

Navahrudak

Pol. Nowogródek, Bel. Навагрудак,

Yid. נאווֹאָרעֶדאָק

*The new inn not distinctive in style or in line;
While the other was built to an older design,
Tyrian carpenters' pattern, it is now well known,
Which the Jews had adopted and took for their own:
A style of architecture they through the world carried,
Abroad quite unknown; we from the Jews it inherit.*

Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*
(trans. Marcel Weyland)

The cradle of Belarusian statehood ¶

The earliest settlement at the site of present-day Navahrudak was set up in about the 10th century, and the first written mentions of it dates back to 1044. External threats from Crusaders, Mongols, and Tatars prompted the union of the Principality of Navahrudak with neighbouring Lithuania into one state, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which gave the town the honorary title of one of the residences of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania. A visible sign of its status was the castle with seven towers, once believed to be the strongest fortification in Belorussia, the construction of which lasted from the 13th century until the early 16th century. All that remains of its former glory are the ruins of three towers, ramparts, and a deep moat. ¶ In the 14th century, Navahrudak was also the seat of the Orthodox metropolis of Lithuania, and from 1581 to 1775, the Supreme Tribunal of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania convened here.

The Jews of Navahrudak ¶

Towards the end of the 14th century and in the early 15th century, Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania settled Tatars in

Navahrudak and the surrounding area. In the 16th century, the Jewish community became an integral part of the town and an active participant in its social, economic, and spiritual life. First mentions of the Jewish community date back to 1529. ¶ The 1560s inventory informs that in return for fulfilling their municipal obligations the Jews of Navahrudak obtained 20 parcels (plots of land) in the town and two shops in “a municipal row amongst Christians.” In 1636, King Władysław IV Vasa allowed the Jews to build stone houses and stores to prevent fires in town, and in 1646, he granted Jews with further privileges, allowing them to own houses and plots of land, to engage in trade, to establish buildings for religious purposes, and to establish cemeteries.

The synagogue ¶ In 1648, a stone synagogue was established in Navahrudak in place of an older, wooden one. Prayer and study houses functioned, too: for example, in 1861, the town had four wooden and six stone batei midrash. ¶ The synagogue operated uninterruptedly until World War II. After the war, the synagogue building



[A] Ruins of the castle in Navahrudak, 2014. Photo by Paweł Sańko, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

[B] Market square in Navahrudak, early 20th c., collection of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN)

served as a warehouse, and in the early 1960s, it was torn down as part of the Soviet atheistic campaign. ¶ Navahrudak boasts several outstanding rabbinic scholars such as Yitzhak Elchanan Spektor. In the mid-19th century, Rabbi Spektor interceded on behalf of the Jews before the Russian high-ranking officials and was considered

an outstanding and unparalleled legal authority (*posek*).

Jewish-Christian relations ¶

In the 17th and 18th centuries, due to natural increase, the Jewish community grew significantly pushing Jews to settle outside the sections of town designated for them and purchasing

The interior of the synagogue in Navahrudak, a view of the aron kodesh, 1920-1930, collection of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN)



land from Christian burghers. Well-to-do Jewish merchants managed to settle within Prince Radziwiłł's *jurydyka* (i.e. jurisdiction district; currently Minskaya, L. Setchko, and 1 Maya Streets). ¶ In 1652, Jan Kazimierz King of Poland and the Grand Duke of Lithuania, issued a privilege permitting the rebuilding of Navahrudak (town hall, shops, bakeries, butcheries, houses) after a devastating fire. However, the privilege barred Jews from purchasing real estate in the town, allowing them to settle only outside the town walls. In 1724, under a proclamation issued in Nowogródek (Navahrudak) Palatinate, Jews and Tatars were barred from hiring Christians for work.

When King Stanisław August Poniatowski visited Navahrudak on August 23, 1784, the first ones to welcome him were Jews who carried candles and were followed by trade guilds with the *landvogt* (communal elder), who made a speech in the King's honour and gave the monarch the keys of the town. In the evening, the town hall, churches, the synagogue, and the town houses were illuminated, fireworks organized, and balls held to celebrate the monarch's visit.

Economic life ¶ In 1799, contract fairs (at which wholesale merchants exchanged bills of sale) were allowed to be held in Navahrudak: from March 19 to March 23 and in the ninth week after Easter. These contract fairs drew over 1,000 people, who bought and sold silk and linen textiles, dishes, sweetmeats, and fish, and also colonial such as Chinese and Indian tea and Turkish snuff tobacco. A special area was designated for the wholesale trade of bread, vodka, wool, and tar. According to the memories of Jan Bułhak, a Belarusian and Polish photographer born in Navahrudak, "contract fairs gathered all the landowners and peasants, as well as merchants and traders from the farthest regions of

the country. The gathering was so large and magnificent [...] that even a theatre from Vilnius came to give performances during the contract fairs [...] and Navahrudak became a real capital." Contract fairs were a good time for young people to date and marry. Parents deliberately sent their sons to these fairs, knowing that the entire regional elite attended them. Contract fairs enjoyed considerable popularity until 1863, when the Russian government decided to entirely suppress the economy in the former Polish areas and instead establish market fairs in the interior Russian provinces. ¶ In the first half of the 19th century, the settlement of Jews in Navahrudak underwent several changes.

At the beginning of the century, the vast majority of Jewish houses were located in Żydowska St. (30 buildings) and Walewska St. (41 buildings; now Savietskaya and Lenina Streets). In 1825, Jews lived in Zamkowa, Kowalska, Trojecka, Sienieżycka, Walewska, Żydowska, Słonimska, Franciszkańska, Szkolny Dwór, Voskriesienskaya, Bazylińska, and Przesiek Streets as well as in Wójtowszczyzna and Racewłanski Lanes. Houses in Kowalska Trojecka, Słonimska, Voskriesienskaya, and Przesiek Streets were inhabited by both Jews and Christians. Jewish stores were located in market stalls in the town square. ¶ Jews were at the forefront of local commerce and industry. The Leitneker's tilery was opened in 1860; it became widely known after its products were awarded the bronze medal at the 1882 all-Russia fair. In 1893, Zelman Hirsch Shlomovich established a textile factory equipped with a 214-horsepower steam engine. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the town had a steam mill, a brickyard, an earthenware factory, two factories manufacturing pots and tiles, and two distilleries. Among other businesses, Jewish entrepreneurs ran pharmacies, public baths, a hotel, several photographic studios, a barber's shop, and a notary public office. There was a hospital, too. Visitors could stay in one of three hotels: the "Europa," the "Warszawa," and the "Petersburg." According to the 1897 census, Navahrudak had 7,887 residents, whose native languages were: Yiddish (4,992 people), Belarusian (1,676), Tatar (475), Polish (401), Russian (319), Ukrainian (16), and German (5).



Palatinate capital ¶ In the interwar period, Navahrudak (then Nowogródek) became a voivodeship (palatinate) capital in the Second Polish Republic. In 1935, the town had 9,567 residents, 1,055 houses, two Catholic churches, two Orthodox churches, three synagogues, a mosque, a Polish and a Belarusian secondary school, and two hospitals. The choice of accommodation for visitors increased, with the construction of a number of hotels: the "Europa," "Paryż" (in Zamkowa St.), "Szwajcaria" (near the Castle Hill), "Targowy" (Kościelna St.), "Brazylia" (Mickiewicza St.), "Italia," and "Wileński" (Piłsudskiego St.). In his memoirs, Stanisław Czajewicz, who visited Navahrudak on his pilgrimage to

[A] Synagogue in Navahrudak, 1920–1930, collection of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN)

[B] Market halls at the market square in Navahrudak, circa 1916, collection of the National Library, Poland (www.polona.pl)

the sites connected with Adam Mickiewicz's life, noted that the town's oldest restaurant, run by one Liponer, offered an array of freshly prepared dishes and high-quality service (the waitresses wore

dark dresses, white caps, and aprons). He wrote that such elegant service was nowhere else to be seen, including the local casino.

Alexander Harkavy (1863–1939) was a famous linguist, journalist and writer born in Navahrudak, where he received a traditional Jewish education. In 1879, he took up a job at a printing press in Vilnius. After 1881 pogroms in the Russian Empire, he emigrated to the USA, where his artistic career blossomed. *English Teacher* (1891), his English-language textbook, sold 100,000 copies. ¶ Harkavy translated European classics such as *Don Quixote*, into Hebrew, wrote books about the history and culture of America, lectured in Yiddish and social sciences at academic institutions in New York. His most significant achievement is considered to be the publication of dictionaries: *English-Yiddish and Yiddish-English* (40,000 words, more than 22 editions) as well as *Yiddish-English-Hebrew* (1925). ¶ It is possible to visualise and understand the world of the shtetl of Navahrudak and its residents thanks to the documentary film *Nowogródek. 1931*, produced by Zenit Studio, Warsaw, with the help of Alexander Harkavy whose visit to his home town was featured in the film.

Cultural life and education ¶ In the early 20th century, girls from Jewish families were able to study at E.W. Kudryatseva-Mele's four-year secondary school (gymnasium). On March 17, 1910, the *Nasha niva* Bielorussian-language newspaper reported that the school had "half of the students who were Jewish girls, and the other half Bielorussian country girls." Graduates of the gymnasium often went on to work as teachers. ¶ In 1919, a seven-year Hebrew school was set up as one of the Tarbut schools network. There was also Shlomo Volfovich's religious school, which later became part of the Mizrachi school network. Several *hadarim* functioned in the town, too. ¶ One of the two local Jewish libraries had a collection of more than 300 volumes of literature in Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, and Russian. In the 1930s, two Yiddish-language

newspapers were published locally: *Novogrodker Lebn* (Yid.: The Life of Nowogródek) and *Novogrodker Woch* (Yid.: The Week of Nowogródek).

The yeshivah ¶ Among Jewish higher educational institutions, the yeshiva established in 1896 by Rabbi Yosef Yuzl Horowitz ("The Old Man of Navahrudak"; ca. 1848–1920) stands out. It was part of the Jewish Ethical Movement (*Musar*), which placed special emphasis on ethical aspects of Judaism (and lesser on legal). ¶ With the outbreak of World War II, the yeshiva was transferred to Vilnius, where several students managed to survive the Holocaust by obtaining Japanese transit visas issued by the Japanese Consul Chiune Sugihara. With these, they travelled by Trans-Siberian railway through Vladivostok to Kobe. From there, some of the students

eventually left for the USA, some for Israel, and some for Great Britain. At present, various branches of the Novogrudok yeshiva called *Beit Yosef* (Heb.: House of Yosef, in honour of Yosef Horowitz) operate in New York (Brooklyn), Jerusalem, and London. Consul Chiune Sugihara was posthumously awarded the title of the “Righteous

Gentile.” ¶ Some other yeshiva students survived because they were deported to Siberia by the Soviets after the USSR annexed Lithuania. Rabbi Avi Shafran, whose father was among them, produced an album of songs in Yiddish performed by yeshiva students (the songs had been recorded before World War II). Rebbe Avi Shafran recollects:

“Listening to Novogrudok yeshivah students sing, and knowing from my father’s tales how cruel the fate was to them, each time I was transfixed by the optimistic power of their songs. And I couldn’t understand where these young people drew such carefree spirituality from, and where they found the joy of life that pervaded every sound they produced. [...] It was not until a few years later that I was able to find the answer to this question. [...] The spiritual strength of Novogrudok yeshivah students increased and intensified thanks to their unshakeable faith in the Most High. They were not discouraged by the vanity of human life. Life difficulties, persecutions, and smear campaigns were a test of constancy in striving to do the Creator’s Will and to bring the light of His Torah to the world... ¶ Avi Shafran, *Fire, Ice, Air. A Polish Jew’s Memoir of Yeshivah, Siberia, America*, Baltimore 2012 (edited).

World War II and the Holocaust ¶

On September 18, 1939, Red Army troops entered Navahrudak (Nowogródek, Novogrudok). The Soviet authorities nationalised private enterprises and institutions, and Jewish schools were all merged into one nine-year school, taught in Yiddish. Some of the town’s residents were deported to Kazakhstan or Siberia. ¶ With the German occupation of the town at the beginning of July 1941, the Nazis began the persecution of Jews. According to September 26, 1941 special order, Jews were obligated to wear a yellow star on their chest and back. They were forbidden to leave the town without official permission and also barred from trading, coming to the market, having contact with the Christian community, etc. In winter 1941, after several stages of

selection involving two formal questions about profession or trade and the number of children, about 1,500 people were confined in the Navahrudak ghetto in Przesiek Street, where they were forced to work for the German administration. Others were transported to the village of Skridlevo and shot. Between 4,000 and 5,100 people were murdered at that time. On August 7, 1942, the 36th Estonian Police Battalion carried out a second liquidation operation, in which 4,000 Jews were transported out of the ghetto and shot near the village of Litovka (2 km from the town). The day before that operation, 500 people – qualified specialists – were resettled to the newly established labour camp in Korelicka Street (now Minskaya St.). A further several hundred people were shot on February 4, 1943 during the final liquidation

The wooden building of the Jewish school in Navahrudak, 1918–1939, collection of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN)



of the ghetto in Przesiek, and on May 7, 1943, the last, fourth *Aktion* took place, in which 250–370 people from the labour camp were executed. ¶ On September 26, 1943, there was a mass escape from the labour camp in Korelicka Street. About

250 people managed to flee through an underground tunnel, about 200 metres long. Some were caught in a manhunt and shot on the spot, but about 150 made it to the forest and joined the partisan forces.

THE JEWISH RESISTANCE MUSEUM ¶ In 2007, the world's only Museum of Jewish Resistance was opened, housed in the Secondary School of Agriculture in Navahrudak (64–66 Minskaya St.).

The Museum was established at the former barracks from which the ghetto dwellers escaped. The exhibition was designed by Tamara Vershitskaya, then director of the Navahrudak Museum of Local History and Culture, and Jack Kagan, one of the surviving escapees. Tel. +375159721470.

Part of the exhibition at the Jewish Resistance Museum in Navahrudak, 2015. Photo by Agata Radkowska



The partisan unit of the Bielski brothers ¶ The fugitives from the ghetto in Navahrudak managed to survive by joining the troops of the Jewish partisan unit formed by the Bielski brothers: Tuvia, Asael, and Alexander (Zus). The brothers organised the first family partisan camp in the early summer of 1942, renamed in 1944, the Kalinin

unit. Tuvia's 1,230-strong *otriad* was the largest Jewish partisan unit in Europe.

¶ The unit's base looked like a town, with 20 dugout dwellings built in two rows along a main street. In the center, there were the staff, workshops, and the drill ground. The dugouts, each housing around 40 people, were organized into units inhabited by people of similar social rank. The hospital and the quarantine unit for patients with typhus had 27 doctors, nurses, and dentists. Watchmakers repaired firearms, 18 tailors mended clothes and sewed underwear out of linen, 20 shoemakers repaired and made footwear out of leather processed at the tannery, which also served as a synagogue. Blacksmiths shod horses and prepared elements necessary for the repair of weapons. The bakery baked several kinds of bread, while the butcher shop produced sausages and cured meat. There was a school, a bath, a soapworks, and a barber shop. There was also a prison. ¶ In 1944, along with part of the unit, Asael Bielski joined the Red Army and died in Malbork (in Poland) just before the end of the war. Tuvia and Zus Bielski survived and first emigrated to Palestine; then, in 1955, they moved to the USA and settled in New York. ¶ In 1986, the people saved by the Bielski brothers organised a banquet in their honour at New York's Hilton Hotel. Six hundred people gave a standing ovation to 80-year Tuvia Bielski. Born in 1906, Tuvia died in 1987 and was buried with honours on the Herzl Hill in Jerusalem. ¶ Prof. Nechama Tec wrote about the Bielski brothers in his book *Defiance*; the book served as the basis for a 2008 film, directed by Edward Zwick and featuring James Bond actor Daniel Craig.



[A] A view from the Jewish cemetery in Navahrudak, 2015. Photo by Tal Schwartz, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)



[B] Monument to Adam Mickiewicz in Navahrudak, 2014. Photo by Paweł Sańko, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

Memorials ¶ About 11,000 Jews were murdered in Navahrudak during the German occupation. Only about 600 people, or 10 percent of the town's pre-war Jewish community, survived the Holocaust. Most of them emigrated to Israel and the USA. Currently, Navahrudak has a small group of Jewish residents but no Jewish community. ¶ In the 1960s, monuments were erected at the sites of mass executions, but (as elsewhere in the Soviet Union) their wording only commemorated the death of the peaceful "Soviet citizens." In the 1990s, at the initiative of survivor Jack Kagan – and at his expense, memorials were erected at the mass execution sites



Café-Bar "Rim" in Lenina Square in Navahrudak, 2014. Photo by Paweł Sańko, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

whose inscriptions contained information about who the murdered people were. One of these monuments is located

near the village of Skridlevo (1995), the second one stands 2 km from Navahrudak, outside the village of Litovka (1993), and the third one is at the end of Minskaya Street (1993), at the site of the last mass murder, committed on May 7, 1943. On each memorial there is a text in Belarusian, English, and Hebrew.

The cemetery ¶ A Jewish cemetery, located on a high, wide hill on Sadovy Pereulok Street, near the Muslim cemetery, has survived. Around 700 tombstones still stand, the oldest one dating back to the 18th century.

THE TOWN OF ADAM MICKIEWICZ ¶ Navahrudak was the childhood town of the great Polish-Belarusian-Lithuanian poet and social activist Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855). From 1924 to 1931, the so-called Immortality Mound was constructed in his honour. In 1938, a museum devoted to the poet was established in town. In 1992, a monument to Mickiewicz was erected (sculptured by W. Januskiewicz). ¶ Mickiewicz was a staunch philosemite, favourably disposed towards his contemporary Jews, and an ardent critic of anti-Jewish bias. Such attitudes are reflected both in his works and in his social activity. One of the main images in his epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* (1834) is the innkeeper Jankiel, a talented dulcimer player, who remains faithful to the Jewish tradition and at the same time supports Polish anti-imperial insurrection. Mickiewicz believed that the union of the Catholic Poles and the Polish Jews would lead to a spiritual and economic revival of the country – as Polish union with Lithuania had once given rise to the powerful Commonwealth. ¶ During the Crimean War (1853–1856), Mickiewicz proposed to organise a Jewish Legion to fight against Russia, similar to General Zamoyski's Polish regiment and the Cossack regiment commanded by Sadik Pasha (real name: Michał Czajkowski, 1804–1886). In 1855, Mickiewicz went to Istanbul to convince Turkish authorities to support the Jewish Legion. He died there, failing to carry out his plans.

Surrounding area

Vselyub (15 km): a former synagogue; a Jewish cemetery with isolated tombstones; the Church of St. John the Baptist (15th c.); St. Michael the Archangel Orthodox Church; a palace and park complex and the O'Rourke family tomb chapel; the town's buildings (19th/20th c.) ¶ **Karelichy** (24 km): the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help; the Orthodox Church of Sts. Peter and Paul (1866); a manor farm house; a distillery; a Tatar cemetery. ¶ **Lubcha** (26 km): a former synagogue (19th c.); a former cheder and mikveh; wooden

houses and shops (19th–20th c.); a Jewish cemetery; Radziwiłł Castle (16th–17th c.); the Orthodox Church of the Holy Prophet Elijah (1910); a church converted into a dwelling house. ¶ **Delyatichi** (32 km): a former synagogue, currently a school (late 19th c.); the remains of a Jewish cemetery; three wooden houses at the market square, formerly owned by Jews (19th/20th c.); the Orthodox Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (1867).

Castle (11th–16th c.) ¶ **Orthodox Church of Sts. Boris and Gleb** (12th–17th c.) ¶ **Old parish church (fara church)** (late 14th c.–1712). ¶ **Franciscan church and monastery** (1780), converted into the Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas in 1846. ¶ **Dominican Church of St. Michael** (1724). ¶ **Mosque** (1855). ¶ **Dwelling houses** (19th and early 20th c.), Zamkova St., Lenina Sq. ¶ **Cloth hall (sukiennice)** (1812). ¶ **Convent of the Sisters of Nazareth** (1930s). ¶ **Palatinate Office building** (1920s and 1930s). ¶ **Former railway station building** (1920s). ¶ **Bank building** (1920s and 1930s). ¶ **Mindaugas Hill**, according to a local legend, the burial place of Grand Duke Mindaugas; in the 18th c. and in the early 20th c. there was a Christian cemetery there. ¶ **Adam Mickiewicz Mound**, constructed in 1924–1931. ¶ **Navahrudak Museum of Local History and Culture**, 2 Grodnenskaya St., tel. +375159721470. ¶ **Jewish Resistance Museum**, 64-66 Minska St., authors of the project: Tamara Vershitskaya, Jack Kagan. ¶ **Adam Mickiewicz House-Museum**, 1 Lenina St. ¶ **Monuments**: to Adam Mickiewicz, St. Elizeusz Lavryshevski, Yakub Kolas, Vladimir Vysotsky, the Unknown Soldier, and compatriots killed in the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979–1985). ¶ **Magdeburg Law Memorial Stone**, erected in 2011 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Navahrudak receiving Magdeburg municipal rights.

Worth seeing

