

# Motal

Pol. Motol, Bel. Моталь,  
Yid. מאָטעלע

*[We] had our own house – one storey, with seven rooms and a kitchen – some acres of land, chickens, two cows, a vegetable garden, a few fruit trees. So we had a supply of milk, and sometimes butter; we had fruit and vegetables in season; we had enough bread – which my mother baked herself; we had fish, and we had meat once a week – on the Sabbath. And there was always plenty of fresh air.*

Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error. The Autobiography*, Philadelphia 1949

**Hebrew greeting** מוֹטַל Motal, the birthplace and childhood home of Chaim Weizmann, the first president of Israel, is probably the only town in Belarus that has a sign with its name in Hebrew posted by the road leading out of town. ¶ The earliest written mention of Motal is found in the documents of the Lithuanian Metrica from 1422, where it was referred to as a private estate in the Principality of Pinsk. In 1520, it was the property of Prince Fyodor Ivanovich Yaroslavich, who later donated it to the Orthodox Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Leszno. After Yaroslavich' death, Motal became the possession of the Polish King Sigismund I the Old, who then transferred it to his wife Bona Sforza. In 1555, Motal was granted Magdeburg rights and became a craft and trade centre. Its large fairs attracted people from all the surrounding area. ¶ In 1706, the Swedish troops entered Motal, burning it down and killing most of its inhabitants. On November 28, 1746, King Augustus III of Poland confirmed the privileges for the town. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Motal had the status of a county town in Brest Palatinate. In 1795, it was incorporated

into the Slonim Province, then into the Lithuania Governorate, and from 1801, it was made part of the Grodno Province of the Russian Empire.

**The Jews of Motal** ¶ In 1562, “a Jewish landlord and tax collector from Kobryn Favish Yeskovich,” who leased the right to collect taxes on merchandise, complained to Savostian Druzhylovitski that the ruler of the district did not allow him to collect taxes in his town of Motal and in the neighbouring villages. This document suggests that Jews collecting taxes – the wealthiest, best-connected and most respectable Jews in the eyes of the Polish nobility – were known to the inhabitants of Motal, but it is not certain whether they were permanent residents there. The presence of a Jewish community in the town is attested to in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Pinsk cadaster includes two documents dated August 13, 1652. In one of them, an Orthodox priest, Nikolai Baranovich, complained about two Jews from Motal, Leiba Girshevich and his son-in-law, who assaulted him during a dispute that took place on Sunday, when the Jews were engaged in building a house in the town. ¶ According to

A portrait of cantor Reznin, Chaim Weizmann's teacher, 1920s. Photo by Weintraub, collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research



the 1806 census, there were 152 Jews in Motal (64 men and 88 women); by 1811, the Jewish community had grown to 222 members. According to the 1897 census, Motal had a total population of 4,297, including 1,354 Jews. In 1921, the Jewish population totalled 1,140 (26 percent).

“ According to Chaim Weizmann's memoirs, Motal lay in one of the darkest and most forgotten corners of the Jewish settlement zone that the tsarist authorities had designated, but still for people from the villages situated on the farther shores of the lake, it was a metropolis. This metropolis – muddy in spring and autumn, frozen in winter, and dusty in summer – had no post office, railway, or paved roads, and the living conditions there were so primitive that modern Westerners

would find them impossible to imagine. The Weizmanns, however, prospered quite well. Chaim's father was a resourceful lumber trader; his uncle floated lumber down the river to Gdańsk and took Chaim on his raft, which had quite a comfortable hut with a kitchen and a bed. Because of the water routes that ran all the way to the Baltic and the Black Sea, neither Chaim nor his family had the feeling that the world was closed. ¶ Małgorzata Szejnert, *Usypać góry. Historie z Polesia* (Pol.: To Heap Up Mountains. Stories from Polesie), Cracow 2015.

**Two clans ¶** There were two influential feuding Jewish clans in Motal: the Czemyryński (Chemerinsky) family and the Piński (Pinsky) family. The former were members of the municipal board, while the latter served on the religious community board. In February 1883, the Czemyryńskis filed a complaint with the Grodno Governor against Abram Piński, who had allegedly come drunk to the synagogue, asking to replace Piński with Rabbi Shmul Rubinstein. Piński denied the accusations and claimed that he had urged fellow believers to pray for the Great Emperor and his family.

The feud between the two clans lasted for centuries and entered memoirs and *belles lettres* written about Motal. ¶ The Czemyryńskis, who had settled in Motal around the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, left an indelible mark on the history of Motal Jews, with many important people descending from this family: the *kahal* chairman (Lejzer Czemyryński), rabbis (Wewel Arielovich), the synagogue warden (Israel Czemyryński and Ezer Weizmann), communal treasurers (Avigdor Czemyryński), butchers, and innkeepers and the writer Haim Chemerinsky (1861–1917), the author

of the influential Hebrew book *My Shtetl Motale*. Not to mention Chaim Weizmann himself.

**Chaim Weizmann (1874–1952)**, the first President of Israel, came from the Czemyryński family on his mother's side. His father, Ezer Weizmann (1850–1939), arrived in Motal to study and it was there that he met Rachela, daughter of the Motal land leaseholder Michel Czemyryński. They married in 1866. Chaim was the third of Ezer Weizmann and Rachela's 15 children. He spent his childhood in Motal and at the age of 11 was sent to school to Pińsk, where the rest of his family also moved in 1892. Weizmann's house in Motal is partially preserved and currently (after being relocated) stands at 1 Bannyi Zavulok. In 2010, the Pińsk Jewish community together with the Museum of Belarusian Polesie, organised a temporary exhibition at Weizmann's house.



Former house of Chaim Weizmann in Motal, 2014. Photo by Margarita Korzeniewska, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre ([www.teatrn.pl](http://www.teatrn.pl))

**Synagogue** ¶ On Motal marketplace, a synagogue and an Orthodox church stood opposite each other. Located in the corner of the marketplace. The synagogue was a wooden structure with a shingled roof, built in the characteristic synagogal style of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was completely destroyed by fire during World War II, but legends about it have been preserved.

“ In the town of Motele there is a synagogue about which tales of wonder are told. I have heard them myself from an old man who lived there. Listen now to what they say about that synagogue: ¶ There was once a rabbi in the town who was a great genius and a saintly man, a tsadek, may his memory be blessed. Even the Gentiles greatly respected him. ¶ One day it happened that the lord of nearby castle got sick (God keep us from the same) and the doctors despaired of his life. The nobleman decided to send a servant to the holy man to ask him for a blessing. As it happened, the nobleman was actually a great anti-Semite but, because he was in such trouble, the rabbi was willing to give him a blessing. ¶ And the nobleman did indeed recover. Since the town of Motele did not have a synagogue, the lord had the idea of donating lumber to the Jewish community so it could build one. He gave the Jews twelve of the largest trees in his woods, and from those twelve trees they built a synagogue so large that today it holds a congregation of two hundred. ¶ A considerable time has passed since its construction, but the synagogue still looks practically new. And to this day, when a misfortune (God forbid) happens in the town – when someone is sick for instance, or a disaster threatens the community, people gather to pray at the grave of the holy rabbi, may his memory be blessed. ¶ B. Silverman Weinreich, “The Old Shul in Motele,” in: *Yiddish Folktales*, New York 1988.

**Heder** ¶ In 1895, a *heder* was located on Pińska Street in the house of Judel Portny.



**A** A scale model of Motal at the local Museum of Folk Art in Lenina Square, 2014. Photo by Tamara Vershitskaya, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre ([www.teatrnn.pl](http://www.teatrnn.pl))

**B** Museum in Lenina Square in Motal, 2014. Photo by Paweł Sańko, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre ([www.teatrnn.pl](http://www.teatrnn.pl))

“ Next I was taken to Motele, which was already quite a distance. My mother arranged an apartment for sleeping and eating and a Rebbe and Cheder. She then kissed me, said to me “Be well my child”, and went home. I stood there heartbroken – I couldn’t hold myself back. I went to a corner and cried bitterly. [...] The next day, I went to Cheder and did my best for a few days. I didn’t have another choice – I was too far from home. Then came Thursday. I waited for my mother to come see me but she didn’t come. My heart filled with sadness. [...] ¶ The next day, Friday, I took the black bread with jelly. I took these sandwiches and went on pretending nothing had happened. Later, the Rebbe sat down next to me and said to me, “You are learning so well, you have a good head. If you learn well, the angels will throw money at you.” On Monday, this happened. The

angels threw money at me. The Rebbe sneaked to the back and suddenly, kopecks were falling. This went on for a few days until suddenly one day a boy screamed out, “Rebbe, throw me also a kopeck.” I pretended like I didn’t know what was going on, and waited for my mother to come on Thursday. My mother came to Cheder and hugged and kissed me. The Rebbe said to my mother, “Your son has a precious head, the angels are throwing him money.” I shouted, “Rebbe, you are a liar.” Despite the great embarrassment and trouble I caused my mother, she laughed. From then on, I didn’t believe him. I understood that it was a made-up thing, that when she hired the Rebbe, she gave him a few kopecks to throw. In the old country, no one threw money, neither the Rebbes nor the angels, because they all were poor. ¶ From *Motal to Chicago. An Autobiography* by David Chez, 1902–1976, translated from Yiddish by Rutie Gold, <http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/motal/memories.htm>

**Leonard Chess (1917–1969)** – the founder, along with his brother Phil, of the record company Chess Records, which played a crucial role in popularising blues and rock ‘n’ roll music in the USA after World War II. Born in Motal, he immigrated to Chicago together with his family. There he co-owned several nightclubs with his brother. The first step toward his overwhelming business success was purchasing the shares of Aristocrat Records. The company was then renamed Chess Records and produced albums by such stars as Chuck Berry (ranked the fifth greatest performer of all time by the *Rolling Stone* magazine), blues man Muddy Waters, and The Flamingos (an American male vocal group included in the rock ‘n’ roll Hall of Fame), whose hits

were at the top of the charts. Leonard Chess was the heart and soul of his company; when he died, the status of Chess Records gradually declined.

**Economic life** ¶ Commercial traditions in Motal date back to the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. Big fairs were held there eight times a year, during important Catholic and Orthodox holidays, when Gentile merchants were coming to Motal on a pilgrimage to local churches and Jews, a dominant force on the marketplace, could trade with them; smaller trading fairs took place every week and attracted tradesmen from the whole neighbouring area. The biggest fair was held on the festival of Corpus Christi, in May or June. The Memorial Book of Motal describes street peddlers who bought various items at fairs and then sold them to the residents of nearby towns and villages. Street peddlers were no real competition for stationary stores because they charged more for their goods. ¶ Small industry started to develop in Motal at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of two candle workshops, three smithies, a fullery, and a horse-driven mill. In 1914, the fullery and steam butter factory were owned by Josel Pomerants, while the local tannery belonged to Aaron-Berek Gotlib. ¶ In the interwar period, Polish authorities did not segregate Jewish communal life thus Motal became the centre of an independent community with its own administration, police, and a fairly large fire brigade. The majority of residents were Orthodox Christians (74 percent) and Jews (26 percent). In the 1920s and 1930s, the town's life centred around the marketplace, with its 85 stores offering a wide variety of goods – meat, snuff, alcohol, utensils, furniture, shoes, etc. ¶ Alcohol production was

one of the most profitable local business activities, as evidenced by the presence of three distilleries and two breweries in town, as well as countless taverns and bars. Takeaway sale of alcohol was permitted only with a licence, which was more often granted to Polish residents, not to the Jews. Jews leased their licenses from Poles, which allowed them to open their own stores. There were occasional incidents that tainted the reputation of respectable shopkeepers, e.g. on July 1, 1928, Chana Szac's liquor store was closed after a police search had revealed counterfeit vodka sold there. ¶ In the 1920s, Motal had a cooperative mill, six slaughterhouses (four of them belonging to Jews), and a tannery. These pre-war business traditions were revived in the 1980s, when Motal enjoyed rampant economic development as a thriving center of the fur coat industry. Sausages made in Motal are still wellknown throughout Belarus. ¶ Jews in Motal also worked as medical doctors serving all the townspeople, Jews and Gentiles. The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century saw the opening of a shelter with three beds located in a room next to the public baths. In 1913, all of its staff (a doctor, a dentist, and a midwife) were Jewish. Later on, medical treatment was provided by a feldsher, or emergency paramedical practitioner, named Schaudier at his surgery, and in the 1930s, by physician Szyja Feldman. In 1922, there was also a private pharmacy and two pharmaceutical storehouses owned by Jews.

Jewish cemetery in Motal, 2014. Photo by Tamara Vershitskaya, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre ([www.teatrnn.pl](http://www.teatrnn.pl))



“ On *Rosh ha-shanah* it was the same as on *Shabbat*. The whole family (but not the girls) went to the shul. We girls just went there to listen to the sounding of the shofar. [...] After the *Kiddush* and the *Hamotze* [blessings on wine and bread – eds.], it was customary to dip a piece of *challah* in honey and make a blessing for a sweet and good year. [...] On the first day of *Rosh ha-shanah* [...], young and old went to the lake and emptied out their pockets, ridding themselves of

their sins, chanting some psalms and the last three verses of chapter seven of the Book of Micah where it reads: “[...] and they will cast all of their sins into the depths of the seas.” Hence, the ceremony is called *Tashlich* (symbolic “sending” of the personal sins into the waters – depth of the seas). ¶ *Sukkot*. We had a permanent, built-in [*Sukkah* – temporary dwelling with a roofing made of green tree-branches or woodsticks]. We kept our library there during the rest of year. It was a large room. The wooden roof was built so when pulled with a rope it opened and exposed the sky. [...] We decorated it. We had all meals there for 7 days, no matter how cold it was. We had our own *etrog* [citron fruit – one of the four species used on *Sukkot* for ritual purposes – eds.] and *lulav* [closed frond of the date palm tree] and took pride in their beauty. ¶ *Passover*. Because there were no *matzoh* factories, the *matzoh* had to be baked at home, mostly in our house as we had a large kitchen, dining room and good oven. [...] Several families made use of the facilities, and they pitched in because the baking had to be done in haste. The work was divided, a person for each of the following tasks: to measure the flour, pour the water, knead, divide the dough, roll the dough into round cakes, to smooth the cakes with a little cog wheel to prevent its rising in the oven, to keep the oven hot, to shove the cakes in the oven and a carrier to put the baked *matzot* onto a white sheet. ¶ Sarah Heller, *Celebrations of Jewish Holidays in Motele*, contributed by her daughter Tauby Shimkin, <http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/motol/celebrations.htm> (edited).

### World War II and the Holocaust

¶ In September 1939, Motal was captured by the Red Army. After the Germans took over the town on June 26, 1941, SS men carried out the extermination of the Jewish population (August 2–3, 1941). Adult men were marched towards the village of Osovnitsa (2 km west of Motal), while women, children, and elderly people were taken to the woods of Gaj near the village of Kalily

(500 metres from Motal). Over just a few days, the Jewish community of Motal (almost 3,000 people) ceased to exist. Only 23 people survived.

**Memory** ¶ In 2004, on the initiative of a descendant of Motal Jews who immigrated to the USA, the old Jewish cemetery was cleared up and fenced. A few *matzevot* have survived to this day at this cemetery, as old as Motal’s Jewish

community. The new Jewish cemetery, set up in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was completely devastated during the Soviet era and is now overgrown with a forest. ¶ In 2010, an exhibition was organised at Chaim Weizmann's old house in cooperation with the Pinsk Jewish community and the staff of the Belarusian Museum. The exhibition featured pre-war everyday household objects that had never been shown before, such as candlesticks, prayer

books, a tray, a sauce boat, a jewelry box, mortars and pestle, a shoemaker's toolbox, a laundry wringer, and ink writing utensils. It also displayed a painting by Arkadiy Shusterman (painted in plein-air to commemorate the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holocaust in Belarus), which depicts the oldest Jew born in Pinsk – Chaim Krasilski – wearing religious attire and donning a *tallit* (a prayer shawl), a *kippar* (*yermolka*), and *tefillin* (phylacteries).

Former house of Chaim Weizmann, the first President of Israel (partially preserved), Bannyi Zavulok. ¶ Jewish cemetery (17<sup>th</sup> c.). ¶ Orthodox Church of the Transfiguration (1888). ¶ Sts. Boris and Gleb Chapel (1986). ¶ Motal Museum of Folk Art, Lenina Sq., tel. +375165258753.

Worth seeing

Ivanava (20 km): the site of the martyrdom of St. Andrew Bobola (1657); the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (1848); the Orthodox Church of the Protection of Our Lady (1901); former Jewish brick houses (early 20<sup>th</sup> c.); a monument at the execution site on Inkubatornaya St.; a monument in the Rudzki Forest at the site of mass executions of Jews from Motal and Ivanava. ¶ Khomsk (29 km): memorials at the site of mass executions and at the old Jewish cemetery. ¶ Telechany (45 km): a former wooden house of prayer (currently a residential building); wooden houses; a manor house (19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> c.); the Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity (1934); the Ogiński Canal; a Jewish cemetery with a few matzevot; a monument on the mass grave in the Grechishche forest wilderness. ¶ Drohiczyn (50 km): a former Jewish hotel, whose guests included Golda Meir (1912); a *cheder*; a pharmacist's house; a smithy; two monuments on execution sites; the Orthodox Church of the Epiphany (19<sup>th</sup> c.); Eliza Orzeszkowa lived in nearby Ludwinów (between 1858 and 1864).

Surrounding area

