

Pruz hany

Pol. Pruzana, Bel. Пружаны, Yid. פרוזשענע

I wanted to begin by saying that I left Pruzhany, but which of you, dear readers, is strong enough in geography to know about Pruzhany?

J. Kraszewski, *Memories from Polesie, Volhynia, and Lithuania*, Vilnius 1840

A little town ¶ Pruzhany has been known since 1487, at first as Dobuchin – at present, this name belongs to a village seven km from Pruzhany. Initially, the settlement developed at the intersection of two routes: the Sialets Route, linking Europe with Muscovy, and the Ruzhany Route, also called the Vilnius Route – later, Jews named that route the Jatke gas (Jateczna St.). This route was used in 1551, when the body of the deceased young queen Barbara Radziwiłł was carried from Cracow to Vilnius, via Pruzhany. The Sialets route was the one that King Władysław IV chose in the mid-17th century, when he was going to wage war against the Khmelnytsky's Cossacks. The Napoleon army used it too, when it marched on Moscow in 1812, and Russian tsars followed it when they came to Warsaw and went on wild hunting expeditions in the Białowieża Forest.

¶ Until 1519, Pruzhany was part of the Principality of Kobryn. After the death of Kobryn's Prince Jan Szymonowicz, the Grand Duke of Lithuania Sigismund I the Old granted the settlement to Marshal Kościwicz. On May 3, 1588, the Queen of Poland and the Grand Duchess of Lithuania Anna Jagiellon granted it with

the Magdeburg municipal rights. After 1795, Pruzhany became part of Russia.

The Jews of Pruzhany ¶ Most likely Jews lived in Pruzhany from the 15th century. In the 1450s, the town already had a functioning Jewish cemetery and a *Hevra kadisha* (Heb.: Burial society). Its first synagogue was probably built in the 15th century and stood for 400 years until it burnt down in a fire that devastated the town in 1863. In 1495, the Jews were expelled from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, but they were allowed to return a few years later. The names of Jewish merchants from Pruzhany appear in the 16th-century tax register of the town of Brest. Various surviving documents contain records connected with Jewish life in this town: in 1560, a Jew from Kobryn, one Faivush ben Josef, obtained a lease on a distillery in Dobuchin; in 1562, a Jew from Brest, Peisach ben Ajzik, leased an inn; in 1583, Mordke ben Yankiev traded in goat skin with the merchants in Lublin; in 1583, Eliyahu ben Chaim brought Moravian cloth, paper, raisins, figs, plums, oil, pepper, and rice to Pruzhany from Lublin.

¶ In 1623, the Jewish community of



A clown performs on the street in Pruzhany, summer 1916. Photo taken by a German soldier during World War I, collection of Beit Hatfutsot, The Museum of the Jewish People, Photo Archive, Tel Aviv, courtesy of Gamal LTD., Kibbutz Sarid

Pruzhany reported to the Brest *kahal* (communal regional umbrella organization). At the meeting of the Lithuanian Council (Vaad, the umbrella organization of the entire duchy) that took place in Pruzhany in 1628, it was decided that the Vaad meetings would continue to be held in the town; but in fact no such meeting took place in Pruzhany after that. ¶ In 1644, Władysław IV granted the Jews of Pruzhany with special privileges, which also included basic privileges Jews received in the private towns of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth such as those to purchase houses and plots of land in the market square and along the streets, to produce and sell wine, to brew and sell beer and mead, to trade, to work in crafts, to build synagogues provided that they did not resemble Catholic churches, to forego tax payments for the plots of land used for synagogues or Jewish cemeteries, and many others. Though he confirmed the basic privileges in 1650, King John Casimir, who succeeded Władysław, prohibited Jews from purchasing new plots

of land on which to build synagogues. These same privileges were confirmed by John III Sobieski (1677) and Augustus II (1698). ¶ Towards the end of the 16th century, the post of rabbi in Pruzhany was taken by the famous Joel Syrkes, a renowned scholar and rabbinical authority, the author of *Beith Khadash* a collection of responsa the acronym of which gave the rabbi his name – the Ba”kh. ¶ In the 19th century, Pruzhany was a well-known pottery centre. In 1857, there were 14 small businesses here, county schools and two-grade parish schools, six hospitals, two Orthodox churches, a Catholic church, a synagogue, and several Jewish prayer houses. In 1873, the town had four functioning synagogues and a free Jewish hospital, and from the mid-1860s, there was also a Jewish state school. ¶ A charity called Linas ha-Tsedek (Heb.: An Overnight Stay for the Righteous) was founded in 1880, and the Organisation for the Assistance of Homeless Jews was set up in 1899. The 1890s saw the establishment of a proto-Zionist Palestinophile club, and



Market square in Pruzhany, 1938, collection of the National Library, Poland (www.polona.pl)

from 1900, Zionist organisations became active, among them Tiferes Bakhurim, Pirkhei Zion, and after 1903, also Tzeirey

Zion. In 1904, left-wing Zionists and Bundists united into one party, Kadima. In October 1905, a self-defence unit was formed to protect local Jewish population from the anti-Semitic mob in the times of revolutionary violence. ¶ By 1910, the town had nine functioning synagogues and a Talmud Torah school. The chief rabbi was Berko Joselevich Kontorshchyyk, and Moshe-Fishel Berkovich Goldberg took over in 1915. A description of the rabbis who arrived in Saint Petersburg to attend a convention of rabbis in 1910 mentions a rabbi from Pruzhany:

“ The figure who inspired particular admiration was Rabbi Elijah Feinstein of Pruzhany. A good-looking old man with a long luxuriant beard as white as the moon, with wise and lively eyes, gave an impression of a patriarch; he spoke little, but his every word was a result of deep thought and honest conviction. Such rabbis inspire respect for the inner spiritual life that they are filled with. ¶ Feliks Kandel, *Istoriya rossiyskich yevreyev* (The History of Russian Jews), Jerusalem 2014

In 1913, Jews owned all four pharmacies, one branch of a bank, one restaurant, and an inn, as well as 166 market stores. The only jeweller working in Pruzhany was Jewish; five Jews made money by renting out furnished rooms. ¶ A school with Yiddish as the main language of instruction was opened in 1915. It was closed down the next year, but a new Jewish school started to function, with instruction in German. In 1917, the Yiddish school was reopened. It was also then that a Jewish old people's home was established. ¶ In 1921–1939, Pruzhany (Pruzana) and the lands around the town came to be incorporated into the reconstructed Poland as a county center in Białystok Voivodeship (Palatnate). In 1919, with the help of the JOINT – the American Jewish Joint

Distribution Committee – an orphanage was established. In the 1920s and 1930s, local branches of various Jewish parties and organisations operated in Pruzhany, and five Jewish schools functioned. In 1922, they established a seven-year Tarbut school with Hebrew as the language of instruction (in the 1927/1928 school year it had 229 students and employed eight teachers). Later, a five-grade Jewish school was opened, run by TSYSHO (*Tsentrale Yidishe Shul-Organizatsye*, Yid.: Central Yiddish School Organisation), with Yiddish as the language of instruction, and an eight-grade classical Jewish gymnasium or secondary school was also established (in 1929/1930, it had 163 students and six teachers; in 1935, 116 students and nine teachers). The Jewish community of Pruzhany ran

two nursery schools. In 1922, a branch of the Jewish Cooperative Bank was opened, and 1931 saw the opening of a branch of Bank Handlowy (Commercial Bank). In 1929, a yeshiva began to function. The weekly newspaper, the Yiddish newspaper *Pruzhener Lebn* (Yid.: The Life of Pruzhany) was published in 1930–1939, and the Zionist weekly *Pruzhener Shtime* (Yid.: The Voice of Pruzhany), also Yiddish, began



to be issued in 1931.

In 1930, the “Pinkas” publishing house released a book titled *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhany* (Yid.: A Record Book of the Town of Pruzhany) edited by Gershon Urinsky, Meir Wolanski, and Noah Zukerman. In more than 300 pages, the book described the history and the present-day life of the residents of Pruzhany. Its particular value lies in the fact that the memorial books of most towns were not written until after the Holocaust. This book about Pruzhany has had two post-war editions, in Buenos Aires in 1958, and in Tel Aviv in 1980.

19th-century market halls — cloth halls in Pruzhany, 2014. Photo by Irina Pivovarchik, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate — NN Theatre” Centre (www.teatmn.pl)

World War II and the Holocaust

¶ In September 1939, Pruzhany (then Prużana, Poland) was seized by the Red

Army. On June 23, 1941, it was taken by German troops. Pruzhany became part of the Białystok District (East Prussia).

“ The war found me in the borderland town of Pruzhany, where I worked as a doctor at the hospital. On June 22, 1941, I was on night duty. At 3:30 am, the Germans started to bomb the town. The Germans entered the town on June, 23, and then, having jumped out of their cars, they began to rob and beat the Jews. ¶ Doctor Olga Goldfein. *Shorthand Notes*, based on *Chornaya Kniga* (Rus.: The Black Book), ed. I. Erenburg and W. Grossman, 1947.

On 10 July 1941, the Gestapo arrived in Pruzhany. Arrests began and the first executions were carried out (18 Jews were shot in the forest, two km from the town). In August 1941, Jewish women and children were forcibly resettled to Pruzhany from Hajnówka and Narewka Mała, where the men had been executed. ¶ On September 25, 1941, a ghetto was established, which included Dąbrowska and Kobryńska Streets and stretched as far as the bridges, Brzeska St. and Czerczewska

St. and included all the adjacent streets (now Kobrynskaya, Svobody, Lenina, Kirova, Ostrovskego, and Tormasova Streets). ¶ Between the fall of 1941 and the spring of 1942, about 4,500 Jews from Białystok and about 2,000 Jews from the towns and cities of the western districts of Belorussia were resettled into the ghetto: from Białowieża, Stołpca, Novy Dvor, Kamyanyets, Zamosty, Byaroza, Sharashova, Bluden, Malecz, Slonim, Ivatsevichy, and from nearby villages. ¶ According

Memorial at the Jewish cemetery in Pruzhany, devoted to the people killed during the Holocaust, 2014. Photo by Irina Pivovarchik, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)



to Doctor Olga Goldfein, 6,000 out of the 18,000 inmates of the Pruzhany ghetto died over the winter of 1941/1942 due to cold, hunger, and deprivation. The communities of nine local synagogues had to pay a substantial ransom to the Nazis, but after that the Nazis completely devastated the synagogues. ¶ Early in November 1942, the Nazis surrounded Pruzhany ghetto with barbed wire. The dwellers of the ghetto were informed that there would be an evacuation. Everyone knew about the annihilation of Jewish communities in the nearby villages and towns, and, therefore, a group of doctors, teachers, and lawyers decided to commit group suicide. They took morphine and turned on the gas. Neighbours saved the doctors and their families; only one of them, Tzvi Nitzkin, died. Still, a total of 47 ghetto inmates did take their own lives. The deportation of the Jews was postponed and the subsequent registration of the ghetto's dwellers showed 9,976 Jews in the ghetto. ¶ In spring 1942, underground organisations were set up in the ghetto. A group of Jews working in the barracks and in warehouses began to gather

weapons and fix the broken German guns. They also established contact with partisans. More than 20 ghetto dwellers escaped into the forests, carrying weapons with them. ¶ On the morning of January 28, 1943, the Nazi soldiers and the auxiliary police surrounded the ghetto. The Jews were informed that they would be sent to Silesia to do forced labour, but instead, about 10,000 people were packed into railway wagons and sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp. The transports were dispatched until January 31, 1943. About 2,000 people managed to hide and survive the operation, but later most of them were found and murdered. ¶ Only about 20 Jews from Pruzhany survived the Nazi terror. On 17 July 1944, the town was liberated. One woman, Olga Goldfein, was saved by a nun, Genowefa Czubak. In 2001, Ivan, Anna, Aleksandr, and Lidia Pauk were honoured with the titles of Righteous Gentiles for saving the lives of teacher Moshe Judevich and his wife Regina, who escaped from the Pruzhany ghetto to her friends in the nearby village of Chakhets.

Memorials ¶ In 1965, an obelisk was erected at the site of mass executions in the Slobodka forest (one km northwest of the village of Slobodka). On November 21, 2005, the community of the refugees from Pruzhany Region (residing in Israel) established a memorial to the Holocaust victims at the old Jewish cemetery.

One of the houses in Pruzhany bears a memorial plaque commemorating the Fridberg family, murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The plaque was funded by **Abraham Fridberg-Harshalom**, born here in 1926, who was the only survivor of the family. His story is told in the book and documentary entitled *Alive from the Ashes* (Jerusalem, 1988) and on the website: www.harshalom.com

Traces of Jewish presence ¶

A former synagogue building from the early 20th century has survived in Pruzhany. It is now used for industrial purposes and can be found behind the Baptist church in Tomasova St. ¶ There is also a large surviving Jewish cemetery in Gorin Kolada St. Although the cemetery has been partly destroyed, about 2,000 fieldstone matzevot can be found

there. ¶ When in Pruzhany, it is worth visiting the Pruzhany Palace Museum, whose collection includes magazines and books in Hebrew and Yiddish as well as a collection of graphic works by Moshe Bernstein (1920–2006), a painter from nearby Byaroza, who lived in Israel after the war. The collection presents the life of Jewish towns.

Former **synagogue** (early 20th c.), Tormasova St. ¶ **Jewish cemetery**, Gorin Kolada St. ¶ **Szwykowski Palace – Pruzhany Palace Museum** (1850s), 50 Savetskaya St., tel. +375163221896. ¶ **Chapel** at the Catholic cemetery (1852), Kafanova St. ¶ **St. Alexander Nevsky Orthodox Cathedral** (1866), Komunistichnaya St. ¶ **Church of the Assumption** (1883), 39 Savetskaya St. ¶ **Cloth hall** (1896), Savetskaya St. ¶ **Pharmacy building** (1811), 20 Savetskaya St.

Sharashova (20 km): a Jewish cemetery with approx. 2–3 thousand matzevot; former Jewish houses (19th c.); Holy Trinity Church; the Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas ¶ **Bluden** (36 km): a former synagogue and cheder building, currently a shop; the Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas (1887–1888). ¶ **Byaroza** (40 km): ruins of the Carthusian Monastery (1648–1689); a former prison; the Orthodox Church of Sts. Peter and Paul (1860); St. Michael Archangel Orthodox Church; Holy Trinity Church; the former Jewish school and a building with a Hebrew date (early 20th c.); a monument in the forest near the village of Smolarka.

Worth
seeing

Surrounding
area

