

Ruzhany

Pol. Różana, Bel. Ружаны,

Yid. ראָזשענאָ

*Lie down and sleep, little one
Listen, I will sing you a song
A long, long time ago, far, far away,
There was a town*

Aharon Libuszycki, *Shir eres* (Heb.: Lullaby),
Warsaw 1900

A Sapieha residence ¶ The first written mention of Ruzhany (Różana) dates back to 1490. The magnate family of Sapieha received Ruzhany into their possession in 1598 and made the town their main residence. Towards the end of the 16th century, Lew Sapieha, the Chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, had a castle built on a high hill of Ruzhany; the castle was often visited by the members of royal family. After a visit to the castle of Ruzhany, Władysław IV Vasa said that he had “[...] spent nine days in unspeakable luxury as the marshal’s guest.” Additionally, he was showered with gifts by the generous host and received “[...] a Belgian carpet worth 10,000 zloty, a ring for the queen, bought for 16,000 zloty, and a sable fur bought for 3,000 zloty in Moscow [...]” Thanks to the efforts of the Sapiehas, Ruzhany was granted Magdeburg municipal rights and its own coat of arms. Ruzhany Castle, rebuilt in 1784–1786 and designed by Johann

Samuel Becker, was a magnificent palace and park complex that used to be called the “Belorussian Versailles”, or the “Versailles of Polesie”. Yet, the estate approached the brink of bankruptcy, which forced Aleksander Sapieha to lease the palace out in 1829 to a Jewish entrepreneur, Mordechai Pines. ¶ Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz recollects: “In Różana, the princely estate once owned by Hetman Pociej, a famous drunk, I saw a different ‘library’ of cups [...]. These were cups that could hold two or more bottles, and which had different shapes: of sticks, pistols, or bears. What a pity! It was from those unmeasured vessels that the fathers and grandfathers had drunk away Poland’s wellbeing, happiness, independence, and unity. They rested in peace, whereas we and our children have to suffer because of their idleness and inactivity.” ¶ From 1786 until the early 20th century, the palace hosted a factory producing silk fabrics, velvet, and cloth.

” *What can you say: for a small town such as Ruzhany, the return – after a hundred years – of the family that had built the town [...] was an extraordinary sensation. The Catholic church, the Orthodox church, the monastery, administrative buildings, and so on – everything was built by the Sapiehas, and the most magnificent*

Ruzhany, Sapieha family estate. In the chapel of the palace, the body of St. Casimir rested for a few years after it had been taken away from the Vilnius Cathedral during the wars of 1655. Postcard from the 1920s, drawing by Napoleon Orda, collection of the National Library, Poland (www.polona.pl)



edifice was the huge castle, which had once towered over the town and of which now only ruins were left. Most people probably had a poor knowledge of history, but they did know that Ruzhany meant the Sapiehas. ¶ After the mass, a little crowd gathered in front of the church – very solemn, but joyful. [...] Everyone welcomed us and wished us happiness and many years of life in the family hearth again. ¶ Suddenly, just like in Nowogródek, a serious-looking elderly Jew with a long beard approached us and, bowing with great dignity, invited us to his place because he had something very important to tell my Dad. After the welcome was over, and after a short visit at the presbytery, we went to the house they showed us. He introduced himself to us as Pines, treated us to tea with some kind of bagel, and told us a story of his family, which settled in Ruzhany at the beginning of the 18th century. It turned out that shortly before the November Uprising, his grandfather together with my great-grandfather Eustachy drew up a sales contract for the Ruzhany Castle, which was later converted into a textile factory by his grandfather. Our interlocutor bent down and took out the original certificate of sale from the lower drawer of the desk; the certificate stipulated that the buyer would pay as much as he would manage to collect quickly within a certain time, provided that if any Sapieha, the seller's rightful heir, ever returned to Ruzhany, the palace was to be returned to him for the same price. ¶ – You are now reclaiming your rightful inheritance, Your Grace, so the contract is valid and I return your property to you in accordance with the contract. I know that Your Grace will not take it back now, as it is merely a worthless ruin, but a contract is a contract and I just wanted to inform you about it. ¶ We finally learnt that, when joining the November Uprising as a volunteer, grandfather Eustachy knew very well that it was only a patriotic bid that could not possibly succeed; he also knew he would not return to Ruzhany and the rest of his estate. Unfortunately, it is often rumoured that Sapieha sold his family hearth to Jews in order to have money for debauchery. ¶ Eustachy Sapieha, *So It Was... Eustachy Sapieha's Undemocratic Memoirs*, Warsaw 2012

became part of the Brest *kahal* region. Decades later, in 1662, the Ruzhany community received the status of an independent *kahal*. The Jews living there suffered severely during the Great Northern War between Russia and Sweden (1700–1721). Despite that, the community was considered prosperous, and in 1721, it paid 1,100 zlotys of poll tax (the same amount was collected by the entire Vilnius community). Later, the situation of the Jews deteriorated to the point that they began leaving Ruzhany. In 1766, the community diminished to 326 members, 154 of them living in the town. ¶ As the result of the Third Partition of Poland (1795), Ruzhany became part of the Russian territory. In 1847, there were 1,467 Jews living in Ruzhany, and in 1897 there were 3,599 (71.7 percent of the population). After the opening of six textile factories and several spinning mills in the first half of the 19th century, many Jews from the town and the surrounding area began to work there. In 1810, Itzko Leibovich, Berko Meierovich, and Gershko Yankielevich opened a textile factory there. By 1829, Jews owned three local textile factories. Some Jewish families grew vegetables and engaged in fruit farming on leased land. In 1850, two Jewish agricultural settlements



were established near Ruzhany – that was part of greater Nicholas I’s plan to transform the trading Jew, whom he deemed unproductive, into agricultural workers engaged in manual labor. Jews from those villages were among the first émigrés from Bielorussia to the land of Israel, where in 1884, they established the farm of Ekron, subsequently *kibbutz* Mazkeret Batya. In 1875, almost all of Ruzhany burnt down in a fire; the flames also destroyed Jewish prayer houses and the synagogue.

Bima in the synagogue in Ruzhany, 2014. Photo by Siergiej Piwowarczyk, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

Accusations of ritual murder ¶

The Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary (1908–1913), *Yevreyskaya entsyklopedia* (Rus.: The Jewish Encyclopaedia) contains the story of a blood libel that took place in Ruzhany:

“In 1657, on the eve of Easter, the body of a child from a Christian family was found in the Jewish quarter – “a victim of the Jewish thirst for blood,” as rumour had it. The crowd was ready to attack the Jews, but the town’s authorities prevented that from happening. [...] The municipal court accused the entire *kahal* of ritual murder and demanded that two representatives of the congregation be surrendered. The two chosen were Rabbi Israel Ben Sholom and Rabbi Tobia Ben Josif (they may actually have volunteered for the sake of sanctifying the name of God by becoming martyrs). The execution was carried out on the second day of Rosh ha-shanah. [...] The Jews remember the martyrs to this day. [...] At the local cemetery, a stone-built memorial to the murdered victims was erected (and renovated in 1875).



A Pre-war houses in the former Jewish quarter in Ruzhany, 2014. Photo by Siergiej Piwowarczyk, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

B Former yeshiva and synagogue in Ruzhany, 2014. Photo by Siergiej Piwowarczyk, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

The story had a continuation, centuries later, told here by Olga Adamova-Sliozberg, a Russian economist and a Gulag prisoner, whose father-in-law was related to one of those who in the 17th century volunteered for martyrdom to save the community.

“ My father-in-law, Ruvim Yevsevich Zakheim was a taciturn Jew, immersed in holy books. Sometimes he would argue loudly with some old men in Hebrew. The argument concerned different interpretations of the Talmud, and for several thousand years it had intensely preoccupied Talmudists, living in their own world, very distant from issues of everyday life. [...] ¶ In 1930, my father-in-law ceremonially entered my room, where I was sitting at my newborn son's bed. ¶ – I need to talk to you. Do you want to circumcise

the child? ¶ I knew the old man had prayed to God that I would give birth to a daughter because he knew that a boy would remain uncircumcised, which would have been a tragedy for him. [...] ¶ – No, I cannot do that – I said categorically. ¶ – But your son won't be a Jew! Do you understand what this means? ¶ I didn't understand. It seemed completely irrelevant to me if my son would be Jewish or Chinese: after all, he would live in the time of communism! [...] ¶ – Do you know the origins of our family name? The old man took out of his pocket an old leather case decorated with the Star of David and an inscription in the Jewish language. Inside the case there was a parchment scroll. He solemnly read to me an incomprehensible text in Hebrew and translated it. ¶ The content of the manuscript was as follows: ¶ “In the 17th century in the town of Ruzhany, the body of a child from a Christian family was found before Passover. The Jewish community of Ruzhany was accused of ritual murder. The influential prince who owned the town announced that he would wipe the whole community off the face of the earth if they would not give up the murderers within three days. For three days and nights, the entire community prayed for rescue in the synagogue, and in the morning on the fourth day two old men went to see the prince and confessed to the ritual murder. The old men were hanged at the gate of the castle.” ¶ The community prepared two documents and gave it to the families of those killed. One of them was in my father-in-law's possession. It certified that the old man (the name was specified) was not a murderer but had sacrificed his life to save the community, that prayers would forever be said for his soul in the synagogue in Ruzhany, and that his family would be given the name of Zakheim, which means “zerekh keidesh geim” – “his seed is sacred.” His family should last forever and ever, and if there is no male descendant, the daughter would give

that family name to her husband after marriage. My father-in-law read the document and gave me an inquiring look. ¶ – If he is not circumcised, I cannot give him this document, and he is the descendant of the family. ¶ I wanted very much to get that scroll, and I was sorry for the old man, who hoped I would not resist any longer. ¶ But I persisted. Offended, he went out of the room and took his treasure with him. My father-in-law died a long time ago. The scroll was lost during the war. The last Zakheim, my son's son, will soon be one year old. He is learning to walk. He is unable to keep his balance yet, and he sways on his plump legs. I look at him and think to myself: How many storms have swept over mankind since the 17th c., when the document for the Zakheim family was issued “forever and ever”... ¶ One Zakheim, head of the municipal executive committee, was torn apart during the White Guard rebellion in 1918. Four others were killed in the war. Several people died in the furnaces of Auschwitz. ¶ My husband was shot in the basement of the Lubyanka in 1936. ¶ Olga Adamova-Sliozberg, *Put'* (Rus.: Journey), 1993.

Modern times ¶ In the second half of the 19th century, a Jewish hospital was established in Ruzhany. In 1883, a charity called Linas ha-Tzedek (Shelter for the Righteous) was founded and a Talmud Torah school functioned, with about 300 students. It was in Ruzhany that one of Russia's first branches of the Zionist organisation Hovevei Zion (Heb.: Lovers of Zion) was established; in 1884, its representatives attended a convention of Palestinophiles (the name for proto-Zionist activists) in Katowice. In 1904, a self-defence organisation was organized here to prevent pogroms.

In 1905–1907, various political parties across the Russian political spectrum were active in the town. ¶ In the interwar period, the number of the town Jewish residents gradually decreased, with 3,718 Jews living here in 1921 and 3,500, in 1939. The Jewish community tried to maintain their Jewish education and culture; the town had a Tarbut secondary school with Hebrew as the main language of instruction, a Yiddish secondary school, a private elementary school, and an amateur theatre. The religious community also maintained a nursing home.

Yecheiel Michael Pines (1843, Ruzhany – 1913, Jaffa) – a religious and Zionist activist, writer, and teacher, proponent of religious Zionism (called Mizrahi movement, in modern-day Israel – a national religious camp). He advocated multiple Jewish reforms, particularly educational, but thought that the religious life of the Jews should be left intact. He taught at the yeshiva in Ruzhany inspiring religious students with the idea of a settlement in the land of Israel. In 1878, having arrived in Jerusalem as a representative of the London-based Montefiore Foundation, he studied the possibilities of enlarging Jewish presence in Palestine. He was one of the founders of the association Thiyat Israel (Heb.: The Rebirth of the Jewish People), the aim of which was to make Hebrew a colloquial language. He also served as a superintendent of charities run by the Ashkenazi Jewish population in Eretz Israel. Pines's works were published posthumously in three volumes in 1934–1939. The Israeli settlement (*moshav*) Kefar Pines was named in his honour.



A The renovated main gate and rebuilt guardhouses of the Sapieha Palace in Ruzhany, 2014. Photo by Siergiej Piwowarczyk, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

B Exhibition at the museum in the Sapieha palace complex in Ruzhany, 2014. Photo by Siergiej Piwowarczyk, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

Writers ¶ One of the descendants of the Jews from Ruzhany executed during the ritual murder trial was **Meir Kryński** (1863–1916), a teacher, and an author of textbooks both in Hebrew and in Yiddish. He founded the first illustrated periodical devoted to literature and art published in Yiddish, *Roman Tseitung* (Yid.: A Gazette of Stories, 1906–1907), and was a co-founder of the Folkist daily *Der Moment* (Yid.: The Moment), perhaps the most widely read Yiddish newspaper with circulation about 40,000 copies. He was buried at the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. Ruzhany was also the hometown of **Aharon Libuszycki** (1874–1942), a Hebrew poet and

translator, and the writer **Zelig Sher** (Shereshevsky) (1888–1971), the author of many books and memoirs in Yiddish. Sher studied at the yeshivot in Ruzhany and Slonim and learnt the weaving trade in Vilnius. He was an active member of the Socialist Zionist movement (Poalei Zion). After emigrating to the USA in 1909, he started to publish articles and short stories in American newspapers and magazines. During World War I, Sher served in the American army and fought on the French front, where he was wounded. When he returned, his short stories – both those about the war and others – began to appear in Jewish American periodicals: *Forverts*, *Der Tog*, and others, and the author himself became one of the editors of *Di Tseit*. **Melech Epstein** (1889–1979) had a similar history. He was a historian, a journalist writing for the *Forverts* (Yid.: Forward), *Der Tog* (Yid.: Day), and *Morgen Fraykhait* (Yid.: Morning Freedom), an activist involved in trade unions, socialist parties, and the Communist Party of the USA, which he left in August 1939, after the USSR and Nazi Germany signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Twenty years later, he described his experience with the Communist Party in the book titled *The Jew and Communism. The Story of Early Communist Victories and Ultimate Defeats in the Jewish Community, U.S.A., 1919–1941*.

Yitzhak Shamir (Jaziernicki) (1915–2012) – an Israeli politician, who served twice as Israeli Prime Minister. In 1935, he emigrated from Ruzhany to Palestine. Besides the prime ministership, he held a number of other senior political positions: in the Mossad (Israeli Intelligence Service), in the Herut (a political party

whose priority was to establish a Jewish state encompassing the entire historical territory of Israel), and in the Knesset.

World War II and the Holocaust

¶ After the outbreak of World War II, Ruzhany was initially captured by the Red Army. The Jewish population swelled due to the influx of several thousand refugees from the areas occupied by the Third Reich. The Soviets deported most of them to the distant regions of the Soviet Union such as Siberia and Kazakhstan, but some remained in Ruzhany. With the beginning of the Nazi occupation (in July 1941), a tribute payment and forced labour duty were imposed on the Ruzhany Jews; the Jews were forced to wear bands with the word “Jude” on their right arms. The Nazis established the ghetto that existed for a short time only. As early as November 2, 1941, Jews from the ghetto were transported to the Treblinka death camp. The entire urban center of Ruzhany, where the ghetto was located, was burnt down. ¶ In 1965, an obelisk was erected in Ruzhany to commemorate the victims of the Nazis; as it was routinely done in the USSR, the inscription on the memorial mentioned only the peaceful “Soviet citizens,” and purposefully neglected the fact that a majority of the victims were Jews.

Traces of Jewish presence ¶

Numerous houses built before the war by the Jewish inhabitants of the town remain till this date; one of them is the former pharmacy. The local history museum exhibition in the partly restored castle has a section devoted to the Jews of Ruzhany.



The synagogue complex ¶ At 6 Jakuba Kolasa Street in Ruzhany, the synagogue building has survived, established probably towards the end of the 19th century, to the design of Samuel Becker, the court architect of the Sapiehas. A two-storey brick building with a main prayer room, it was in use until 1940, when it was closed down by the Soviet authorities. The building is currently in a state of ruin, but a stone *bimah* has survived. Next to the synagogue stands the building of the former yeshivah, opened around the 1840s. In 1855–1888, the rabbi of Ruzhany was Mordechai Jaffe (1820–1891), one of the illustrious pioneers of the first *aliyah* in 1888.

The Jewish cemetery ¶ There is a Jewish cemetery with more than 200 surviving matzevot in Tchyrvonarmieiskaia Street. The oldest ones date back to the first half of 17th century, which means they are among the oldest preserved matzevot in Belarus.

Matzevot at the Jewish cemetery in Ruzhany, 2014. Photo by Siergiej Piwowarczyk, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

Worth seeing

Synagogue complex (18th–19th c.), the former synagogue and *yeshivah*, 6 J. Kolasa St. **¶** **Jewish cemetery** (17th c.). **¶** **Castle**, formerly the residence of the Sapieha family (16th c.), Pianierskaya St. **¶** **Holy Trinity Church** (1617), Tchyrvonoarmieiskaia St. **¶** **Orthodox Church of Sts. Peter and Paul** (1675), 2 17 Verasnia Sq. **¶** **Former Basilian monastery** (1788). **¶** **Church of St. Casimir** (1792). **¶** **Former inn** (2nd half of the 18th c.), Tchyrvonoarmieiskaia St.

Surrounding area

Lyskava (20 km): ruins of a synagogue (early 20th c.); a Jewish cemetery with about 150 matzevot; the Orthodox Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God (1933); the former missionary monastery (1763–1785); Franciszek Karpiński's grave; Holy Trinity Church. **¶** **Kosava-Paleskaie** (26 km): the Pusłowski Palace (1838); Orthodox Church of St. Anthony (18th c.); the Church of the Most Holy Trinity (1878); a Jewish cemetery; the manor house in Meračovshina in which Tadeusz Kościuszko was born. **¶** **Izabelin** (38 km): the former stone synagogue (18th c.); the rabbi's wooden house (early 20th c.); a Jewish cemetery; Church of Sts. Peter and Paul (1778); tombstones connected with the history of Lithuanian Calvinism); Orthodox Church of St. Michael (late 18th c.). **¶** **Ivatsevichy** (38 km): the manor house of the Gołuchowski and Jundźwiłł families (18th c.); a memorial at the grave of World War II victims; a plaque commemorating the designation of a triangulation point that was part of the Struve Geodetic Arc in 1830, established to mark and measure the meridian. **¶** **Porazava** (42 km): a brick synagogue, currently a warehouse; the old and new Jewish cemeteries; Church of St. Michael Archangel (1825–1828); Holy Trinity Orthodox Church (1872); the manor house in the Bogudzięki estate (19th/20th c.); a Catholic cemetery with a chapel (1894). **¶** **Vawkavysk** (49 km): a Jewish cemetery, a collection of documents and ephemera from the Vawkavysk ghetto at the Vawkavysk War and History Museum in the manor house called Bagration's House; Castle Hill (14th c.); St. Wenceslaus Church (1841); St. Nicholas Orthodox Church (1847); January insurgents' cemetery. **¶** **Bronnaya Gora** (50 km): a memorial at the site of the extermination of more than 50,000 people, mostly Jewish.

