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Author(s): Shimshon Leib Kirshenboim , Aharon Weiss and Shmuel Spector
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KREMENETS

KREMENETS (Pol. **Krzemieniec**), town in Tarnopol district, Ukraine, from 1344; under Lithuania until 1569; Poland-Lithuania until 1793; Russia until 1918; and again under Poland until 1939. Jews are first mentioned there in 1438, when they were granted a charter by the Lithuanian grand duke Svidrigailo. They were expelled in 1495 along with all other Jews in Lithuania, returning in 1503. The number of Jews in the town rose from 240 (10.6% of the total population) in 1552 to 500 in 1578 and 845 (15% of the total) in 1629. The community developed and prospered in the 16th and 17th centuries, up to 1648. It was a center of *Arenda activity and the related trade. Among the rabbis of that period were Mordecai b. Abraham Jaffe and Samson b. Bezalel, brother of Judah Loew b. Bezalel of Prague. The representatives of the community participated in the work of the Volhynian Council, and in the work of the Council of Four Lands. Outstanding among the scholars of the yeshivah at the beginning of the 17th century was *Joseph b. Moses of Kremenets . In the *Chmielnicki massacres (1648–49) and the Russian and Swedish wars soon after, many Jews were savagely murdered and many others fled. Subsequently the community was unable to regain its former importance. In 1765 only 649 Jews lived there. The Jews were prohibited from rebuilding the houses burned down in the frequent fires that broke out in the town. At the beginning of Russian rule Kremenets was an impoverished community of petty traders and craftsmen.

Kremenets was within the range of 50 versts from the Russian border, which was prohibited to Jews, but the authorities did not apply this prohibition to the town. The number of Jews increased from 3,791 in 1847 to 6,539 (37% of the total population) in 1897. At the end of the 19th century they played an important role in the economy of the town, in particular the paper industry, and the Jewish carpenters and cobblers of Kremenets exported their goods to other towns in Poland and Russia. There was an active cultural life in the community with the Haskalah and Ḥasidism competing for influence. The Haskalah writer Isaac Baer *Levinsohn lived there, as did the Ḥasid R. Mordecai, father-in-law of Nahum Twersky of Chernobyl. In 1918–20 Kremenets suffered from the attacks of marauding bands in the Ukraine. In 1921, 6,619 Jews lived there, and 7,256 in 1931. In modern Poland the Jews faced both the need for reorganization of their markets, as they were cut off from Russia, and the anti-Jewish policies of Polish society and state. Cultural life continued, influenced mostly by Zionism. Two periodicals in Yiddish, which appeared at the beginning of the 1930s, merged in 1933 into one weekly newspaper, *Kremenitser Leb'n*. Until 1939 there operated in town a Hebrew Tarbut school, as well as a Hebrew nursery, a *talmud torah*, and an ORT vocational school. A local drama circle and a string orchestra gave public performances. The violinist Isaac *Stern took his first steps in music there.

[Shimshon Leib Kirshenboim]

Holocaust Period

The Soviet authorities took over the town on Sept. 22, 1939. In the spring of 1940 the refugees from western Poland were obliged to register with the authorities and to declare whether they wished to take up Soviet citizenship or return to their former homes, now under German occupation. For family reasons, many refugees declared that they preferred to return; that summer they were exiled to the Soviet interior. All Jewish communal life was forbidden, and Zionist leaders moved to other cities to keep their past activities from the knowledge of the authorities. By 1941 the Jewish population had increased to over 10,000, including about 4,000 refugees.

Kremenets was occupied by the Germans on July 1, 1941. Hundreds of young Jews managed to flee to the Soviet Union. A pogrom broke out on July 2, 1941, when Ukrainian police, aided by Germans, concentrated 800 Jewish men, women, and children, made them open graves of Ukrainian prisoners – killed by the Soviet NKVD before retreating – and accused the Jews of being to blame, and murdered all of them. In the beginning of August 1941 the *Gestapo ordered all Jews with academic status to report for registration. All those who did so were murdered, and thus the Jewish community's leadership was destroyed. That month the Germans bombed the main synagogue and exacted a fine of 11 kg. of gold from the community. They also imposed a *Judenrat , headed by Benjamin Katz, but he was murdered for his refusal to collaborate with the Nazis. Eventually the Judenrat consisted of a number of people whose influence was detrimental. On March 1, 1942, a ghetto was imposed and 9,340 Jews were crowded there. The inmates endured great hardship, such as starvation and diseases, and there was a serious shortage of water. Each day 10–12 persons died. On Aug. 10, 1942, the Germans initiated an *Aktion* to annihilate the inmates. Fifteen hundred ablebodied persons were dispatched to

slave labor in Bialokrynica, where they met their death on August 18, 1942. The vast majority of the ghetto inhabitants rounded up in the *Aktion* were taken in groups and murdered over trenches dug near the railway station, near a former army camp. The local Zionist leader Benjamin Landsberg committed suicide at this time. There existed a Jewish underground in the ghetto, which acquired arms and false Aryan documents with the help of Poles. The *Aktion* surprised them while they were still organizing themselves. They initiated sporadic fighting, inflicting some casualties on the enemy, and also set fire to ghetto houses. Only 14 of the Kremenets community survived the Holocaust.

[Aharon Weiss /

Shmuel Spector (2nd ed.)]

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