

# Jewish Addresses in Rechitsa

by Leonid Smilovitsky, Ph.D.,  
Diaspora Research Institute of Tel Aviv University

Today you will no longer see any visible signs of past Jewish presence in Rechitsa. They have not been preserved in the names of streets, squares or public gardens, there are no memorial plaques or monuments in public places. In this, Rechitsa is no different from the other small and medium-size Belorussian towns which used to have rich Judaic traditions and were deprived of their distinct identity by the Soviet national policy. Synagogues, prayer houses and yeshivas, heders, secular Jewish schools and cultural establishments in the town and its environs were outlawed. Private Jewish trade and handicraft businesses meeting the demand of their Belorussian neighbors were nationalized by the Bolsheviks as part of their effort for a “more just world order”.

Until a few years ago no Soviet book, textbook, reference material or tourist guide had ever mentioned the Jewish section of the Rechitsa population. The powers-that-be had wanted to dissolve the Jews in the “single and indivisible” Soviet people in its Belorussian version. Therefore the first volume of the historical-documentary chronicle about Rechitsa and Rechitsa District, which appeared in 1998 in the “*Memory*” series describing every district in Belarus, came as a surprise to many. It cited figures showing that at different periods the share of the Jewish population of this Belorussian town varied from 30 to 60 percent. Evidence of the once vibrant Jewish life has been preserved in the Rechitsa Museum of Regional Studies, the State Rechitsa Zone Archive, and in the Jewish cemetery. Then, it is our good fortune that a few former and present Rechitsa residents are still alive and can share with us their reminiscences of their childhood and adolescence which take us fifty-odd years back. Let us go on a sightseeing tour of Rechitsa’s Jewish addresses mentioned by these people, or found in the materials of the Museum of Regional Studies and the town archive.

One early mention of Jewish presence in the region is connected with Cossack detachments. According to deacon Grigory Kupanov, Bogdan Khmel'nitsky's troops staged a massacre of Rechitsa Jews.<sup>1</sup> In 1648-1651, Rechitsa passed hands several times. In 1648, a 3,000-strong force of Cossacks and peasants entered the town. The troops were short of weapons, yet they had Bogdan Khmel'nitsky's order to hold on as it was an important strategic point. In 1649, the town was taken by a Polish *voevode* Prince Janusz Radziwill and in 1650 surrendered to Colonel Martin Nebaba. The latter could not hold the town either and was killed when retreating. After these battles the Poles built many fortifications in Rechitsa.<sup>2</sup> In 1765, there were 133 Jews in the town and much more - as many as 4,125 - in the *povet*. The Jewish population grew rapidly, as did its role in the development of the town. Not a single important economic

issue could be tackled without the participation of Jews, which could not but have an impact on social life.<sup>3</sup>

After the second partition of Rzeczpospolita in 1793, Rechitsa was incorporated in the Russian Empire and in 1795 made an *uyezd* seat in the Minsk Gubernia. According to the registry (*oklad*) books for the year 1800, there were 34 Orthodox Christian and 14 Jewish merchants and 573 Christian and 1,254 Jewish commoners in Rechitsa. The 1847 data put the number of the Jewish population at 2,080.<sup>4</sup> The mild climate of Southern Belorussia, coniferous and deciduous forests, oak groves, navigable rivers teaming with fish, flood meadows, fertile black-earth soil, convenient routes to the Ukraine, Poland, and Russian gubernias were factors contributing to the economic development of the region. Jewish communities had their distinctive traditional way of social, religious and economic life. Jews were loyal and law-abiding citizens and punctual taxpayers.

The Luninets-Gomel leg of the Polesye Railway that reached Rechitsa in 1886 and the pier on the Dnieper River built in the town in 1891 further boosted the town's economic and cultural development. According to the 1897 census, the Rechitsa *uyezd* had a population of 221,000, of whom 28,531 were Jews, including 5,334 living in Rechitsa, or 57 percent of the town's population.<sup>5</sup>

There is a 1649 drawing of Rechitsa made by Vesterfeld Van Avraam, a Dutch artist from Rotterdam. The first map of the town appeared in mid-17th century. It was drawn by Eger Christofor, an artillery captain in the service of Janusz Radziwill. Marked on the 1795 map were an old fortress, a Russian Orthodox church, a Dominican church and monastery, as well as the market place, shops, a Uniate church, and a distillery. The 1830 map included the big Resurrection Cathedral, the parish Church of Nicholas the Miracle-Worker, a *Klishtor*, a Dominican church. Besides these, shown on the map were a wooden jail, a public house where the mayor lived, people's schools, Jewish schools, blocks of private and commoners' houses, a wooden post office, warehouses, butcher's shops, smithies and a bath-house.<sup>6</sup>

The Rechitsa population was made up of commoners, a small number of gentry, the Polish *szlachta*, *raznochinets* intellectuals, and Jews. It was a one-storey town with the center on a *zamchische* rising over the rest of the town and crowned with a detinets (fortress). On this spot today is a well-appointed children's park with carved wooden statues. Only well-off townspeople had brick houses. Almost all of Kazarmennaya Street (named after the word *kazarma*, Russian for “barracks”) was Jewish. Beila Shklovskaya, Freida Agranovich, Abram Sheindlin had brick houses on this street. On Preobrazhenskaya Street there were houses owned by Haya Shklovskaya (No. 38), a one-and-a-half-

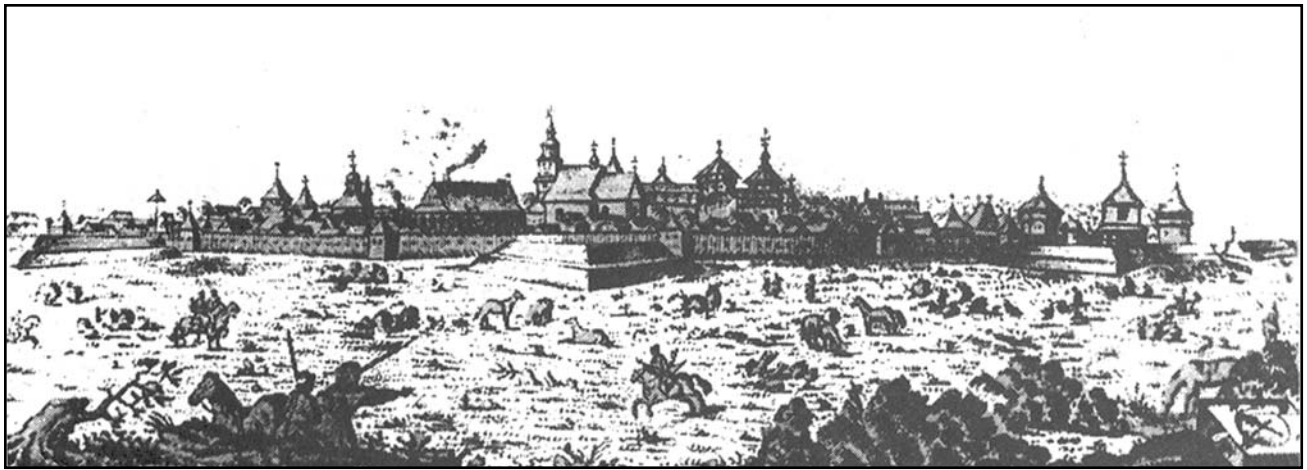


Fig. 1 -1649 Vesterfeld Van Avraam drawing of Rechitsa

storey house with a high foundation belonging to Leiba Livshits (torn down). After the 1917 revolution, the two-storey brick building (No. 47) housed the Executive Committee of the Rechitsa Town Soviet. Rabbi Reinin lived in the house on the corner of Sapozhnikskaya and Alexandrovskaya streets, Rabbi Tyshler - on 13, Kazarmennaya Street.<sup>7</sup>

The waves of change have affected the Rechitsa microtoponymy. Many streets lost their historical names, which reflected their past, and were named after leaders of the communist party and the Soviet state, founders of the Marxist theory, leaders of the international working-class movement. Twin names appeared not only in other Belorussian towns, but throughout the Soviet Union as well. In this way the central Uspenskaya Street became Sovetskaya Street, Sapozhnikskaya - Proletarskaya, Tyuremnaya - Komsomolskaya, Soldatskaya - Krasnoarmeiskaya, Mikhailovskaya - Karl Marx, Preobrazhenskaya - Lenin, Andreyevskaya - Lunacharsky, Vladimirskaya - Uritsky, Vygonnaya - Michurin, Semenovskaya - Chapayev, Kazarmennaya - Konev, Pochtovaya - Trifonov, Kulikovskaya - Naumov, Fabrichno-Zavodskaya - Frunze, Vokzalnaya - Sytko, 1st Polevaya - Gastello, 2nd Polevaya - Zaslouov, 1st Kladbishchenskaya - Turchinsky, 2nd Kladbishchenskaya - Tankovaya, Lugovaya - Khlus, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Any shtetl used to take pride in its synagogue. There were several of them in Rechitsa. The first one was on the corner of Alexandrovskaya (now Kalinin) and Proletarskaya streets. The second synagogue with the yeshiva belonged to the hasids of Shalom Dov-Ber Shneerson. Its building is still standing on the even-numbers side of Lenin Street (formerly Preobrazhenskaya Street) opposite the town executive committee. The third synagogue used to stand at the intersection of Uspenskaya (now Sovetskaya) and Sapozhnikskaya (now Proletarskaya) streets. The fourth one (the Tall one) was between Sovetskaya and Naberezhnaya streets. The fifth one - on the corner of Andreyevskaya (now Lunacharsky) and Preobrazhenskaya streets (hence its name

the Horn, that is, on the very corner). The sixth synagogue was next door to the fifth one on Andreyevskaya Street. The seventh one, which was called the Merchants' Synagogue, was a beautiful two-storey building located close to the intersection of Vladimirskaya (now Uritsky) and Preobrazhenskaya (now Lenin) streets. Besides the synagogues, there was a Russian people's school for boys and two private Jewish schools (for boys and girls) and Talmud-Tora.<sup>9</sup>

Uspenskaya Street got its name from Uspensky (Dormition) Cathedral. Close to it, a Catholic church was put up. And nearby, at the intersection of Naberezhnaya and Sovetskaya streets, stood the Rechitsa Choral Synagogue, a two-storey imposing building. It was destroyed during the war and today the area is occupied by House No. 19 on Sovetskaya Street. Sapozhnikskaya (now Proletarskaya) Street was also called Samosengas, derived from *shames* (*sames*), a person helping in the synagogue. Living on this street were hevra-kaddisha (Judaic undertaker fraternity) members. In addition to the Jewish schools (*shulem*), there was a home for retarded and deranged children. The home was situated opposite the synagogue. It existed in the first post-revolutionary years but then was closed.<sup>10</sup>

A walk in Rechitsa's central public park on Sovetskaya Street will bring you to the recently erected building of the town executive committee. Jewish shops used to be located opposite it. Later the place was occupied by Gavrilova's high school for girls. Opposite it stood the house of Rechitsa's chief rabbi who died before the revolution. His body was carried on specially made carved catafalque and the road up to the Jewish cemetery was covered with velvet. On the site which used to be the Jewish cemetery, first a city bank was put up, and today the building houses the town food trade administration. The cemetery was on a hill adjacent to the Kozlov swamp (to the right) and dominated the area. Farther on, on the left-hand side was the Shchukin swamp, so named after the Shchukins, a Jewish family who has in this way been perpetuated in the town's microtoponymy. The swamp posed a constant threat of flood. In

1930, a record high freshet burst the dam and water came up nearly to Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Pochtovaya streets. Many streets got their final line after amelioration canals were dug; they also served as the town's sewer. Their banks were spun by numerous small bridges, which connected streets. The old Jewish cemetery has not been preserved and the one used today was opened in the early 20th century.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned above, the Merchants' Synagogue located at the intersection of Lenin and Uritsky streets was a large two-storey wooden house of rare beauty. It had high ceilings and very large windows of distinctive shape. In the late 1920s the building housed a workers' club and the Blue Blouse Society. Its members staged musical-drama and



Fig. 2 - Womens School in Rechitsa, 19th century

almost as beautiful as before. There was no one to lodge a complaint with. Forty years ago the building was torn down. The area was first planted to make a small public garden and three years later a building for the inter-regional prosecutor's office was erected. In a way, this barrack-like structure of white silicate brick was an embodiment of the drab spiritual life that had set in.

Before the war, the Rechitsa Jewish eight-year school occupied a spacious one story 19th-century building at the intersection of Preobrazhenskaya (now Lenin) and Mikhailovskaya (now Karl Marx) streets (House No. 91). The school was surrounded by similar wooden structures more than a century-old. Rechitsa was home to many



Fig. 3 - Yiddish Soviet school closed by authorities

sport shows popular at that time. Then a Jewish theater with a professional company appeared. Its directors were Blyankman, a professional actor, and Kanevsky, formerly a hairdresser. Blyankman was a newcomer who took up residence in Rechitsa after he married Liza Eventova, whose parents owned a bakery and a shop on Sovetskaya Street selling a variety of baked delikatessen. After the revolution Liza taught mathematics at School No. 5 on Lunacharskaya Street.

Neither before that nor after did Rechitsa have its own theater. Amateur actors, who were mostly Rechitsa craftsmen, staged plays after Sholom Aleikhem, Perets, S. Ansky, Kushnerov, or those which were on at the Belorussian State Jewish Theater in Minsk. The most popular plays were *A Holiday in Kasrilovka*, *Gershele Ostropoler*, *The Recruit*, *The Heder*, *The Deaf*, *The Song of Songs*, *The Witch*, *Wandering Stars*, *Two Hundred Thousand*, *Tevye the Milkman*, and *Girsh Lekkert* starring Yankel Kravchenko, Meishe Sverdlov and the Ungerovsky sisters.

During the war the German authorities allowed the theater to function, but of course without Jews. After an act of sabotage was committed against the Nazis, the theater was closed down. For a short time after the war the former synagogue building housed the Rechitsa Officers' House. Later it became a troops warehouse guarded by sentries and its windows were boarded up, but the building remained

interesting people. Rabbi Tyshler enjoyed everyone's trust. Rabbi Reinin's beautiful daughter Manya finished high school and continued her education in Paris, where she won a prize at a beauty contest. It was rumored that nobleman of Rechitsa courted. Madam Palu, a Jewess converted to Christianity, taught Russian language and literature at the high school for girls. Her husband always addressed her as "my Kike". When she could stand it no longer, she took poison. Nahum Betsalel Frenkel lived in Rechitsa until 1905. After the pogroms he left for Palestine with his wife Gnissa Ginzburg and his sons. He had a bookstore in Yaffo but in 1914 the Turks deported them because they had come from Russia. The family found shelter in Egypt.<sup>12</sup>

Like any other place in the country, Rechitsa was drawn into the vortex of the early 20th-century upheavals and revolutions. In October 1905, peasants, incited by a Rechitsa priest Nikolai Mozharovsky, were preparing to stage a pogrom. It was prevented by a self-defense detachment coming from Gomel.<sup>13</sup> The Civil War, which broke out after the coup of 1917, did not bypass Rechitsa. The policy of war communism adversely affected the town and district demography. People were leaving for safer places where it was easier to survive. By 1920, the Rechitsa population had dropped from 17,594 to 12,363 people and Rechitsa *uyezd* as a whole had lost about 30 percent of its population.<sup>14</sup>

Rechitsa Jews fought for Soviet power. A monument to the war dead was put up, with Jewish names inscribed on it.

In the summer of 1920, Jews were victimized by the Pilsudski troops: they robbed, raped and cut beards of the devout Jews with their bayonets. In the Volchya Gora Village, 7 km. from Rechitsa, there is a common grave of those killed in fighting with the Polish troops. Many names of the nearby monument are Jewish. Then came the short-lived NEP (New Economic Policy that allowed for small business), the Stalin prewar five-year plans and the cultural revolution. In 1921, the Rechitsa power plant was commissioned, followed by the Dnieper match factory and a plywood plant in 1923. Appearing next were a tanning factory, a bakery, a wine distillery and a shipyard. Shoemaking and cart-and-wheel-making producer's cooperatives, small food enterprises, timber mills and tar works met the demand of the town and district's population.<sup>15</sup>

In the prewar decade the Jewish population of Rechitsa remained stable: 7,386<sup>16</sup> in 1926 and 7,237 in 1939, or 24 percent of the town's population.<sup>17</sup> Most of them were comfortably-off, were respected and occupied the appropriate place on the social ladder as educators, doctors, lawyers, engineers, agronomists, blue-color workers, craftsmen. Those who were loyal champions of the socialist cause could make a career working for the communist party, komsomol, trade union and administrative bodies. Krupetsky, a Jew, was the first chairman of the Rechitsa Soviet of People's Deputies, Sofia Finkelberg, Natan Vargavtik, Grigory Roginsky, Iosif Resin were the first komsomol members. The Rechitsa branch of the State Bank was headed by Shneerov, Lelchuk was secretary of the Town Committee of the Young Communist League (komsomol), Dveira Ber was director of the town library, Glesina - director of the Rechitsa machine and tractor station, Zholkver headed Rechitsa's sanitary service, pediatrician Sara Shaikevich enjoyed everyone's respect.

Soviet leaders saw the solution to the Jewish problem as part of their "revolutionary transformation of society". Zionist organizations were accused of bourgeois nationalism and chauvinism although many important planks in their programs did not run counter to the principles of the Soviet state. Zionist clubs, libraries and schools were banned, many people were arrested and exiled. The mid-twenties saw the beginning of the process when synagogues were being closed and their buildings given over to house clubs, production shops, dwelling quarters, nurse schools and even a skin and venereal disease outpatient clinic. The "low" synagogue on 30, Sovetskaya Street was made into a dwelling house. After the war a food shop was opened on the first floor. Today it is occupied by an establishment dealing in car spares. The synagogue on Vokzalnaya (now Sytko) Street is also a dwelling house today. The building of the "tall" synagogue near the Kalinin Cinema Theater is now the town gym, the synagogue on Proletarskaya Street near the bath-house, a Young Pioneer Club, and the synagogue on Lunacharsky Street is a shoe-maker's cooperative.

Although all the above-mentioned buildings belonged to the community and their construction was mainly financed by the donations of the believers, compensation

was never mentioned. Even posing such a question was considered unacceptable because according to Karl Marx any religion was like "opium for the people" and Jews were deprived of the synagogues allegedly at their "own request" and for "their own better use". Those who dared to protest were ostracized, fired and in some cases even faced arrest. The synagogues buildings were falling into decay and torn down one after another. Conformism, however, was not universal: some continued to observe the tradition. There were some *minyanim* left in Rechitsa, although without rabbis. There was a visiting *mohel* and when he was not available his duties were performed by Yehuda Pinsky, Elya Tsvilin, and Zasepsky. The authorities resented these activities and they tried to ban them and imposed heavy



Fig. 4 - Local State Archive on Michurina Street

taxes on any person who engaged in them. The largest of the *minyanim* assembled at the homes of Gershl Rogachevsky, Moische Olbinsky, Grigory Ovetsky, Livshits and others.

Like other citizens, the Jews were the targets of unfounded persecution by the OGPU-NKVD (security service). In 1937, Abram Arotsker, chief engineer of the Gomel power plant, was arrested and shot. Nikifor Yanchenko was exiled to Magadan where he remained for 17 years. His wife Tsilya tried to get the sentence reversed but she was taken to Minsk and shot at an NKVD prison. Leaving Rechitsa did not save former residents from persecution. After she married, Zelda Ginzburg moved to Minsk where she held a responsible position at the Republican Red Cross Society. In 1938, she moved to Moscow following her husband Abram Rosin's appointment to the People's Commissariat of Timber Industry. Soon after that Abram was arrested and she spent 16 years in prison and exile.<sup>18</sup> The materials of the Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Belorussia, kept in the National Archive of the Republic of Belarus, include a "Memorandum of Lavrenty Tsanova, People's Commissar of Internal Affairs of the Belorussian SSR, concerning the case of high officers of Rechitsa District of February 22, 1940". It says that First Secretary of the district party committee Ryzhov, chairman of the district executive committee Fridlyand, district commissioner for

procurement Domoratsky, head of the land department Kozlovsky and head of the finance department Kupreichik were arrested and convicted on charges of counter-revolutionary activities.<sup>19</sup>

Rechitsa was occupied by the Germans on August 23, 1941. The police precinct was on 115, Vokzalnaya Street. It was a one-storey Mendel Margolin's house which later belonged to Zholkver and Fondaminsky, Jewish doctors.<sup>20</sup> Former *melamed* Malenkovich was ordered to make a list of Jews that remained in the town. The ghetto was located in the industrial district on Frunze Street in a two-storey house beyond the prison. Some houses were fenced off by barbed wire and guarded. A network of ghettos was established in Gomel Region: four in Gomel, two in Zhlobin, and one in



Fig. 5 - Pushkin College on Naberezhnaya Street

each of the towns of Rogachev, Bragin, Khoyniki, Rechitsa and some others. The inmates were kept in inhuman conditions, they were beaten up, humiliated, kept on the brink of starvation and made to do hard work and surrender all their valuables.<sup>21</sup> On November 25, the Jews were brought to an anti-tank ditch (today it is the area of the bone tuberculosis sanatorium - L.S.). Many cursed the Germans, others shouted: "Stalin will win!", "You are shedding our blood but the Red Army will avenge us!" People were ordered to alight and driven to the ditch 15-20 at a time. Once there, they were placed on the ditches edge and fired at with Tommy-guns. Eyewitnesses say the soldiers who were shooting were "drunk". Over 3,000 Rechitsa Jews were killed in such operations. An additional 4,000 were killed in Gomel, 3,500 in Rogachev, 1,200 in Zhlobin, to name a few.<sup>22</sup>

Rechitsa was liberated on November 18, 1943. During the war the match factory (named after the Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution), the Kirov Timber Mill, the Voroshilov Tanning Agents Factory, the International Hardware Works, the plywood factory, the town power plant and bakery were either destroyed or burned down. Six schools, four orphanages, the central town library, three clubs, the town hospital and the railway station were no longer functioning. Blocks of houses on Proletarskaya and Kladbishchenskaya streets had disappeared. But of course the most irreparable was loss of life.<sup>23</sup>

The German occupation had its impact on the way part of the population felt about the Jews. On the one hand, Belorussians were sheltering Jews during the German occupation although it was fraught with mortal danger. Nina Kartovich, who before the war had been a teacher of German in School No. 2 named after Karl Marx, headed a team of girl translators during the occupation. She gave her word that Ida Shustina (a Jewish blonde) was raised in an orphanage which was confirmed in writing by residents on Grazhdanskaya Street. When Ida was taken to the office of the police head, the Rechitsa old-timer Korzhenevsky, he asked her to pronounce the word "gorokh" and issued a note certifying that she was not Jewish. It was unbelievable, so much so that later the KGB refused to issue a note to Shustina confirming that she had been in the occupied territory during the war. Girsh Slavin was backed by the whole of Zhmurovka Village of Rechitsa District. Olga Anishchenko, a teacher of Russian in a worker school, staged amateur theatricals for German officers at the building workers' club. She was receiving theater fans in her house, while her student Masha was hiding in the basement. This lasted for about two years. Olga's house on 1, Naberezhnaya Street was at some distance from the other houses and even the neighbors did not know that a Jewish girl had been given shelter there.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, those returning home after evacuation often came up against a hostile attitude. Jews from the surrounding smaller towns and villages of Loev, Gorval, Buda-Koshelev, Dvortsy, Vasilevichi, Khoyniki, Ozarichi, Narovlya and other places in which the Jewish population had been exterminated were returning to take up residence in Rechitsa.<sup>25</sup>

Jews were taking an active part in restoring the war-ravaged economy. Revsin was director of the pier on the Dnieper River, Kaplan was inspector of the Central Statistical Board for Rechitsa, Chernyavsky was first elected chairman of the handicraft producer's cooperative in which the disabled were working and then headed the Rechitsa Service Center which had many repair shops, Mikhail Livshits was director of the Rassvet Producer's Cooperative, Portnoi headed the Krasnyi Transportnik Cooperative, Sonya Kozovskaya - the Kollektivnyi Trud Cooperative, Merman - the Krasnyi Boets Cooperative, Hana Chausskaya - the Kooperator Garment-Making Cooperative. Former secretary of the Rechitsa District Party Committee Isaak Maskalik was appointed director of the town furniture-making factory, Zakhar Malikin - director of the garment factory, Fridlyand - director of the integrated enterprise of local industries, Zelichonok - director of the rope-making factory, Rubinchik - director of the mill. Lapidus and Klaiman were respectively director and chief engineer of the town's building administration.

Jews proved good managers in farming which was not at all easy under the Soviet system. Abram Spitserov was director of a suburban state farm, Semyon Levin - director of the Borshechka State Farm. Zalman Levin - director of the workshop repairing farm machinery engines. A large part of Rechitsa's doctors, educators and cultural workers were

Jewish. In different years Lyubov Ber and Lev Babin headed the cultural department of the Rechitsa district executive committee. Similarly, Sima Khaitovich and Boris Sheiman were directors of the Kalinin Cinema Theater. Anis Finkelberg was director of the town House of Culture. Semyon Lozovik was a people's judge. In February 1948, he was elected deputy president of the Gomel Regional Court.<sup>26</sup>

Each passing year saw a shrinking Jewish presence in Rechitsa. Of the seven synagogue buildings that the war had spared, not one was returned to Jewish administration. On May 15, 1946, Judaic believers applied to the Executive Committee of the Rechitsa Town Soviet, asking for a building to worship in, but were refused ostensibly for a lack of vacant buildings. The committee's decision stated that the town had a population of more than 30,000, a number of factories, industrial cooperatives, educational establishments and orphanages in which a great number of young people and intellectuals "striving for cultural advancement" were working or studying. The activities of amateur artistes companies and of the only cinema theater were greatly hindered by a lack of facilities.<sup>27</sup>

A similar application from Christian believers received a different response. In 1941, taking the opportunity offered by the Nazi occupation, the Rechitsa Russian Orthodox Church Council regained the former Preobrazhensky Cathedral, which in 1935 had been restructured into the House of Social Culture. In the town's environs were many churches (in the villages of Bronnaya, Demekhi, Yampol, Kholmechi, Zaspad and others). Christian believers were offered the former Officers' House on 11th Polevaya Street instead of the Cathedral and after they refused to take it, they were given the building of the former town food trade administration on Kooperativnaya Street.<sup>28</sup>

In response to the authorities' refusal to register the Judaic community, the believers organized *minyanim*. Despite his venerable age Tsodik Abramovich Karasik, 90, formerly an official rabbi, guided these activities. Prior to 1947, worshippers assembled at Khaim Gumenik's on 54, Lenin Street. After the authorities made him promise in writing to discontinue the *minyanim* at his home, another place was found. In 1947-1949, the *minyanim* took place on 16, Lunacharsky Street, at Mendel Zaks' apartment. Another synagogue of this kind functioned on 25, Karl Marx Street at Hasya Feigina's. The community had the premises repaired, brought the items needed for worshipping and paid for the heating. Major Ryumtsov, deputy head of the Rechitsa MGB (security service), tried to make the town authorities fine Karasik, Zaks and Feigina for their "persistent refusal" to abide by the Law on Religious Societies in the USSR. This was not done and he informed Lugansky, deputy commissioner of the Council for Religious Cult Affairs at the Belorussian SSR Council of Ministers, about it when the latter was on an inspection tour of Gomel Region in the winter of 1949.<sup>29</sup>

*Matsot* were baked secretly on 1st Kladbishchenskaya (later Aviatsionnaya and now Turchinsky) Street at the home of Khonya Shayeovich Rumanovsky and on 73, Kalinin

Street near the creamery. Both the flour and the *matsot* were delivered at night to avoid being seen even by Jews, for there were informers among them too. For a long time Rechitsa did not have a *shoihet* of its own. On Jewish holidays, a *shoihet* was invited from Gomel. One such *shoihet* was Zalman-Dovid, a native of Streshin who after reevacuation lived in Kalinkovichi. Jews would also gather for prayer on Kooperativnaya (formerly Kazarmennaya, now Konev) Street. Some Jewish communists sent their wives or children there. Staying away from work on a Saturday was out of the question, but there were some who managed to observe the tradition in any circumstances. On Yom Kipur, Yankel Kuperman, a painter, would take a bucketful of paint and



Fig. 6 - The grave of the last *shoihet* in Rechitsa Yehuda Pinsky (1897-1966)

pretend he was working. Zalman Gurevich, head of supplies at the furniture factory would lock the door of his office from the inside, pretending he had some urgent work to do and stayed there until the end of the working day. There was a popular joke: "How would you translate the word 'communist' "? "Who has it bad." " 'Nist' is Yiddish for 'bad'" ["Komu" is Russian for 'for whom' - Tr.]<sup>30</sup>

Worthy of special note are attempts to perpetuate the memory of the victims of German genocide. In the three years of occupation, 4,395 people were killed. Of these,

4,190 were Rechitsa residents and 205 were war prisoners. Jews accounted for more than three fourths of all Rechitsa residents killed - 3,500 people out of 4,190. The Rechitsa commission of assistance to the USSR Extraordinary State Commission for Investigation into the Nazi Crimes could establish only 819 names of various nationalities.<sup>31</sup> In 1946, on the initiative of Khaim Gumenik, the relatives of the killed Jews transferred the remains of the victims to the Jewish cemetery. With modest donations at their disposal, they put up a simple brick monument with the Magen David. Nobody thought of asking the permission of the authorities, since no help from them was expected and it seemed such a natural act just a year after the war ended. The believers requested to fence off the functioning Jewish cemetery in Rechitsa and the authorities promised to supply the



Fig. 7 - The Smilovitsky family in 1929. L-R, Boruch-Mott (1892), Chaim (1920), Leib (1925), Liza (1900)

necessary timber provided the work was done by volunteers.<sup>32</sup>

In May 1946, the Belorussian Council of Ministers and the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Belorussia issued a decree "On keeping the graves of Red Army men and partisans in order, perpetuating the names of places and events on the territory of the Belorussian SSR related with the Great Patriotic War". In June 1946, acting on this decree, the Rechitsa town Soviet adopted a decision to undertake a series of steps, such as to have cemeteries guarded and well-tended, to transfer single graves located in unsuitable places (swamps or gullies) to civil and military cemeteries, to keep a register of the buried with brief information about them. Two streets - 1st Polevaya and 2nd Polevaya - were renamed, respectively Gastello and Zaslouov streets, although these two Heroes of the Soviet Union - Nikolai Gastello (a pilot) and Konstantin Zaslouov (a partisan) were not connected with Rechitsa in any way.<sup>33</sup> However, this important decision remained practically unrealized.

In July 1948, the Gomel Regional Soviet noted that a great number of graves had not been put in order. No fences had been put up, no trees or flowers planted, there were no monuments, and the wooden fencing and obelisks some graves had were in a poor condition. The names on wooden

plaques had been bleached by the sun and rains and some plaques had been torn off. After the regional authorities' inspection, the reburial of the remains of the killed and those who had died of wounds was started. Monuments were erected on the cemetery in the region of the new hospital, at the common cemetery on Vokzalnaya Street and in the central public garden on Sovetskaya Street. The anti-tank ditch, however, that last resting place for 800 Jewish families killed on November 25, 1941, was not marked in any way. It was only in 1973, when the town was preparing for the 30th anniversary of its liberation, that in the park on Frunze Street a drab obelisk appeared. The standard inscription reads: "To the peaceful civilians of the town of Rechitsa who were killed in the years of the Great Patriotic War." No mention is made concerning who most of these "peaceful civilians" were.<sup>34</sup>

In 1993, the Rechitsa executive committee registered the *Ami* Jewish organization (*Ami* means "my people" in Hebrew), and immediately work on erecting a monument to the victims of Nazi genocide started. Money was coming from former Rechitsa residents now scattered all over the world, but mainly from Israel. The *Krasny Oktyabr* factory (director - M.N. Smirnov) and the pilot hydrolysis plant (director - A.N. Turok) took an active part in this work. The black granite monument put up at the Rechitsa Jewish cemetery bears the somewhat laconic inscription: "3000! What for?"<sup>35</sup>

Through the 1960s-1980s, the remaining synagogue buildings in Rechitsa were demolished. The synagogue building which had housed the skin and venereal outpatient clinic was burned down in 1985. For some time religious life was smouldering in the *minyanim* on Proletarskaya, Kalinin, Michurin, Lunacharsky, Karl Marx and Frunze streets until only one was left. Gathered for the *minyanim* were Vasilevsky, Vinnitsky, Chechik, Ovetsky, Bykhovskiy, Demekhovsky, Rumanovsky, Rogachevsky, Latukh, Malikin, Mnuskyn and some others. The last *minyanim* gathered at the home of Genya Shmuilovna Levina (Krigel) on 49, Karl Marx Street. The law-enforcement authorities were anxious to know if children and adolescents were also praying. Worshipping was taking place with the shutters closed. On Saturdays and holidays more people came to say prayers than on weekdays. The hosts habitually locked the shutters facing both street and courtyard. In the mid-1970s, a pogrom was staged at night. Breaking the shutters and windows facing the street, some thugs entered into the anteroom shouting abuses and threatening to put an end to the "synagogue of the kikes". Nobody was apprehended and the Jews had to repair the damage at their own expense. Despite the pogrom Genya Levina continued to host the *minyanim*.<sup>36</sup>

For a long time some elderly Jews used to tie their wrist with a handkerchief on Saturdays so as not to put their hand into the pocket even to get keys or money. *Matsot* were baked by Ester-Frada on Kalinin Street and some others. Although it was supposed to be done in secret, every year the lists of their "clients" were sent to the Rechitsa town

communist party committee. A few people were buried as the Jewish tradition required. Among them were Yehuda Pinsky (a *shoikhet*), Izrail Chechik (a *melamed*), Gershl Rogachevsky (a glazier) and his wife Zeld, Nokhem Pugach (a blacksmith), Motel Smilovitsky (a carrier), Lea Fainshmidt (a midwife), Aron Vainer (a stove maker), Zakhar Kopelyan (in charge of timber procurement), Khaim Gumenik, the Khasin couple, Iser Rudnitsky, Sofa Arotsker and others. In the autumn of 1986, during the Jewish holidays, the Rechitsa Jewish group gathered for the last time. Assimilation was proceeding at its own pace. Seeing little prospect for themselves in Rechitsa, Jewish young people were leaving the town.<sup>37</sup>

Today there are 450 Jews in Rechitsa. At least 300 of them are elderly people. Regrettably, the clearest traces of the Jewish presence are to be found at the cemetery and in the memory of the old-timers. The cemetery is big, but few prewar graves have been left. Taking care of it are mainly those who are still in Rechitsa. After the *Ami* society applied to the authorities, on orders from the town Soviet a cast-iron enclosure and a gate were installed and a road made. Yet anti-Semitic sallies keep occurring. On the night of February 16, 1999, as many as 24 monuments were damaged. The monument to the victims of Nazi genocide was broken into several parts. It was the fifth act of vandalism in six years. Two of these took place at Russian Orthodox Church cemeteries, but Jewish graves were the main targets.<sup>38</sup>

Jewish Rechitsa is practically no more. The postwar restoration pushed out those whom the town had for centuries been proud of and to whom it had owed its glory, those who used to multiply its successes and pass the wisdom acquired over the centuries to new generations. In this sense Rechitsa shares the fate of other Belorussian shtetls which have forever lost their Jewish traces.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Acts of the Vilno Central Archeographic Commission, vol. 3633 (Bershadsky's papers)

<sup>2</sup> B.I. Umetsky. *Rechitsa: Kratkii istoriko-ekonomicheskii ocherk* [Brief historical-economic essay], (Minsk, 1963), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> F.A. Brokhaus and I.A. Efron. *Yevreiskaya Entsiklopedia* [Jewish Encyclopedia] (SPtSbg, 1913), vol. 13, p. 755.

<sup>4</sup> F.A. Brokhaus and I.A. Efron. *Entsyklopedicheskii slovar* [Encyclopedic Dictionary] (SPtSbg, 1899), half-vol 54, p.488-489.

<sup>5</sup> L. Smilovitsky. *Yevrei Belarusi iz nashei obshchei istorii. 1905-1953* [Jews of Belarus: From our Common History, 1905-1953], (Minsk, 1999), p. 219.

<sup>6</sup> According to the materials of the Rechitsa Museum of Regional Studies.

<sup>7</sup> Author's archive. Maria (Mera) Rubinchik's letter from Ashkelon dated May 23, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> According to the materials of the Rechitsa Museum of Regional Studies. Cf. the table of renamed Rechitsa streets in the supplement.

<sup>9</sup> Author's archive. A talk with Yakov Plekhov, leader of the Rechitsa Jewish religious community, recorded in Rechitsa on September 18, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Author's archive. A talk with Alla Shkop, chairperson of the Rechitsa Ami Society, recorded in Rechitsa on September 20, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Author's archive. Sara Ber's letter from Rechitsa dated May 5, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Frenkel and his four sons were artists. From 1929 to 1932 they made furniture, in 1936 they were awarded a Gold Medal at the International Handicrafts and Industries Exhibition in Cairo and won the right to be official suppliers of King Farouk. After 1935 they started making animated cartoons and produced the first sound-track animated cartoons film in Arabic. During 1936-1964 they shot 30 animated cartoons. After the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, they were persecuted by the Egyptian authorities and left for France. Cf. *Mishpokha*, no. 5, 1999, p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> For details see L. Smilovitsky. "Pogrom in Rechitsa, October 1905", *Shvut*, no.5 (21)// Tel Aviv University, 1997, pp. 65-80.

<sup>14</sup> *Bulleten Gomelskogo gubernskogo statisticheskogo buro* [Bulletin of the Gomel Gubernia Statistics Bureau] published by the RSFSR Central Statistical Board, no.1 (Moscow, 1923), pp. 13-15.

<sup>15</sup> Yehuda Mendelson. *Skvoz dymku snov-vospominaniy* [Through the Haze of Dreams and Reminiscences]. (Jerusalem, 2001), pp. 248-250.

<sup>16</sup> *Where Once We Walked: A Guide to the Jewish Communities Destroyed in the Holocaust*. Edited by Garry Mokotoff and Sallyann Amdur Sack (New Jersey, 1991), p. 283.

<sup>17</sup> Mordechai Altshuler (ed.). *Distribution of the Jewish Population of the USSR, 1939*. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Center for Research and Documentation of East-European Jewry, (Jerusalem, 1993), p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Author's archive. Letters by Moisei Gorelik from Ashdod dated December 11, 2000, and by Faina Rudnitskaya from Hadera dated January 7, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> National Archive of the Republic of Belarus (NARB), coll. 4, invent. 21, file 2075, p. 2532.



<sup>20</sup> At present it houses the Union of Consumer's Cooperatives of Rechitsa District.

<sup>21</sup> L. Smilovitsky. *Katastrofa yevreyev Belorussii* [Holocaust in Belorussia]. 1941-1944. (Tel Aviv, 2000), p. 266.

<sup>22</sup> Yad Vashem Archives. M-33/476, p.19; M-33/481, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> State Archive of the Russian Federation, coll. 7021, invent. 85, file 217, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> In the mid-1990s, Olga Anishchenko was conferred the title of the "Righteous of the World." Her medal was presented to her son Oleg at the Yad Vashem Memorial Institute in Jerusalem.

<sup>25</sup> Author's archive. Letter by Isaak Wolfson from Beer-Sheva dated June 30, 1999.

<sup>26</sup> Rechitsa Zonal State Archive (ZSA), coll. 342, invent. 1, file 4, pp.30-34; file 12, p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, file 6, p. 94.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, file 6, p. 258; file 14, p. 161.

<sup>29</sup> NARB, coll. 952, invent. 1, file 16, p. 8-9.

<sup>30</sup> Author's archive. A talk with Zalman Gurevich recorded in Rechitsa on September 21, 2001.

<sup>31</sup> NARB, coll. 845, invent. 1, file 55; coll. 851, invent. 1, file 16, p. 339.

<sup>32</sup> Rechitsa ZSA, coll. 342, invent. 1, file 6, p. 94.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, coll. 342, invent. 1, file 7, p. 39.

<sup>34</sup> *Pamyat. Rechitsky raion. Istoriko-dokumentalnaya khronika* [Memory. Rechitsa District. Historical-documentary chronicle], (Minsk, 1998). vol. 1, p. 248-249; Marat Botvinnik. *Pamyatniki genotsida yevreyev Belorussii* [Monuments of Genocide Against Belorussian Jews], (Minsk, 2000), p. 225.

<sup>35</sup> Author's archive. A talk with Alla Shkop in Rechitsa recorded on September 18, 2001.

<sup>36</sup> Author's archive. Letter by Lev Levin from Brooklyn dated March 5, 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Author's archive. Letter written by Samuil Rozhavsky from Hadera dated December 31, 2000.

<sup>38</sup> The damage was made good by the Rechitsa authorities, cf. Aviv no.2/1999.



Fig. 8 - The author at Rechitsa's road sign



*The English translation of this article was made possible by a generous contribution of the American Jewish Distribution Committee*

*Rechitsa's Streets*

No.	Old Names	New Names	Year
1.	Proboinaya. Uspenskaya since 1872 (the year the Cathedral of Holy Dormition was consecrated)	Sovetskaya	1925
2.	Preobrazhenskaya	Lenin	1924
3.	Alexandrovsкая	M.I.Kalinin	-
4.	Vygonnaya	I.V.Michurin	1925
5.	1 <sup>st</sup> Polevaya	N.F. Gastello	1947
6.	2 <sup>nd</sup> Polevaya	K.S. Zaslونov	1947
7.	Polevaya	N.D. Scherbitov, fighter for Soviet power in Rechitsa and Rechitsa District	-
8.	Novo-Polevaya	Yuri Gagarin	-
9.	2 <sup>nd</sup> Naberezhnaya	Avrora	-
10.	Sapozhnikskaya	Proletarskaya	-
11.	Andreyevskaya	A.V. Lunacharsky	-
12.	Vladimirskaya	M.S. Uritsky	-
13.	Mikhailovskaya	Karl Marx	-
14.	Semyonovskaya	V.I. Chapayev, Civil War Hero	1921
15.	Tyuremnaya	Komsomolskaya	-
16.	Soldatskaya	Krasnoarmeiskaya	-
17.	Bezmyannaya	V.V. Zhilyak, fighter for Soviet power in Rechitsa and Rechitsa District	-
18.	Nikolayevskaya	Rosa Luxemburg	-
19.	Rudnyanskaya	E.P. Mitskevich, fighter for Soviet power in Rechitsa and Rechitsa District	-
20.	Lugovaya	P.M. Khlus, organizer of the town's public health system, Merited Doctor of the BSSR (1958), the town's Citizen of Honor	1983
21.	1 <sup>st</sup> Pochtovaya	F.A. Trifonov, Hero of the Soviet Union, killed in battle for the liberation of Rechitsa in 1943	1973
22.	Parkovaya	I.K.Dvadnenko, Hero of the Soviet Union, killed in battle for the liberation of Rechitsa in 1943	1973
23.	Dachnaya	I.V. Krasikov, Hero of the Soviet Union, killed in battle for the liberation of Rechitsa in 1943	1973
24.	Kulikovskaya	K.I. Naumov, Hero of the Soviet Union, killed in battle for the liberation of Rechitsa in 1943	1973
25.	Rudnyanskaya	Marshal M.V. Tukhachevsky	-
26.	Kazarmennaya, Kooperativnaya	Marshal I.I. Konev	-
27.	Trudovaya	I.A. Senkin, militiaman killed when performing his duty	-
28.	Industrialnaya	V.L. Snezhkov, Party functionary, participant in the partisan movement	-
29.	1 <sup>st</sup> Kladbishchenskaya, Aviationsnaya	M.F. Turchinsky, leader of the partisan movement of Rechitsa District during the Great Patriotic War	1985
30.	2 <sup>nd</sup> Kladbishchenskaya	Tankovaya	-
31.	Kommunalnaya	P.P. Opyakin, a military commander who liberated Rechitsa and Rechitsa District during the Great Patriotic War	-
32.	Kolkhoznaya	35 <sup>th</sup> Guards Mortar Brigade	-
33.	Druzhby	M.M. Seredin, a military commander who liberated Rechitsa and Rechitsa District during the Great Patriotic War	-
34.	Vokzalnaya	M.P. Sydko, Hero of the Soviet Union, lived in Rechitsa since 1963	1983
35.	Fabrichno-Zavodskaya	V.G. Massalsky, Hero of the Soviet Union, was born in Rechitsa	-
36.	Fabrichno-Zavodskoi Lane	Kommunisticheskoi Roty	1965

*Table compiled from resources at the Rechitsa Museum of Regional Studies*