on 1 October 1942, and on 6 June 1943 – were conducted. During the last operation, the German occupation authorities sent some of the ghetto Jews to Bełżec and others to the forced labour camp in Ternopil. In June 1943, the ghetto was liquidated. In 1942–1943, about 300 Jews were killed at the Jewish cemetery in Pidhaisi. During World War II, some 70 percent of the houses were demolished. After the liberation of Pidhaisi in July 1944, more than 50 Jews returned to the town, but most of them left soon afterwards.

cemetery, located 200 m west of the synagogue, is one of the oldest and best-preserved in Ukraine. Some 150 m long, it has more than 1,350 preserved matzevot. The last burial took place in 1952. On its northern side, fragments of the former entrance gate have survived. ¶ One of the Pihaisi last Jewish inhabitants was Moshe Khaber (1897–1989), whose entire family, including his wife and their five children, were killed during the Holocaust. It was thanks to his efforts that the Jewish cemetery was not destroyed in Soviet times, when there were thoughts to build a supermarket, a nursery school, and a road on its site. ¶ The oldest preserved matzevah dates back to 1599. It was discovered and described in 2011 during a research expedition led by Dr. Boris Khaimovich from Jerusalem. Most of the inscriptions on it had been effaced, but judging by the image of hands raised in a gesture of blessing, carved on the stone, the matzevah most likely marked the grave of a person from a priestly (Katz, Kahn or Cohen) family. Interestingly, this matzevah – the only one from the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the cemetery – is located in the lower, northeastern part of the cemetery, among much more recent, 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century gravestones. ¶ A larger group of older matzevot can be found closer to the entrance, in the western part of the cemetery; these include a matzevah from 1629 and more than 50 dating back to the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the section of the cemetery where 18<sup>th</sup>-century tombstones stood has not survived. The upper, northeastern section includes about 1,000 matzevot from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Also in this part of the cemetery stands an obelisk, erected in 1919 to

commemorate the Jewish soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian army killed during World War I. There are mass graves, too, in which the Jews killed here during the Holocaust were buried.

**Memory** 🕯️ Stefan Kołodnytsky, a local history enthusiast, was elected the town's first mayor after Ukraine gained

independence. He lived near the Jewish cemetery and for many years worked relentlessly for the preservation of the town historical legacy. On his initiative, in 2012, a monograph was published presenting the history of Pidhaitsi and its surrounding area. It was also his efforts that made it possible to save the synagogue and the church from collapsing.

Former **synagogue** (17<sup>th</sup> c.), Lesyi Ukrainki St. 🕯️ **Jewish cemetery** (16<sup>th</sup> c.), Lesyi Ukrainki St. 🕯️ **Museum of Local History and Culture**, 13 Berezhanska St. 🕯️ **Former inn** (17<sup>th</sup> c.), 7 Zamkova St. 🕯️ **Market square**, triangular in shape. 🕯️ **Town hall** (1931). 🕯️ **Holy Trinity Church** (1634), Mitskevicha St. 🕯️ **Orthodox Church of the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary** (1650–1653), Berezhanska St. 🕯️ **Orthodox Church of Sts. Boris and Gleb** (1711–1772). 🕯️ **Greek Catholic Church of the Transfiguration** (1772).

Worth seeing

**Strusiv** (40 km): a former synagogue (18<sup>th</sup> c.), a Jewish cemetery (18<sup>th</sup> c.), ruins of a castle (16<sup>th</sup> c.), the Lanckoroński Palace (18<sup>th</sup> c.). 🕯️ **Ternopil** (64 km): the main city of the region, with a functioning modern synagogue, a former Jewish hospital (1894–1895), a Jewish cemetery (19<sup>th</sup> c.), a castle (1540), a cathedral (18<sup>th</sup> c.), and numerous monuments. 🕯️ **Hrymailiv** (68 km): ruins of a fortified synagogue (18<sup>th</sup> c.); the Orthodox Church of the Transfiguration (1806). 🕯️ **Sataniv** (94 km): fortified and recently restored synagogue (16<sup>th</sup> c.); a Jewish cemetery (16<sup>th</sup> c.); ruins of a castle (15<sup>th</sup> c.), town gates (15<sup>th</sup> c.), a fortified monastery (16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> c.)

Surrounding area

