

# Mir

Bel. Mip, Yid. מיר

*Here the people saunter along at a very slow pace. Life in Mir does not exactly have the hustle and bustle of New York City!*

Ruchoma Shain, *All for the Boss*,  
Jerusalem 1984

**Beginnings** ¶ The first mention of Mir dates back to 1395, when the town was burnt by the crusading Teutonic Knights on their Christianization mission through the towns of Lida and Navahrudak. In 1486, Mir became the property of the Illinicz family and then in 1569, of the Radziwiłłs. In 1579, Mikołaj Krzysztof Radziwiłł gave the local dwellers the privilege allowing for producing and selling mead, beer, and vodka. The multi-cultural character of the town at that time was reflected in various religious buildings that

surrounded the marketplace: a wooden mosque (not preserved), the synagogue complex, the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, and St. Nicholas' Catholic Church. ¶ Mir became famous thanks to its castle and a park complex – a 16<sup>th</sup>-century architectural monument. Built in the Gothic and Renaissance styles, the castle belonged to the families of Illinicz (1568), Radziwiłł (until 1828), Wittgenstein (until 1891) and Świętopełk-Mirski (until 1939). In 2000, Mir Castle was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

**In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Mir was known as the “Gypsy capital”: it was home to Jan Marcinkiewicz, a Gypsy king of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, to whom Karol Radziwiłł (nicknamed “My Dear Sir”, Pol. *Panie Kochanku*) in 1787, granted the privilege of the chief judge over all the Gypsies residing in the area.**

” There are five main streets. [...] The entire town is no larger than an area of five or six city blocks on the East Side of New York, with a population of five hundred Jewish families [...]. The river is used by the people to swim in during the warm weather. Clothes are also washed at the river bank in the spring and summer months. [...] The electricity is controlled by the town electrician, who switches on the lights before nightfall and off at midnight. I had noticed that on most evenings our light bulb goes off and then on again at around the same time. To my surprise, I learned that the electrician uses this as a signal to alert his wife that he will be coming home shortly for his evening meal! ¶  
Ruchoma Shain, *All for the Boss*, 1984.



Yeshiva students, Mir, photo published on 23 January 1925, collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

**The Jews of Mir** ¶ The Jewish community of Mir was established at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and grew rapidly, soon receiving its own jurisdiction (earlier the Jews of Mir had been under the jurisdiction of the Nesvizh *kahal*) as well as membership in the Lithuanian Vaad. Mir Jewish community hosted several Vaad conventions: in 1697, 1702, and in 1751. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the town was a major trade centre, developing thanks to Jewish merchants and their fur trade with Leipzig and with the Baltic ports such as Königsberg and Memel. Mir was also the site of many annual fairs and weekly markets; its St. Nicholas Fairs, for example, held twice a year (on 9 May and 6 December) and lasting 2–3 weeks each, were famous for horse trade. ¶ Local stores in Mir enjoyed high sales: in 1822, 18 stores had a turnover of 100 to 900 roubles (approx. 323 roubles per store, which was a price of a very fancy house or a drive-in tavern in a shtetl). As a Polish romantic poet Władysław Syrokomla noted, the stores were full of high-quality cotton and silk

products. These fancy goods available in Mir for sale gave rise to a saying, “she has already gone to Mir,” referring to a woman who was getting ready for marriage: it meant that she was preparing her dowry and purchasing fancy commodities. ¶ The Jews of Mir enjoyed a reputation as outstanding craftsmen who – according to Ruchoma Shain – “[...] could turn an old thing into a new one so well that even in Paris nobody dreamt about it.” ¶ In 1806, the Jewish population of Mir numbered 807 (including 30 merchants and 106 tailors); in 1833, it stood at 1,583 (75.5 percent of the town’s population), in 1847 – at 2,273, and in 1897 – at 3,319 (about 62 percent of the town’s population). Most Jews worked as craftsmen and tradesmen; some of them were wealthy merchants with extensive trade contacts, as can be seen in the 1832 records of the Leipzig fair, which listed several residents of Mir. The Jews of Mir were also involved in industry. In 1839, a cloth factory that belonged to guild merchant Mejer Czarny produced 3,200 pieces of cloth worth 2,400 roubles.



**A** Mir Castle, 1930s, collection of the National Library, Poland ([www.palona.pl](http://www.palona.pl))

**B** The yeshiva in Mir, circa 1920, collection of Mir Castle Complex Archives

ful, although this was one of many petitions of the Russian Jewish guild merchants who purveyed the Russian army with fodder and victuals during the campaign against Napoleon's invasion and served as spies in the Russian army interests.

According to the data collected in 1834 by the provincial administration, Mir – with its 2,198 Jewish residents – had the following Jewish institutions and officials: five *shuls*; eight temporary *shuls*, eight elementary schools for Jewish children; as well as eight cantors, five trumpet players, two town rabbis, two other rabbinic scholars with ordination but without a communal rank, one lawyer, five judges, five experts in Torah recitation, three kosher butchers, and six *mohalim* (specialists in circumcision). The 1853 data on synagogues and Jewish prayer houses included the following information: “[...] in the town of Mir there is one synagogue and five prayer houses. The synagogue is wooden and

Additionally, Mejer Czarny leased Prince Wittgenstein's cloth factory.

In 1814, in his petition to the Governor of Grodno, merchant Boruch Czarny requested a reward for his services: “In July 1812, when foreign troops invaded our borders, I served under Count Platov, taking part in various expeditions to find out the enemy's location and other information. This task I carried out, risking my own life. In return, Count Platov promised to present me to His Imperial Majesty for a decoration. But due to the rapid retreat of our troops, I was left without a written confirmation of whether or not Count Platov fulfilled his promise. The enemy seized all my property and house in Mir, where I live, and even threatened to kill me.” It is not known if the petition was success-

“cold”, and next to it there is a “warm” house of study – beth midrash. There are four small brick prayer houses, all of which have been in existence for about 200 years, but there is no information or documents about when and by whom they were founded. The number of the observant Jews is 1,520.” The synagogue complex was located in the town centre close to the marketplace, on a plot that belonged to the Jewish community. This place was called a school court or *szkolisko* (Rus.: *школице*); the latter name is still remembered by the oldest inhabitants of Mir. ¶ In 1886, the town had eight *shuls*, including two Hasidic ones. All of them were destroyed in a fire on August 9, 1892.

## Philosopher ¶ Solomon (Shlomo)

**Maimon** (Heiman ben Yehoshua, 1753–1800), the famous radical rationalist philosopher and educator and one of the most insightful commentators and critics of Immanuel Kant, was born in the village of Suchowbyborg near Mir. He attended a *cheder* in Mir and then studied at the yeshiva in the town of Iyvanets. Already at the age of 11 he was considered an *yilui* (a genius) in the rabbinic sources, memorized several tractates of the Talmud, and was a sought after groom. He had his and his bride's parents arranging his marriage, and three years later he became a father. Maimon supported his family by giving private lessons in the nearby towns. In his spare time, he studied Jewish philosophy, European languages, drawing, natural sciences, and Kabbalah. Around the early 1770s, his spiritual quest brought him to Maggid of Mezherich, then the head of the first Hasidic court and study group; his account of his visit became one of the earliest outside sources on the growing Hasidic movement, which Maimon described accurately yet critically. The next direction of his quest was Berlin. Maimon travelled to Prussia, leaving behind his wife and family. In 1786, after

a long journey, unsuccessful attempts to settle in Berlin, and an attempt to get baptised, he returned to Berlin, where he dedicated himself to the study of Kant philosophy, to which he dedicated his first book *Transcendental Philosophy* (1790). Kant saw and highly assessed Maimon's work, emphasizing that none of his critics understood his philosophy as profoundly as Maimon did. Kant's remark influenced the Maimon's life – he started publishing philosophical books and articles as well as works on mathematical physics and algebra, which were appreciated by Goethe, Schiller, Humboldt, and other outstanding European thinkers and scientists. In scholarly literature, Maimon is referred to as a German, Polish, or Jewish philosopher, although he spent most of his life in Belorussia. It is in Belorussia where his worldview was formed, where he discovered books with Latin script, where he read his first scientific books by Enlightened thinkers, Jewish and Gentile, and where he began his literary and scientific work. Published in Berlin in 1793, Maimon's autobiography (*Lebensgeschichte*) constitutes an important source of information about the history of Belarusian Jews, the Haskalah, and early Hasidism.

“From childhood I had a great inclination and talent for drawing. True, I had in my father's house never a chance of seeing a work of art, but I found on the title page of some Hebrew books woodcuts of foliage, birds, and so forth. I felt great pleasure in these woodcuts, and made an effort to imitate them with a bit of chalk and charcoal. However, what strengthened this inclination in me still more was a Hebrew book of fables [...]. My father indeed admired my skill in this, but rebuked me at the same time in these words, “You want to become a painter? You are to study the Talmud, and become a rabbi. Who understands the Talmud, understands everything.” ¶ Solomon Maimon, *Autobiography*

The shtetl of Mir was home to many well-known Jewish scholars, politicians,

and statesmen as well as social, cultural, and religious activists. These included:



**A** Exhibition at the castle in Mir devoted to the ghetto, 2014. Photo by Paweł Sario, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre ([www.teatrnn.pl](http://www.teatrnn.pl))

**B** Former Jewish houses in 17-ha Vier-asmaia St. in Mir, 2014. Photo by Paweł Sario, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre ([www.teatrnn.pl](http://www.teatrnn.pl))

**Yeshivah** ¶ The year 1815 saw the opening of one of the most famous Jewish institutions of higher learning, the Mir *yeshivah*, today one of the most famous Talmudic academies. Founded by Rabbi Shmuel Tiktiń (or Tiktinski), it enjoyed an exceptionally high reputation from its earliest days, and in terms of the number of students it was second only to the Volozhyn yeshiva. It earned itself the name of “The Yeshivah of Roshei [Heads of] Yeshivahs,” since most future teachers and leaders of the Lithuanian Talmudic academies studied there. At the head of the Mir yeshiva were eminent figures such as: Yeruham Leibovitz (1874–1936), Chaim Leib Tiktiński (1824–1899), and Eliezer Yehuda Finkel (1879–1965). This educational establishment brought together important Jewish religious authorities, and in its heyday it accommodated about 500

Zalman Shazar (1889–1947) – a scholar, writer and journalist, an active Zionist, the third president of Israel; Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1817–1893) – one of the leading rabbis of his generation, head of the world-famous *yeshivah* in Volozhyn; and Heinrich Sliozberg (1863–1937) – an outstanding Russian-Jewish lawyer and social activist.

“ Five hundred young Jewish boys bent over books were silently repeating the words of the Torah. Their combined whisper sounded like a tide, like a fresh gust of wind filling the sail. ¶ Ruchoma Shain, *All for the Boss*, 1984.

students from around the world: Great Britain, Holland, France, Germany, Sweden, America, Canada, South Africa, and other countries. ¶ Following the generally accepted tradition, yeshiva students ate their meals in the houses of the town’s well-to-do residents, engaging their hosts in academic discussions, which often ended in a successful marriage between a talented student and a rich man’s daughter. The students were important for the town economy because the town residents earned their living by providing various services to them (renting rooms, doing laundry, etc). Students were also the main customers of small stores and craft shops. ¶ Mir is remembered by students as “[...] a town consisting of five streets, where you meet friends wherever you go [...]” The American Ruchoma Shain, the American-born wife of a Mir yeshiva student, wrote in her memoirs: “[...] I am impressed with the custom of wives supporting their families to permit their husbands to devote all their time to

Torah study. In addition, they brought up children and ran the house. Is it any wonder that they knew everything and could do everything in the world?” ¶ The Mir yeshiva was the second only to Volozhyn yeshiva, which was established

in 1803 and created a blueprint for all other yeshivahs in Lithuania, including that of Mir. After the Volozhyn yeshiva was forcefully shut down, the Mir yeshiva took its place and kept its position until World War II.

After Mir was incorporated into the USSR in 1939, the yeshiva was relocated to Vilnius. Its students managed to escape the Holocaust, fleeing to Shanghai with visas issued by Chiune Sugihara, Consul for the Empire of Japan in Kovno (Kaunas). Sugihara was later awarded the title of a “Righteous Gentile” for rescuing Jews. After World War II, branches of the Mir yeshivot were founded in New York and Jerusalem. At present, the Jerusalem-based Mir Yeshivah boasts over 8,500 students, it is the largest yeshiva in the world.

### **World War II and the Holocaust**

¶ In September 1939, Mir was annexed to the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. When the Nazis captured the town on June 27, 1941, about 1,500 Jews were executed immediately while others were confined in a ghetto, which

was later moved to the Mir Castle. On August 9, 1942, members of the Jewish underground organised an escape from the ghetto after Oswald Rufeisen, a town police interpreter, warned the Jews about the Nazi plans to liquidate it. Those who remained were killed on August 13, 1942.

**THE STORY OF OSWALD RUFEBISEN** ¶ The story of **Aaron Shmuel** (Oswald Rufeisen; b. 1922, Żywiec – d. 1998, Haifa), a Jew who became a Catholic priest and Carmelite monk is dramatic. Together with several Mir ghetto prisoners, he fled the ghetto the day before the mass shooting in June 1941. Once outside, Rufeisen passed himself off as a *Volksdeutscher*. In December 1941, Serafinowicz, the head of Mir police, offered him the position of an interpreter. In June 1942, Rufeisen warned the ghetto prisoners of the planned *Aktion*; he helped them to get weapons and organise an escape. However, not all Jews in the ghetto trusted him, and he was given away. He was arrested, but miraculously managed to escape and returned to Mir. For ten months he lived hidden by four nuns, and it was then that he converted into Catholicism. After the war, he moved to Israel, where he was ordained as a Catholic priest. As a priest, he settled in the Discalced Carmelites’ monastery on Mount Carmel and worked as a tour guide. ¶ He became a protagonist for *Daniel Stein, Interpreter*, a popular Russian novel by Ludmila Ulitskaya. The author borrowed the main facts of Rufeisen’s biography from the book *In the Lion’s Den. The Life of Oswald Rufeisen*, by the American author Nechama Tec.

**Cemeteries** ¶ There are four cemeteries in the town, reflecting the religious

beliefs of its inhabitants (Orthodox, Catholic, Tatar, and Jewish). The Jewish



**A** New yeshiva building in Mir, 2014. Photo by Paweł Sańko, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre ([www.teatrnn.pl](http://www.teatrnn.pl))

**B** The shulhoif (synagogue complex) in Mir, with the main synagogue and the merchants’ synagogue, 2014. Photo by Paweł Sańko, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre ([www.teatrnn.pl](http://www.teatrnn.pl))

cemetery is located in the northeastern part of the town, at Pionierskaia St. The cemetery is fenced, with an entrance through an open gate. During the Nazi occupation, many of its gravestones were stolen and used for construction purposes. Several hundred gravestones have survived to this day. A narrow path to the left of the entrance leads to the grave of Yeruham ha-Levi Leibovitz, son of Abram, known as Mashgiah (here – spiritual supervisor, d. 1936). He was a lecturer at the Mir yeshiva and the author of religious books including *Sefer*

*da'at, hokhmah u-mussar* (The Book of Knowledge, Wisdom, and Ethics) and *Sefer da'at torah* (The Book of Torah Knowledge). His recently reconstructed grave draws Jewish pilgrims from around the world.

**Traces of Jewish presence** ¶ The only synagogue complex that has been preserved in Belarus is located at Kirava St. in Mir. It consists of a synagogue, a *beth midrash*, a *kahal* building, and a *yeshivah*. Other surviving buildings connected with the Jewish community include: a *cheder*, a *mikveh*, a pharmacy, and a Jewish bank. Many items connected with Mir history and culture can be found in the museum “Mirskij Posad” privately run by Victor Sakel. The museum is located near the synagogue complex in a former inn. One of its rooms is entirely devoted to the history of Mir Jews (it has a collection of Jewish religious items, books and magazines in Yiddish, musical instruments, and everyday objects). ¶ The Mir Castle hosts a branch of the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus. It includes 39 permanent exhibitions, one of which is devoted to the life of the Jewish community of Mir, especially the Holocaust period. The tragic events of the Holocaust are commemorated with obelisks at the mass graves of ghetto prisoners.

Worth seeing

Former great synagogue complex (19<sup>th</sup> c.), Kirava St. ¶ Victor Sakel’s “Mirskiy Posad” Museum, located in a former inn, 2 Kirava St. ¶ Former synagogue (19<sup>th</sup> c.), 1-ha Maya Ave. ¶ Jewish cemetery, Savetskaia St. ¶ Catholic cemetery, Leninhadskaia St. ¶ Orthodox cemetery. ¶ Tatar cemetery. ¶ Castle (16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> c.) with a museum, in which one of the exhibitions is dedicated to the life and death of the Jewish community of Mir, 2 Chyrvonno-armiejskaya St. ¶ Church of St. Nicholas (end of the 16<sup>th</sup> c.–early 17<sup>th</sup> c.) 1-ha Maya St. ¶ Holy Trinity Orthodox Church (16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> c.), 17-ha Vierasnia St.

**Turets** (14 km): the Orthodox Church of the Protection of the Mother of God (1888); a Jewish cemetery with a few matzevot and a monument. **Stowbtsy** (21 km): a former synagogue, currently a factory (19<sup>th</sup> c.); a *mikveh*; Church of St. Anne (1825); the remains of two clerical colonies (circa 1925); the Mickiewicz family manor house in Okinchitsy – the birthplace of Jakub Kolas, one of the founders of Belorussian literature; a Jewish cemetery with about 200 matzevot; a memorial to the victims of World War II. **Novy Sverzhen** (23 km): synagogue ruins; the Church of Sts. Peter and Paul; the Orthodox Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary; a watermill; a cemetery of Polish soldiers from 1919–1920; a Jewish cemetery. **Ishkaldz'** (23 km): Holy Trinity Church – the oldest church in Belarus (circa 1472); **Nesvizh** (31 km): Radziwiłł Castle, currently a museum; Corpus Christi Church with the tombs of the Radziwiłł family (1587–1593); a Jesuit college (1586); Slutsk Gate (1690); a town hall with market halls (1752); a manor-style clerical colony (1925); a Benedictine convent and Church of St. Euphemia (1590–1596); a Bernardine monastery; the wooden yeshiva building; a grave of Holocaust victims at the municipal cemetery. **Kletsk** (50 km): a Dominican monastery (1693); the former Dominican Church of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, currently the Resurrection of Christ Orthodox Church (1683); a watch tower of the Border Protection Corps (1924–1925); a former *yeshivah* (19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> c.); a Jewish cemetery. **Dzyarzhynsk / Koidanov** (59 km): a site of mass executions during World War II; a former yeshiva (1892); the Orthodox Church of the Protection of Our Lady; Church of St. Anne. **Uzda** (64 km): a former synagogue (19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> c.); a former mikveh (19<sup>th</sup> c.); the former Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross; the burial chapel of the Zawisza family; a Tatar cemetery (*mizar*); the Orthodox Church of Sts. Peter and Paul. **Kapyl** (65 km): the birthplace of the classic Yiddish author Mendele Mocher Sforim (Sholem Yakov Abramovich, 1836–1917). *Judaica* collection at the Local History Museum, a former synagogue; Jewish cemetery with about 100 matzevot; buildings around the market place (19<sup>th</sup> c.); the Orthodox Church of the Ascension; a Tatar cemetery.

