

Traces of Jewish life in Opatów, Poland

Opatów was the first noble town in the Sandomierz County, where Jews settled down. In 1538 there were four Jewish families living here. In 1634 the town was divided in two parts – Christian and Jewish. Opatów was a very important trade centre which was run mainly by Jews. Merchants from Persia, Crimea, Greece and Turkey visited the town to buy and sell goods. The first privilege for Jews in Opatów was granted in 1545 by the then owner of the town - Jan Tarnowski. The first rabbi in Opatów known from reports was Izaak ben Eljakim Heilprin, who began to perform his function before 1590. Opatów was the home of one of the six districts of the Jewish Sandomierz and Cracow lands.

Famous Opatów rabbis are Abraham Jozue Heschla (Herschla) known as Rabbi of Opatów and Meir Rothenberg. It was in 1825 when Opatów became most important as the centre of Hasidism. Then, about 200 Jews came to Opatów every shabbat and on more important holidays even 500-600 people from outside the town.

In the nineteenth century and in the period between the wars Opatów was still one of the biggest and most important Jewish communities in this region. It is worth mentioning that in the patriotic manifestations which took place in Opatów before the January Uprising, Jews also participated. Doctor Wiktor Stawowczyk characterising Opatów in the I World War period reports that the town can only dream about the foregone fame as the connector between the west and the Asian Mediterrean lands – when the huge market was buzzing with various languages and stored piles of exotic goods.

„I should explain that I don`t differentiate very much between Jewish and non-Jewish life. I had a few friends who were not Jewish, although they were not my very closest friends. When we met, we had a good time. We would chit-chat, walk around for a couple of hours, and discuss different things, from politics to schoolwork. These friends were not anti-Semitic or hateful. I used to play music with a Christian boy, but that`s where it ended because he belonged to one side of town and I belonged to the other side. That said, more than two thirds of the population of Apt (Opatów) was Jewish: in 1921, there were 5.462 Jews and 2.365 Christians. We considered Apt a Jewish town: a Jew could live out his whole life in the Jewish community, and many never went beyond the town`s boundaries.“

- Mayer Kirshenblatt -

(Mayer Kirshenblatt/Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, They called me Mayer July. Painted memories of a Jewish childhood in Poland before the Holocaust, London 2006, p. 5 ff.)

In the years between the wars Opatów was a county town. According to the census from 1921 there were 8827 inhabitants among whom there were 5432 Jews, which is 61,5%. Christians and Jews lived there peacefully side by side.

THE OCCUPATION AND THE HOLOCAUST

One of the greatest tragedies that happened to Jews was their systematic persecution and extermination. On the territories conquered by the Germans until 1941, there lived 7,8 million Jews – including 3 million in Poland, when in the autumn of 1939 they were made to wear the Star of David symbolizing the Jewish nation (in the Third Reich this obligation existed since the autumn of 1941, in occupied areas of western Europe since the spring of 1942). All their belongings were taken away from them, their freedom was limited. Since 1939 Jewish Councils (also known as Judenrat) were established. These Jewish municipal administrations were required to ensure that Nazi orders and regulations were implemented. Ghettos were created: at the beginning in Poland (around 400), and later in other countries. The conditions of life were terrible there and any attempt to escape was punished with death. German Nazis created concentration camps in which Jews were kept and then killed by hunger, extremely hard work and mainly by gas and finally burnt (some have even been reported to have been burned alive). Over 400 concentration camps were created in Poland, in which the mortality rate ranged around 50%. Both in concentration camps and outside them, Nazis murdered approximately 6 million Jews during the Second World War. Many of them were outstanding scholars, artists and writers.

THE GHETTO IN OPATÓW

The Opatów Ghetto was a World War II ghetto set up by Nazi Germany for the purpose of persecution and exploitation of local Jews in the town of Opatów during the German occupation of Poland. The ghetto population at the time was around 7,000 people. Expellees were brought in from smaller towns, but also a group of expelees from the Czech Republic from Vienna. Severe overcrowding led to steadily increasing number of deaths. The Ghetto was closed off from the outside officially on 13 May 1942 in preparation for its eventual dismemberment. The approximate number of Jewish people confined to the ghetto was about ten thousand. Beginning in January 1942 the SS conducted mass shooting actions at the Jewish cemetery in Opatów [Apt] where the bodies of the Ghetto victims were also buried by the hundreds.



Old Jewish school



Old Jewish bath



Jewish synagogue



Jewish cemetery



Jewish monument