

Valozhyn

Pol. Wołożyn, Bel. Вало́жын,

Yid. וואָלזשין

People come here to study to become rabbis, not only from different parts of Russia and Europe, but also from all over the world – from America, or even from Japan. [...] and the Jews here [...] do not chatter like magpies, in a foreign language; no, they firmly cling to their faith, customs, and tongue...

Yadvihin Sh. (Anton Lyavitski), 1910

Włoszyn ¶ The first written reference to Valozhyn (more often referred to in Jewish sources as Volozhin) can be found in German chronicles from the late 14th century, where it features as “Flosschein” or “Włoszyn” (Vloshin) – a name used by the Teutonic Knights. In 1407, Valozhyn became the property of the Palatine of Vilnius, Albertas Manvydas (Wojciech Monwid), who obtained it in his possession from Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania. The town belonged subsequently to the families of Manvydas, Wieriejski, Gasztold, Słuszka, Radziwiłł, Czartoryski, and Tyszkiewicz. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, Valozhyn was located in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – first as part of the Vilnius Voivodeship, then in the Navahrudak (Nowogródek) Voivodeship, and then again in the Vilnius Voivodeship.

¶ In the second half of the 16th century and at the beginning of the 17th century, the town enjoyed a privilege for a weekly “bazaar day.” In the early 17th century, the town consisted of a market and three streets, and by the beginning of the 18th century, it had as many as five streets (Wileńska, Smorgonska, Mińska, Krzywa, Tylna), two Catholic churches,

and two Orthodox ones. The number of households grew from 83 in 1690 to 107 in the early 18th century and 186 in 1790. ¶ In 1793, Valozhyn was incorporated into the Russian Empire as part of the County of Ashmyany (Oszmiana) in Vilnius Province, and in 1803, it was purchased by Count Józef Tyszkiewicz. In the years 1803–1806, Tyszkiewicz founded a palace and park complex that included a large orangery (designed by A. Kossakowski) in the town centre, as well as the Church of St. Joseph. At that time, the town had a population of 2,446 residents. ¶ In the 1880s, according to the contemporary description, Valozhyn had “three Orthodox churches, a temporary magistrate’s office, a police station, the estate administration building, a folk school, a post office, a pharmacy, a mill, a synagogue, two prayer houses, stores, and taverns. The peasants work in farming, while Jews work in trade. Five fairs are held during the year, their turnover reaching 4,000 roubles, and markets take place every Sunday.”

The Jews of Valozhyn ¶ Most likely the first Jews settled in Valozhyn in the 16th century. According to the

1766 census, the local *kahal* numbered 383 members. In the second half of the 19th century, about 2,000 Jews accounted for more than 70 percent of the town's population. At the end of the 19th century, the town had 523 houses (including two brick ones), and the population of 2,446 (406 Orthodox Christians, 140 Catholics, and 1,900 Jews). The Jews of Valozhyn enjoyed their most prosperity in 1803–1840, when the town was administered by Józef Tyszkiewicz. In a document of 1809, he granted them special economic privileges and established the amount of tax they were to pay. The following provisions were also favourable for them: "All Jewish-owned land, as well as houses, malt houses, distilleries, shops, or any kind of building located on this land, both existing and planned in the future, should be considered the property of Jews and of their heirs, on which they are required to pay an annual tax; the synagogue, school, hospital, bathhouse, and cemetery are exempt from this tax." In 1900, the Vilnius (at that time, Vilna) Province Governor requested the approval of the elected Jewish members of the municipal Land council because, as he wrote, "the Valozhyn community consists exclusively of Jews, and there are no Christian townspeople here at all." ¶ The synagogue played a significant role in the life of the Jewish community. Not only was it a house of prayer and learning, but it also served as the communal meeting place, its spiritual and social centre. The 1868 census listed three prayer houses in Valozhyn, one brick and two wooden ones. According to 1897 correspondence, the Jews of Valozhyn had one synagogue



90-year-old shochet Yehuda Avram worked as a ritual slaughterer and food controller for 70 years, Valozhyn, photo published on 16 March 1924 in *Jewish Daily Forward*, collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

and four *batei midrash* (prayer and study houses).

The mother of all yeshivot ¶ The spiritual life of the town flourished in particular due to the yeshiva founded in 1803 by **Chaim ben Isaac** of Valozhyn, disciple of the illustrious Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, the Vilna Gaon. The Valozhyn yeshiva (usually referred to as the Volozhin yeshiva) and also known as Etz Chaim (Heb.: Tree of Life) – became the blueprint for large Talmudic academies across Eastern Europe as well as in Israel, North America, and other countries. Known as *Em a-yeshivot* (Heb.: The mother of all yeshivot), it greatly influenced the religious and spiritual life of the so-called *Litvaks* (Lithuanian or non-Hasidic Jews), who became the backbone of modern Jewish Orthodoxy. The yeshiva building was completed in 1806 (and, according to some sources, rebuilt after a fire in 1865). It attracted students from different countries, including the United Kingdom, Germany, the Habsburg Empire, and the United States. In



A panorama of Valozhyn, 2014. Photo by Paweł Sariko, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

the late 1880s, the number of students exceeded 400. In the mid-19th century, despite the reservations of the yeshiva spiritual management, a new Musar (Ethics) movement began to penetrate the groups of students at the Volozhin yeshiva. The institution was also increasingly influenced by the ideas of the Haskalah, while in the 1880s many of its students were attracted to various proto-Zionist groups and even founded a Nes Tsiona student group of Palestino-philosophes, supporting the settlement of Jews in the land of Israel and raising funds for the purpose. ¶ The Volozhin yeshiva distinguished itself from other institutions of that kind both in terms of its organisation and its teaching methodology. It relied not only on funding collected in Valozhyn, but also on financial support from distant Jewish communities, including those in Siberia, Central Europe and the USA. As the result, it was free from any local influences and pressures and had the local community depending on the operation of the yeshiva, not vice versa. The learning

process took place 24 hours a day, which reflected the view of the yeshiva founder that the existence of the world was directly linked to a non-stop study of the Torah. Entrance examination, and self-education was required from all the students. Additionally, every student received a small scholarship sufficient to meet his modest needs which students used to pay to the Valozhyn dwellers for residence and services. ¶ The Valozhin yeshiva was shut down in 1893 by the tsarist educational authorities who required that the secular subjects be included into its curriculum. It was soon reopened but never achieved the reknown it enjoyed from 1803 to 1893. The yeshiva continued to function until World War I – it was only after the front line came close to Valozhyn the classes were discontinued and the yeshiva was moved to Minsk. It resumed its activity in 1921, though with a reduced number of students, and operated until World War II, when its last 64 students were executed by the Nazis. ¶ One of the graduates of the Valozhyn yeshiva was

the great Hebrew poet **Haim Nachman Bialik** (1873–1934), who humorously depicted the atmosphere of the yeshiva

in his poem *Ha-matmid* (Heb.: A non-stop Torah learner):

[...] / *Within those walls, not one day, but six years, / Have watched his toil – his childhood ripened there / Too soon, his youth matured there ere its time, / His eyes were darkened and his face grew white. / [...] / Some go to spend the Solemn Days at home, / Some spread to neighbouring villages and there, / Delivered from the dread Superior's eye, / Disport themselves beneath the kindly roof, / Where pride and pity wait such learned guests. / And some have been expelled and leave in haste / And sadly to their fathers these return. / But one remains, stuck faster than a nail! //* Translated from Hebrew by Helena Frank, <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/talmud-student>

TORAH SCHOLARS ¶ **Haim ben Isaac of Volozhin** (1749–1821) – a rabbi and teacher, a disciple of Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman (known as the Vilna Gaon), and the founder of the yeshiva, was born and died in Valozhyn. His major work *Nefesh ha-hayim* (Heb.: Soul of Life) was published posthumously in 1824. ¶ **Haim Soloveitchik** (1853–1918) – an outstanding Talmudic scholar, the head of the yeshiva at the turn of the 20th century, one of the founders of the famous Soloveitchik dynasty of Talmudic scholars. During his life, Soloveitchik did not publish any works, but his teachings were spread in Lithuanian yeshivot by his students. He published very few of his rabbinic novellae – only those that he considered absolutely proven. The method of Halakhah (legal aspects of Judaism) study proposed by Soloveitchik is still used in Lithuanian-type yeshivot.

”” *Of medium height, well dressed, with a typical belly, a gold chain, a tiny French beard, and parted hair. All this made Orié Poliák look just as a rich man should look like. Everyone treated him with respect and was the first to wish him a good day. After his wife died, he lived alone in a big house on Wileńska St, opposite the pond. The house had many rooms and a spacious guest room with paintings on the walls and upholstered furniture. The children, however, were more interested in his collection of butterflies and insects. Every box had both a Latin name and a common name written on it. When thinking of wealth in Valozhyn, one simply said: “If I were Orié Poliák” ¶ The first and most important barber in Valozhyn was Moshko der Sherer (Yid. scissors). His clients were the wealthy and prominent people of the town, officials of the Count, officers, etc. [...] The other barber – Alterke – did not have a hair salon. In one room there was a chair, a mirror on the wall, and a desk with hairdressing tools. His clients were poor and less important people, artisans, labourers, and youth. Here they all felt at home, [...] especially when Alterke left his client in the middle of the haircut or shave, and went to another room to calm a crying baby. And there were many crying babies, every year a new one was born. Alterke had a goat, which he left to graze on the empty square between his house and the beth midrash. The boys dragged the bearded animal to the beth midrash door, opened it, and let the goat saunter between praying Jews wrapped in a tales (prayer shawl). They watched the resulting confusion for*



[A] A matzeva at the Jewish cemetery in Valozhyn, 2014. Photo by Paweł Sańko, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

[B] The yeshiva in Valozhyn, also known as Etz Chaim, founded in 1803 by Rabbi Chaim of Valozhyn, 2014. Photo by Paweł Sańko, digital collection of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

Philanthropist ¶ Israel Rogosin

(1887–1971) was born in Valozhyn into an Orthodox family. In 1890, at the request of Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (then head of the Valozhin yeshiva), Israel’s father Samuel Eliezer traveled to the USA to raise funds for the yeshiva. A year later, he was joined by his wife Hana and their four children. In 1895, Samuel Rogosin set up a textile mill in Brooklyn, which became a profitable undertaking. In 1903, he decided to found a yeshiva modelled on the one in Valozhyn and left the mill management to his 16-year-old son Israel, who turned out to be an extremely talented entrepreneur. In 1912, the mill employed 200 workers; eight years later their number grew to 1,000, working in five mills. In April 1956, Rogosin founded Rogosin Industries Ltd., a viscose fibre plant. In

some time and then closed the door and ran away happily. ¶ Osher Malkin’s memories in: *Volozhin. Sefer shel ha-ir-shel yeshivat Etz Haim* (Heb.: *Valozhyn. The Book of the Town and Etz Chaim Yeshivah*), Tel Aviv 1970, retrieved from www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor

1958, the production was transferred to the newly established town of Ashdod in Israel, at the request of the Israeli Minister of Trade and Industry, Pinchas Sapir. Israel Rogosin became a genuine philanthropist: he donated \$1 million for the establishment of the Centre for Jewish Ethics in New York and \$2.5 million for the construction of ten schools throughout Israel, three of them in Ashdod. He founded a medical treatment and research institute for the study of kidney diseases – the Rogosin Institute in New York.

Sculptor ¶ Max Kalish (1893–1945) was born in Valozhyn into an Orthodox Jewish family that later emigrated to the United States. He graduated from the Cleveland School of Art and went to study in New York and Paris. He became famous for his sculptures of American workers. He also worked on decorations for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (San Francisco, 1915). During World War I, Kalish served in the medical corps, where he helped to design prostheses for wounded soldiers. In 1944, he created 48 figures of social workers entitled *The Living Hall of Washington* for the Smithsonian Museum in Washington.

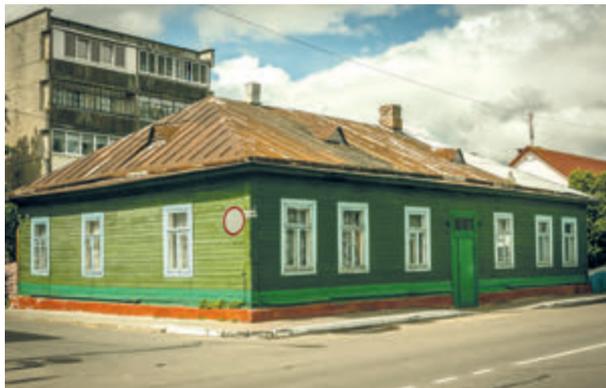
World War II and the Holocaust

¶ In September 1939, Valozhyn was

seized by the Red Army, and on June 26, 1941 it was occupied by the Nazi Germans. Soon after taking over the town, the Germans established a ghetto and set in motion their plan of exterminating the Jews. Local Jews organized an underground resistance group. According to the documents in the National Historical Archive of Belarus, six *Aktions* were organised in Valozhyn between 1941 and 1944, in which approx. 3,500 people were executed. The bloodiest events took place in June and July 1942, when about 2,000 Jews were shot at the Jewish cemetery. Soviet army troops captured Valozhyn on July 5, 1944. ¶ **A monument to ghetto prisoners** is located near the town, at the foot of Wysoka Góra (High Hill), where about 1,000 people were executed in September 1942. Another **monument at the mass grave of Jews** (100–220 elderly, women, and children) murdered in October and November 1942 can be found at a municipal stadium. In the spring of 2015, a park was planted around it.

Traces of Jewish presence ¶

A fenced **Jewish cemetery** with several hundred surviving gravestones is located on a hill north of the yeshiva building, at the intersection of Kirova and Kupala Streets. In the 1990s, with funding from foreign Jewish organisations, the cemetery area was cleared up and gravestones were restored. Here are buried the Volozhin yeshiva founder Haim



A former Jewish house in Valozhyn from the early 20th c., at 13 Savetskaya St., 2014. Photo by Paweł Sańko, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrn.pl)

ben Isaac and other rabbis associated with the town; there are also the mass graves of Holocaust victims and a plaque commemorating the Jews of Valozhyn murdered during World War II. The last burial at the cemetery took place in 1957. The cemetery is taken care of by the town's last remaining Jewish inhabitants. ¶ After World War II, the yeshiva building was converted into a grocery store. In 1998, when former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres (born in the nearby town of Vishnieva) visited Valozhyn, it was agreed that the building would be reconstructed to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the yeshiva establishment. Today, the building of the yeshiva is under the auspices of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities of the Republic of Belarus and a memorial plaque has been placed on it. In 2010, a commemorative 10-ruble silver coin dedicated the Volozhin yeshiva was released by the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus.

Vishnyieva (23 km): the birthplace of Shimon Peres; the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1442); the Orthodox Church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian (1865); the manor house of the Chreptowicz family; a Jewish cemetery; a mass grave of Holocaust victims in the village of Helenowo. ¶ **Haradok** (30 km): a former synagogue (1875); a former Jewish water mill (19th c.); ruins of a *yeshiva* (early 20th c.); a Jewish cemetery with about 100 matzevot,

Surrounding area

a memorial to Holocaust victims; Holy Trinity Church (1884); a hill fort (11th–12th c.); the Literature Museum. ¶ **Ivyanets** (32 km): a former synagogue (1912); the rabbi's house, now a music school (19th c.); a Jewish cemetery; Church of St. Michael the Archangel, called the “white” church (1702–1705); a Franciscan monastery; Church of St. Alexis, called the “red” church (1905–1907); a Catholic cemetery (19th c.); remnants of manor farm buildings; the House-Museum of Apollinaris Pupko. ¶ **Maladzyechna** (37 km): a former synagogue (early 20th c.); military buildings: an officers’ casino, an NCOs’ manor house, commander’s office, and barracks (1922–1939); a Trinitarian monastery (18th c.); a railway station; an Orthodox church (19th c.); a memorial complex – Stalag 342 on Zamkowa St.; a castle with remains of ramparts of a bastion castle (16th–17th c.). ¶ **Rakaw** (40 km): wooden buildings of the former Jewish street; a Jewish cemetery (17th c.); a memorial to fire victims at the site of a burnt synagogue; Transfiguration Orthodox Church (1730–1793); the Cemetery Church of St. Anne (1830); the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary (1906); the Museum–Art Gallery “Yanushkevichy”; a hill fort near the church. ¶ **Radashkovichy** (56 km) a former yeshiva, currently a store (19th c.); Church of St. Elijah; Holy Trinity Church; a Jewish cemetery on a hill; a World War I cemetery of Polish soldiers. ¶ **Zaslavye** (58 km): a historical and archaeological museum; Transfiguration Church (1577); ruins of Jan Hlebowicz’ bastion castle; an old Christian cemetery; a Jewish cemetery.

Worth seeing

Former yeshiva (1806), 2 Kirova St. ¶ **Jewish cemetery**, Kirova St. ¶ **Valozhyn Regional Museum of Local History** 9 M. Gorkogo St.; tel. +375177255865. ¶ **Tyszkiewicz palace and park complex** (1782–1806), Belarusskaia St. ¶ **Church of St. Joseph** (1816), Svabody Sq. ¶ **Orthodox Church of Sts. Constantine and Helena** (1886), Savetskaia St. ¶ **Municipal palace** in the former Market Square, the southern part of Svabody Sq.

