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NOVOGROD: IMAGES FROM MY SHTETL

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The following is abstracted from five pages in the Lomza Vizkor Book (edited by H. Sabatka, New York: 1957). According to Julius Marjor, who sent the translation to us, it is the most extensive published work on the Jews of Novogrod. All references to personalities in the original have been retained in this abstract.

(Introduction From The Yizkor Book)

Novogrod, 14 kilometers from Lomza, was well known by the 15th century. In 1434 permission was given (to the Jews) to open a Community Bath, a barbershop, etc., whose earnings were to go to the city authorities. In the year 1564 Novogrod had 300 houses. Employment of the Novogroder Jews was varied. There were then 14 shoemakers, 16 wagon makers, smiths, fishermen. Seventeen water mills existed in Novogrod and its surroundings near the River Narev and its tributary Piza.

The Jews of Novogrod did not suffer from any restrictions in the 16th and 17th centuries, such as Lomza endured. In the year 1856 before the Polish uprising the Russians carried out a census, according to which Novogrod had 1,185 Christians and 186 Jews. In the following 40 years the population increased by 50 percent. In 1897 there were 1,177 Jews out of a total population of 3,029.

Images From My Shtetl

Novogrod had three "making a living" days each week. On Tuesday, the long market day fair; Friday, the short market day; and Sunday when the shops were really closed from the front side, but open from the back door, through which there was a sizable trade with the Gentiles from the surrounding villages. They used to come to town to go to Church and, on the way, to do some shopping, or grab a drink at the bar. The rest of the week, the Novogrod Jews were involved in Jewish matters, such as charitable things, Societies, etc.

As everywhere in those stormy times (about the year 1905), Novogrod had a number of revolutionary young people. I remember some: Mordeke SHKLAZHEVSKY, Alter ZABYELK, Berl LOKSHEVITZ, Itche ZALMENKES.

One time when I was eight years old I went with my father to Lomza. Suddenly M. SHKLAZHEVSKY appeared. A shot was heard; young men ran to a policeman, who fell near M.A. HEPNER's store. The fellows inter-mingled among the wagons and the mass of people and were not caught. All the Gentiles left the old market with their carts because they were frightened. My father and I also went home quickly. The attackers, after a certain amount of time hiding out, came back to Novogrod. They were members of the Socialist Revolutionaries who were involved in terrorism throughout the Russian Empire.

In the same year, on a Sabbath in the middle of the service, there entered into the Shul 40 fellows with long forelocks from Lomza who blocked the exits. They let out only the children and elderly. The same M. SHKLAZHEVSKY, a former Yeshiva student, got up on the stage and delivered a speech about the Revolutionary movement for freedom. "Guards" were posted with loaded revolvers in their hands. The congregation had to listen to everything and not move from their seats. After the speech, they fired several times into the air and left for their wagons.

One time, at the market, the bar of Zalmen-Barukh TOBIASH (father of the well known teacher Jacob TOBIASH) was, as usual, full of drinking peasants. But in a room

facing the courtyard young men of the Revolutionaries were conferring. Suddenly police surrounded the house, and they were arrested. Shortly they were very discreetly freed from jail and sent to America. SHKLAZHEVSKY wiggled himself out of the hands of the police. They subdued and arrested him, but on the way he again broke loose and hid, and after a few days he went over the Prussian border and left for America. This SHKLAZHEVSKY was well known in the area. In America he was also active among the workers under the pseudonym Dr. ROZENBERG.

In 1909 several shoe makers and tailors split from the large Synagogue and formed a separate minyan in a private house. From the sale of Aliyas they earned money for The Society of Psalms and the Society for the Marrying of Orphaned Girls. The trustees were M. VISHNIAK and "Meir the Great".

One time they needed 200 rubles for a poor bride. So they delayed the wedding, and on Purim the Society organized a "spectacle" (a mock wedding). Hilka the movers son, a young tailor, dressed up as a bride and Itche BOGLE as a bridegroom. Other members of the Society, dressed well as in-laws, were accompanied to the canopy with music and dance throughout the whole town. Near every house the "wedding" stopped and everyone gave a nice offering, not less than a ruble. The rich Gentiles also donated, as well as some peasants. They collected 230 rubles.

On another occasion, the Society of Shoe Makers decided to write a Torah scroll. After a year, it was finished. Two societies of young people, Proud Fellows, whose members used to study and buy books for the Synagogue, and the Psalms Youth, whose members recited a chapter of Psalms every day, organized a great parade through the streets. A lot of them were dressed in uniforms of the cossacks, officers, and generals. They brought musicians from Lomza and Zambrov. Reb Yoel Yosl, the glass maker, made a large lantern. The windows of the lantern were painted to look as though Jews with beards were dancing with the Torah Scroll. Such a celebration Novogrod had never had. After that, whenever an "ending of the Torah" was celebrated, people would say: "It doesn't compare to the celebration of the shoe makers."

The society Friends of the Poor helped every poor man. When out-of-towners came, they would

be "raffled off" to the community. One time large maneuvers of the Russian army took place in and around Novogrod. In Novogrod were two regiments of soldiers, 500 of whom were Jewish. The High Holy Days were approaching. Two community leaders, Moshe Eliyahu MORGENSHTERN and Moshe-Yosef ROZENBOYM, with Rabbi Noah at the head, went to the headquarters in Kolno and (successfully) requested that the Jewish soldiers be freed from service. The householders wrangled with the Elders because they wanted to have more Jewish lonely soldiers. A lot had to be satisfied with only one.

In 1912 the Russian government allowed a Post Office to open in Novogrod. The town had to levy a tax on every household. My brother-in-law Pinkhas LIPKEVITS received the postal position. Later Yankev-Moshe PERKEL, the shamas, took it over.

People came to Novogrod by ferry over the Narev. Also, Fayvl KHMELEVSKY was for many years the lessee of a "swimming bridge." During the occupation the Germans built two bridges, in Kolno and in Mishenits, and the ferry became unnecessary. We young fellows then lacked a place for amusement.

Novogroder Rabbis were very well known for their Torah and "G-d fearing persons." About Reb Hershele, known as a Cabalist, it is told that he once saved the town from a great fire by shaking his handkerchief at it. The fire quickly extinguished itself. Thereafter, Novogrod considered itself safe from fire, as long as Reb Hershele lived. After him, Reb Noah served for 50 years. He was 75 years old when he died. A man of stately appearance and a well know orator, he made a living by selling yeast to the whole city. That is, his wife, the Rebitsin, sold it. He alone did not know anything about handling money. The old shamas Reb Hersh-Feyvl used to announce every Friday before candle lighting: "To the Shul!" The Gentiles would give way and take their hats off to (the Rabbi). After his death there were many candidates for the chair of the Rabbinate. Every Saturday a different person preached. There emerged two candidates: The Rabbi's son-in-law, Reb Shmuel SHAPIRO, and Reb Shmuel HIRSHBEYN, a son-in-law of the wood merchant Reb Leybtse. Each had his own following. Then Reb Natan ("Sarah Bashe's") LIBINGER brought from Lithuania a

Rabbi, a scholar and orator who pleased many. His enemies denounced him as a revolutionary, and he was arrested. After a talk with the Governor they freed him and sent him to Novogrod with honor. But shortly after, World War I broke out and Reb Shmuel **HIRSHBEYN** became Rabbi. He was wanted by all.

Evil decrees drove out all the inhabitants of the town on Purim, 1915. The Poles came back, but many of the Jews were scattered. Most settled in Lomza, whose Jews helped with apartments for the poor, cheap kitchens, etc. My sister Slava (a victim of Auschwitz) and the refugee woman Nakhama from Radzilov, under the auspices of the Lomzer philanthropist Kh. Y. **GLINKA**, arranged food for 200 refugees. With the German occupation about 150 families returned to Novogrod. We started to rebuild the ruins. Making a living was difficult, but one was free.

In 1917 we founded, as in Lomza, a Zionist organization, "Hatkhivah." To the opening ceremonies there came from Lomza **DAMAVITS**, **GLINKA**, and a singer. To the first Committee were elected: Motl **LOREN**, Velvl **TRITSANOVITS**, Gershon **ZAYDENSHTAT**, Khane-Sarah **HIRSHBEYN** and Esther-Hinde **MORGENSHTERN**. Simkhas Torah of that year was celebrated with great fanfare. The Zionist youth under the White and Blue flag sang and marched all over town. In every window they put a candle for our honor. Those who did not were fined and had to give a sum to the Jewish National Fund.

At the time of Polish Independence there was a split in our "Hatkhivah:" 50 members left and founded "Tsairay Tsion." Among the first committee were: Alter **SHKLAZHEVSKY**, Kalman **ZAVEYLIK**, Zelig **COHEN**, Gutke **MORGENSHTERN**, and this writer. In 1925 we united with "Poalay Tsion." In 1922 we founded a "culture-farband," and the Y.L. Perets Library. With about 1,000 books in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish it was the only library in the whole area. The Jewish students congregated around the library, where lectures were organized as well as forums.

Under the Russian government there were no elections to City Council. To the Polish Council there was elected one Jew, R. Moshe-Eliyahu **MORGENSHTERN**, a dedicated Zionist. When Poland became a Republic, out of 12 positions 7 Jews were elected.

Elections to the Jewish Community Council were very stormy. As heads of the Council were chosen: Moshe-Yosef **ROZENBLUM**, a powerful, influential person; Moshe-Eliyahu **MORGENSHTERN**, Shlomeh **SHTSHAVINOVITS**, a scholar and quiet worker; Yaakov **SREBROVITS**; Alter **ZHOTKEVITS**, a scholar and bestower of loving kindness. He used to lend money to poor workers without percent. Also, Dovid Reuven **YABLONSKEVITS**, a young man 35 years old. Once a shoe maker, he became a butcher and was a scholar who could speak and write Polish. This was the last community council of Novogrod. All were done away with by the Nazis.

Hebrew evening courses taught about Eretz-Israel. Berl **ZHOLONDZSH** was the Principal: today in Israel he is called **ALONI**. Mr. **FILAR** from Ostrolenke presided over the Hebrew Kindergarten. In 1929 during the riots in Eretz-Israel we sent the first four members from our "Hekhalutz" to receive "Hakhashara: Khayim **PINSKY**, Rivkah **GRODNER**, Sarah **SHVITSKOVSKY** and Rivkah **SREBROVITS**. All are today in Israel. In the same year was founded "Hakhalutz Hatsair," which had 80 members and was very active in Zionist work. Novogrod was the site of "Hakhalutz" get-togethers for a large part of Poland, including summer camps. Once, these groups camped near Novogrod and they wanted to organize a Herzl celebration. I delivered a request to the Lomzer Staroste, but after three days received no answer. We took it as a positive sign. So on a Sunday evening, about 500 youth with their flags and orchestras with lighted torches marched into the street which led to town. The Gentiles did not let them march in. The next day, the Jews took revenge on the President of the City Council. All his creditors came at the same time with their notes of credit and they demanded the sums he owed them. The President, very confused, came to this writer (who then worked in the city government) to ask forgiveness and proposed to give the fire fighters depot for the celebrations free. Next Sunday we celebrated in the best order. After that, he also allowed Mr. **TABENKIN** from Eretz-Israel to speak to a crowd of 600 people.

In World War II the community was destroyed. Out of 300 families no trace was left, except those who emigrated to America or Israel.