Kremenets

At the foot of the Hill

Situated amid picturesque hills, Kremenets has long been a secure place for people to settle. The Castle Hill (also called Bona Hill, in honour of Queen Bona Sforza) provided an excellent defensive position, and it is hardly surprising that, according to some sources, fortifications were built on it already in pre-Christian times.

On one of those hikes, we went all the way to Dubno, 30 kilometers from us, where a soccer game was being held between a local Maccabee team and one from the Polish army stationed there. For most of us, it was the first time in our lives that we had seen this game. What is more, the ball itself was a completely new thing for us. True, as children, we had played a few games with balls, but in those games, we used balls we made from rags. It was a great feeling for us to see these festive goings-on: on a wide green field, players from the two teams ran quickly, an assembly of onlookers shouted, and an army band played throughout the game. The result: we watched and got hooked. We decided on the spot to organize a soccer team. We envisioned something similar happening in our town, and what seemed at the time to be a nice dream very quickly became a reality, as you will see here.

Without any help or encouragement from anyone, we got to work. There were many obstacles in our way: we had no financial means; in Kremenets, a town built on the slopes of hills, there was no flat area to be found for a soccer field; none of us had short pants for sports, and they were not available in our stores; and worst of all, there was no soccer ball to be found in the whole town. We overcame most of the obstacles soon enough. About an hour’s walk from the center of town, up on Mount Vidomka, we found a fallow field hidden among thick shrubbery on Kalinovski’s farm. We improvised short pants, folding our heavy wool pants up to our knees. Avrasha Rozenfeld, who had lived in central Russia during the war, found an instruction booklet for soccer among his things. The most important obstacle yet to overcome was that we were missing the ball. And here help came to us from high above; from there came our ball – a ball from Israel. From such a source, how could it be otherwise? This is how the story goes: one day Avraham Krivin – son of Shalom Krivin, the leather merchant – came from Israel, where he had lived for many years, to visit his parents. We heard that he had brought a big ball as a gift for his sister’s little children.

Once Rabbi Abraham visited his father-in-law in Kretnitz. The most distinguished members of the congregation assembled to welcome the holy man. But he turned his back on them and looked out of the window at the mountain at whose foot the city lay. Among those waiting for him was a man very aware of his own learning and intent on his own importance. He said impatiently: “Why do you keep staring at the mountain? Have you never seen anything like it before?” The rabbi answered: “I look and am amazed to see how such a lump of earth made much of itself until it grew into a tall mountain.”

A delegation was dispatched to him to present our problem. Our happiness was endless when he responded favorably to our request, and we left his house with the ball in our hands. Now we could get to work.

Kremenets is one of Ukraine’s oldest towns. According to the archaeological data, it has been uninterruptedly inhabited since the end of the 10th century, but the earliest written reference associates the town with the 1227 battle fought by Prince Daniel Romanovich of Volhynia against the army of King András II of Hungary. In 1240, Kremenets Castle withstood an attack by Batu Khan’s Tatar forces. In 1366, the town was captured by the forces of Casimir the Great.

After a brief period of Hungarian rule, Kremenets fell under the dominion of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania. In 1438, Grand Duke Švitrigaila of Lithuania granted the town Magdeburg rights. The charter stated that the rights extended to: “Ruthenians, as well as to Poles, Germans, Vlachs, Armenians, Jews, and Tatars.” Švitrigaila knew Kremenets well, though what he knew was not its best side: the future ruler had spent nine years in prison at the local castle.

The Jews of Kremenets

A Jewish presence in Kremenets dates to the 15th century, aside from a brief interval in 1495, when Grand Duke Alexander Jagiellon decided to expel all Jews from Lithuania (and thus also from Kremenets). The same duke allowed the Jews to return in 1503. According to documents, their former property, including the cemeteries and synagogues, was returned to them.

The town’s Jewish community became so influential that at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, the Jews of Kremenets, along with the Jews of Ostroh, represented all the Jews of Volhynia at the Council of Four Lands, this Jewish communal umbrella institution was analogous to the Polish Sejm. In the second half of the 16th century, there were more than 50 Jewish houses in the town; there was the Żydowska (Jewish) Street (currently Shevchenka St.), a functioning synagogue, a kahal house, and a hekdesh (a poorhouse and a hospital for the needy). The eminent Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe, future town rabbi in Lublin, Prague, and Poznań, represented Kremenets at the Council of Four Lands around that time.
one of the largest towns in Volhynia. In 1629, it had 1,224 houses, which means, in terms of population size, it was second only to Ostroh (1,655 houses) and double the size of Lutsk, the main city of the province (546 houses). The subsequent centuries were not easy for the local Jews, however. The entire town suffered during the mid-17th century Cossack Revolution – even Kremenets Castle was captured and destroyed; influential anti-Judaic pamphlets were published by a printing-press in the nearby town of Pochaiv (Poczajów); and in Kremenets, several blood libel trials were held against Jews accused of allegedly using the blood of Christian children to bake Passover matzah.

Notable personalities born in Kremenets include a key representative of the Jewish Enlightenment, Isaac Ber Levinson; the eminent Polish Romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki, the Orthodox Saint Alexander Hotovitzky, the Ukrainian composer Mykhailo Verykivsky, and the famous Jewish American violinist Isaac Stern. Wilhelmbald Besser, a botanist of Austrian descent, worked in this town for a long time.

Near the border In 1793, in the wake of the second partition of Poland, Kremenets found itself under Russian rule. Initially, Russia preserved the status quo of the Jews in the territories it annexed from Poland. However, the appearance of the border disrupted traditional trade routes, prompting many Jews to engage in smuggling and establishing contraband routes circumventing the customs. In 1812, the Russian authorities began issuing regular orders aimed at limiting or reducing to a minimum the number of Jews in the frontier zone, which was usually understood as the 50-verst wide belt along the border. These orders were never fully executed, however. Towards the end of the 19th century, Jews made up 37 percent of the Kremenets population, which was the lowest percentage among all the towns of the Volhynian Guberniya. Kremenets Jews lived in the centre of the city as well as in two suburban districts: the Dubno suburb and the Vyshnivets suburb. The town’s main street was called Żydowska (Jewish) St. until the 19th century, when its name was changed to Szeroka St. At that time, the town lived off trade with neighbouring Austria. Jewish merchants traded in grain and tobacco.

The year 1805 marked the beginning of a period when Kremenets was called the “Athens of Volhynia.” It was then that Tadeusz Czacki, an influential enlightened thinker and a magnate in his own right opened the Volhynian Lyceum (secondary and high school) in 1819. For a quarter of a century, this school remained the major centre of learning and education.
in the Right-Bank Ukraine (that is, the pre-partition Polish territories on the right bank of the Dnieper River), leading to a revival of social and cultural life and perceptibly changing the face of the town. After the 1830 November Uprising of Poles against the Russian dominion, the Lyceum was closed and its book collections were taken away to Kyiv, where they became the basis of a newly-established library and the University of Kyiv. Some of the teachers moved there as well. Meanwhile, in 1817, a Jewish publisher from Warsaw, Nathan Gluksberg, opened a bookshop in Kremenets, and two years later, he established a printing house that published some 61 titles in less than two decades: secondary school curricula, textbooks for schools of the Vilnius school district, popular science books, and literary works. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, smuggled goods were not the only things that arrived in Kremenets from across the Austrian border. Smuggled ideas, related both to Judaic mysticism and European rationalism also made their way here, particularly from the nearby town of Brody, which was then part of Austria. Brody was a strong centre of the Haskalah and Hasidism. At the beginning of the 19th century, Kremenets had its own Hasidic community leader – tsaddik Mordekhai, son of the legendary Maggid (preacher) Yekhiel Mikhel of Zolochiv. Late in the 18th century, Kremenets also became one of the main centres of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) in Volhynia. Kremenets was the hometown of Isaac Ber Levinson (1788–1860), an influential maskilic (enlightened) writer, thinker, linguist, and satirist, also called “the spiritual leader of the maskilim.” Although his father-in-law, Nakhum Tversky, was a tsadik of the Chernobyl dynasty and one of the most respected Hasidic leaders in Volhynia, Levinson left his Hasidic family and eventually radically departed from the pietistic Judaism, although he remained an observant Jew for the rest of his life. He tried to introduce the ideas of the Haskalah among Jews in Volhynia. He argued that Yiddish should
Yet his financial situation and his poor health (he could hardly walk) made him return to Kremenets in the early 1820s, where he lived in a small cottage on the outskirts of town writing his most remarkable works. He was visited there by his contemporaries that included such prominent figures as Count Dmitry Tolstoy, Russian statesman. Levinson sought to convince the Jews to introduce secular subject matters into the educational curriculum. At the same time, as a genuine enlightened thinker, he argued for Jewish move to farming. He spent much time using his leverage with the Russian government trying to dispel popular anti-Jewish stereotypes and bias among the Russian statesmen. He published his works with the help of Russian governmental grants. After his death, many of his works were reprinted and translated into many languages. Levinson died in Kremenets in 1860 and was buried there.

An-ski in Kremenets The ethnographic expedition led by S. An-ski (Shlomo Zanvel Rapoport, 1863–1920) visited Kremenets during its first two seasons (1912 and 1913). The visit of July 1912 is fairly well recorded and was later included in the Memorial Book of Kremenets. The author of this record, Hanokh Gilernt recollects that An-ski arrived in Kremenets accompanied by the ethnographer and musicologist Zusman (Zalman) Kisselgoff and the painter and photographer Solomon (Shlomo) Yudovin. They arrived on Friday, stayed at Moshe Melamed’s hotel, and the owner was surprised to see the Yiddish-speaking guests from St. Petersburg. Gilernt added: “Some strange Jews checked in and said they were from St. Petersburg.”
On Friday night, the streets were usually filled with young people; this time, they all gathered around the hotel and envied the group that was privileged to be inside. Meanwhile, Sender Rozental and Yashe Roytman, and Shlome the baker’s son, joined the group and were told by the hotel owner that An-ski wanted to visit a Hasidic kloyz on Sabbath morning. The hotel owner went to the caretaker, Peysi the blind, to let him know. An-ski asked for information about Hasidic liturgical rites and details about the Hasidim in town. He was quite astonished to hear that Hasidim in town lived in peace and that representatives of various Hasidic trends – Trisk, Stolin, Ruzhin, Husiatyn, Chernobyl – all prayed in the same synagogue and in the same style. He was not surprised, however, to hear the maskilim prayed with them. After a while, the young men took Kisselgoff and Yudovin for a short walk to the “mountain.” An-ski [did not] forget to greet them with “good Sabbath” and [reminded] them to behave properly, meaning that they should not smoke or speak Russian … in other words, they should behave in a Jewish manner. Based on Hanokh Gilernt’s account in: Pinkas Kremenits (Hebr.: The Record Book of Kremenets), Tel Aviv 1954, retrieved from www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor

During their stay in Kremenets, An-ski’s team managed to record some unique Hasidic nigunim (tunes), to write down local tales, and to obtain two copper lanterns from the synagogue for the museum in St. Petersburg.

Synagogues The Memorial Book of Kremenets mentions 18 synagogues and prayer houses that existed in the town. The main synagogue of Kremenets was located in Żydowska St. (now Shevchenka St.). According to the 1563 inventory, at the end of Żydowska Street there was “doctor Smuyla’s plot” (more than two hectares); on Średnia Street, running parallel to it, there were two school plots (three and two hectares accordingly), a “Jewish doctor’s plot” (about seven hectares), a Jewish hospital
plot (three hectares), and “shkolnik Józek’s plot” (two hectares). A synagogue was probably located on one of these plots. Towards the end of the 18th century, a new stone synagogue was erected. It was designed according to a rectangular plan, and had a nine-section prayer hall, and a gable roof. On the eastern wall, there was an impressive cartouche with the Star of David and the crown of the Torah, supported by two lions. In the backyard, there was the smaller Synagogue of the Maggid, named in honour of Yakov Israel ben Tzvi ha-Levi, a maggid who worked in Kremenets in the second half of the 18th century and was the author of several exegetical works that appeared in Zhovkva (1772, 1782).

In Żydowska Street, there were also the kahal house and two batei midrash – the old one and the new one, known as the “Cossack” bet midrash, the town’s second largest synagogue. The tailors’ synagogue (Yid.: shneider shul) stood in Krawiecka (Tailor) St., and the butchers’ synagogue (Yid.: katzavim shul) in Jatkowa St. There were also several Hasidic synagogues and prayer rooms in private houses. Synagogues existed in the Dubno and Vyshniwets suburbs, too. The only synagogue building that has survived is the one at the end of Dubienska St. Thoroughly rebuilt after the war, it now serves as a bus station.

The time of change At the beginning of the 20th century, the young generation of Kremenets Jews studied at the traditional educational institutions (such as the elementary heydorim, a Talmud Torah school, and a small yeshivah), but there were also secular institutions: in 1907, a “progressive cheder” for children of both sexes with instruction in Hebrew was established. A year later, a vocational training school was opened, with Russian as the language of instruction: its statute stipulated that 40 percent of its students were to be Jewish, and 60 percent – Christians. In order to keep up with this regulation, a Jewish family wishing to send a child to the vocational training school was required to find a Christian child and cover the cost of his or her education too; this included buying school supplies. During World War I, the front line ran near the city, but Kremenets suffered no damage, thanks to its location surrounded by hills. There was perceptible tension between Jews and Christians, but Kremenets Jews experienced no mass violence. Between 1917 and 1920, Kremenets changed hands seven times. From the moment the Central Rada declared the independence of Ukraine on January 22, 1918, until the entry of Bolshevik forces on June 2, 1919, the town was controlled by the government of the Ukrainian People’s Republic which, however, changed its political profile and cadre three times during the 18 months of its existence. During the election of the town councillors in the fall of 1917, Jews representing various political parties won more than half of the seats, and for some time in 1919 a Jew, Azril Kremenetski, held the post of Chairman of the Municipal Council. After the Bolshevik coup d’état in Petrograd, a faction of the Bund advocated closer cooperation with the Central Rada of Ukraine. In April, 1918, it fought for the introduction of an 8-hour working day. After the war, Kremenets found itself within the borders of Poland. According to the 1921 census, the Jewish community had 6,397
people and constituted nearly 40 percent of the local population. Subsequently, after the change of the town’s administrative borders, the percentage of Jews decreased a little. The Jewish population had their own Society for the Care of the Elderly, the Jewish Sports Club “Hasmonea,” and the Jewish Workers’ Sports Club “Jutrznia.” The Zionist organisation and Jewish trade unions had their own libraries and Yiddish-language newspapers. ¶ In 1931, a report on the difficult situation of the local Jewish community appeared in the newspaper Kremenitzer Shtime (Yid.: Voice of Kremenets).

“The economic situation of the Jewish community is difficult and is getting worse year by year. A considerable number of people are ruined and forced to look for new ways to earn a living, since the old ones are no longer sufficient. Many respected merchants have gone bankrupt, and the situation of small shopkeepers and craftsmen is even worse. Unemployment and low income lead to hunger and poverty. ¶ Based on Kremenitzer Shtime, December 19, 1931.

In the 1920s, the Jews of Kremenets began to leave for Palestine in an organised way. First preparations took place in the village of Verba (currently in Rivne Oblast), where a kibbutz was set up – a settlement whose inhabitants were trained to live in harsh conditions of an agricultural settlement. They learnt Hebrew and the kinds of work that could be useful in Israel; they were also learning Hebrew songs.

World War II and the Holocaust ¶ In September 1939, Kremenets was captured by the Red Army. Waves of Jewish refugees from the German-occupied part of Poland arrived. In the spring of 1940, the authorities required that the refugees either register and declare their intention to remain in the Soviet Union or to return to Poland. Those who decided to return were unexpectedly visited by the NKVD at night. Whole families were loaded on trains and deported to Siberia. Meanwhile, all Jewish parties and movements were banned, including even a theatre troupe. Only the cinema continued to function and only Soviet films were shown. The NKVD murdered 100–150 Ukrainian and Polish inmates in the local prison. Then the Germans entered the town on July 2, 1941; more than 8,500 Jews lived in Kremenets at that time. On the following day, a pogrom against the Jewish population took place, organised with the help of local Ukrainian collaborators, in which at least 130 Jews were killed. On July 23, 1941, the Germans carried out a mass execution of the Jewish intelligentsia; members of the Polish and Ukrainian intelligentsia were arrested on
28 July. On 1 March 1942, a ghetto was established in the centre of the town. Many people died of hunger there. On August 10, 1942, the Germans began the liquidation of the ghetto: 5,000 people were shot that day. According to various accounts, a group of armed Jewish young people put up resistance. The ghetto was put on fire; the people were marched out and shot near the tobacco factory. To this day, it is not known who set fire to the ghetto: the Jews in self-defence, or the Germans in order to force the Jews out of their hiding places. The old part of the town burnt down.

Only 14 people from the entire ghetto survived.

Memory ¶ Today, there is no Jewish community in Kremenets. The Kremenets Jews who managed to survive the Holocaust or who emigrated earlier, as well as their descendants, established active compatriots’ associations in Israel, Argentina, and the USA. They published two memorial books: in 1954, in Israel and in 1965, in Argentina, and also the Hebrew periodical titled Kol Kremenitz (Hebr.: Voice of Kremenets).

The violinist Isaac Stern (1920–2001), left Kremenets with his family as a child, emigrating to the USA. It is his violin that can be heard in the Fiddler on the Roof, the 1971 Hollywood musical that won three Oscars and two Golden Globes.

Another figure who emigrated to the USA was Mark Katz (also Kac; 1914–1984), who left one year before the outbreak of war, already with a PhD in math and a representative of the renowned Lvów school of mathematics. He became a famous expert in the field of spectral theory and the winner of several prestigious scholarly awards.

There are two monuments at the site of the mass grave at the former tobacco factory where thousands of Kremenets Jews were murdered. The first one dates back to Soviet times. The other was erected in 1992 on the initiative of the Israeli association of the former residents of Kremenets. In the vicinity, there is also a mass grave of the members of Ukrainian, Polish, and Jewish intelligentsia, murdered by the Nazis at the foot of Krzyżowa Hill. ¶ Present-day Kremenets is a district center with a population of about 20,000. It is the seat of the Kremenets-Pochaiv Reserve of History and Architecture and an important centre of local tourism, based on its scenic landscape, a past shrouded in legend, numerous monuments, and deep traditions of spiritual life.

Cemeteries ¶ Cemeteries of various religions are located on the hills around Kremenets. The oldest surviving tombstones can be found at the recently fenced and restored Jewish cemetery on a slope of Mount Chercha. Among the approximately 7,000 surviving matzevot, about 50 date back to the 16th century. On a different slope of the same hill there is the Cossack Pyatnitsky Cemetery, the burial place of Maxim Kryvonos’ Cossacks killed during the siege of the town in 1648. At the Tunicki
Cemetery, founded towards the end of the 18th century, Christians of the Orthodox, Uniate, and Roman Catholic rites are buried together.

Jewish cemetery (16th c.), Dzerelna St. § Former synagogue (19th c.), Dubienska St. (now a bus station). § Castle ruins (13th c.), on Bona Hill. § Cossack cemetery (17th c.), Kozatska St. § St. Nicholas Orthodox Cathedral, former Franciscan monastery (17th c.), 57 Shevchenka St. § Buildings of the former Kremenets College (18th c.), 1 Litseynta St. § Orthodox Monastery of the Epiphany (18th c.), Dubienska St. § Twin houses (18th c.), 1 Medova St. § Church of St. Stanislaus (19th c.), 30 Shevchenka St. § Local History Museum, 90 Shevchenka St., tel. +38 035 462 27 38. § Juliusz Słowacki Museum in the poet’s family home, 16 Slovatskoho St.

Pochayiv (23 km): Orthodox monastery – Pochaivska Lavra (16th c.). § Vyshnivets (25 km): a Jewish cemetery (16th c., several hundred matzevot, the oldest one dating back to 1583); the palace and park of the Wiśniowiec (Vyshnevetskyi) family (1720); the Orthodox Church of the Ascension (1530). § Shumsk (38 km): a Jewish cemetery (18th c., more than 100 matzevot); the Orthodox Church of the Transfiguration (17th c.); the Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1852). § Yampil (46 km): a Jewish cemetery (16th c.); the ohel of the Maggid of Zolochiv, a pilgrimage destination of Hasidim. § Zbarazh (52 km): a Jewish cemetery (18th c.); a former synagogue (18th c.), Zbaraski castle (1626); Bernardine monastery and church (17th c.); Orthodox Church of the Transfiguration (17th c.); the Orthodox Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God (18th c.). § “Kremenets Hills” National Park