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JEWS IN THE KURPIE FOREST

ŻYDZI NA OBSZARZE PUSZCZY KURPIOWSKIEJ

Introduction

The Kurpie Forest, also known as the Green Forest, used to be called Zagajnica; the present name derives from the people who lived in this region: *Kurpie Zielone (Green Kurpie)* (in distinction to *White*), inhabiting the area between Pułtusk and Ostrów Maz.). The region covers approximately 2,000 km², situated between the rivers Narew (from the south), Pisa (from the east), Orzyc (from the west) and a former Polish-Prussian border (from the north); the area now spreads across the Voivodeship of Mazovia ($\frac{3}{4}$ of Kurpie), Podlasie ($\frac{1}{4}$) and Warmia-Masuria (Dąbrowy village). The “capital” of Kurpie is the town of Myszyniec, vying for this name with Kadzidło, which is slightly bigger but still a village¹.

The aim of the dissertation is to demystify the history of Jewish community inhabiting the region of the Kurpie Forest from the beginning of their settlement to the extermination during the World War II, and, in particular, to show the community’s contribution to an overall social development of the region discussed. The main sources of information are archival materials from The Central Archives of Historical Records (AGAD), the Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute (ŻIH) and the National Archives in Białystok (APB), including the Department in Łomża (APŁ), as well as printed materials². Available publications on the discussed region and the history of Jewish communities in northern Mazovia were also used.

Jewish settlements in the Green Forest during the Noble’s Republic of Poland

During the time of The First Republic of Poland, Zagajnica Forest belonged to the dukes of Mazovia and then (after incorporating this part of Mazovia to the Crown in 1526) to Polish kings, and it was a part of the Mazovia Voivodeship but in the area of Łomża, together with the following county administrations of Łomża, Nowogród and Ostrołęka. The towns built on the edges of the Forest (Kolno,

¹ M. Żerański, *Kurpie. Puszcza Zielona. Przewodnik turystyczny*. Cieszyn 2008, p. 11.

² What needs to be highlighted is: *Mazowsze Północne w XIX–XX wieku. Materiały źródłowe 1795–1956*. Elab. J. Szczepański. Warszawa–Pułtusk 1997.

Nowogród, Ostrołęka, Chorzele) were the “guidance of cultural work”³ for fairly unstable at first settlement (beekeepers, charcoal burners, hunters, fishermen). In the light of the eldest description of Zagajnica, it seems that the majority of the population were, however, immigrants from Prussia, thus Lutherans⁴. Since 1650, there had been a Jesuit mission⁵ in the Forest, with confrontational attitude towards Lutheran Prussia, which may have created more comfortable living conditions for Jewish people- that was the case in Węgrowo, where Jews took place of the Protestants leaving the town managed by new owners, Krasieńscy, who conducted an intolerant policy towards Jews. Unfortunately, no certain records from the 17th century relating to the presence of Jews in this area have been found so far⁶.

The process of Jews coming to Mazovia began in the 13th century (the eldest reference about Jews in Płock is dated 1237)⁷. Trade routes along the Vistula river, the Narew and the Bug encouraged Jewish merchants to settle in Płock, Warsaw, Wyszogród, Pułtusk and Wyszaków.

Mazovia was different from other districts of The First Republic of Poland in a matter of its uniformity: Polishness, Catholicism and poor urbanization. “Before the Partitions of Poland, Jewish population lived mainly on ethnically non-Polish lands, where the majority of inhabitants were Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians [...]. On ethnically Polish lands [...] lived 171 804 Jews [excluding infants under the age of 1, according to the census of Jewish people in 1765 – J.M.], representing 29,24% of the overall number of the population of Jews, but in the areas of mainly non-Polish population there were 415 854 Jews, representing 70,76%”⁸. In the Mazovia Voivodeship at that time there were 10 379 Jews, in the Płock Voivodeship (Northern Mazovia) – 3960, whereas in the Russian Voivodeship, for instance, 100111, in the Voivodeship of Trock – 33 738, Podlasie – 19 403. Interestingly, Jewish population used to live in towns and cities (e.g. in the Kalisz Voivodeship – 98,79%, the Łęczyca Voivodeship – 66,36%, the Sieradz Voivodeship – 77,53%). The situation was different in the Mazovia Voivodeship,

³ L. Krzywicki, *Kurpie*. Warszawa 1962, s. 516, as cited in: Z. Niedziałkowska, *Kurpie. Bory Ostrołęckie*, Warszawa 1988, p. 28.

⁴ *Najstarszy opis Puszczy Kurpiowskiej spisany przez jezuitę Łukasza Kościeszę załuskiego w czasie misji odbytej w lasach, Zagajnica, około 1650*, [In:] M.K. Kozłowska, *Duchowe i materialne wytwory kurpiowskiej kultury ludowej jako wyraz działalności myszynieckiej misji jezuickiej w latach 1650–1773*. Ostrołęka 2009, pp. 79–80.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 12–23.

⁶ AGAD, *Księgi ziemskie ostrołęckie 1633–1670*.

⁷ J. Szczepański, *Dzieje społeczności żydowskiej powiatów Pułtusk i Maków Mazowiecki*. Warszawa 1993, p. 7.

⁸ A. Podraza, *Żydzi i wieś w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej*, [In:] *Żydzi w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej. Materiały z konferencji Autonomia Żydów w Rzeczypospolitej szlacheckiej*. Wrocław–Warszawa 1991, p. 243.

where out of the total population of 10 379 Jews, 4092 (39,43%) lived in cities, and 6287 (60,57%) in the countryside⁹.

The situation in question can be explained by a confluence of some consequences. Jews living on non-Polish rural areas were intermediaries between noblemen (Polish or polonized) and peasants, i.a. as tax-collectors, lessees of taverns, breweries. In Mazovia, where gentry prevailed, the role of Jews was not significant. However, much more important was the fact that Jewish community was banned from living in most cities of Mazovia (there were only few private cities, and only their owners, who cared for their income, weren't prejudiced against Jews, especially when it came to trade¹⁰).

The functioning of Jewish community was often connected with the attitude of the Catholic Church in The First Republic of Poland towards Jews, which was related to church councils and successive Popes. Although local conditions did not always allow the all-Church doctrines of proceedings against Jews to be realized, the Polish ordinaries were yet obliged to release the canons of *De Judaeis* and Pastoral Epistles; some of them actually did that with apparent reluctance towards religious dissenters¹¹. The bishops of Płock, who managed the Catholic congregation from Northern Mazovia, were no different in this respect. As far as the Church goods are concerned, the bishops usually undertook to discard Jewish lessees, which was the case in Pułtusk and Wyszaków, managed by the bishop of Płock¹². The antipathy towards Jews is confirmed by the protocols of visitation in a parish in the Diocese of Płock, in which the Jewish were described as following: "they do not bring any good to the Church, even though they settle in Catholic places and apartments [...] Drunkenness is common among Jews"¹³. However, it is necessary to point out here that, despite the official rigid attitude towards Jews, it was the part of Catholic clergy, especially the monastic as they did not abide by bishop decrees, who willingly used the opportunity to increase their income collected from the Jewish lessees of parish goods, breweries and taverns, as well as of built or repaired synagogues¹⁴.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 244.

¹⁰ ŻIH, Master's theses written before 1939 r. (dissertations written under prof. Majer Bałaban's supervision), sign. 117/2 (E. Szejnberg, *Szlachta polska a Żydzi w drugiej połowie XVIII wieku*. Warszawa 1937), p. 4.

¹¹ Bishop Stefan Rupniewski wrote in a pastoral letter *O Żydach* in 1722 r.: "Not only did they almost deprive themselves of their disgraceful slavish name in Poland, publicly conduct their celebrations, customs, and services, usurbing all the freedom, but also over Christians they want to rule, and take away from them trade, mercantilism, art, craft, and other ways of earning a living", as cited in: A. Kaźmierczyk, *Polscy biskupi wobec Żydów w XVIII wieku*, [In:] *Rzeczpospolita wielu wyznań*. Materiały z międzynarodowej konferencji. Kraków, 18–20.11.2002. Ed. A. Kaźmierczyk et al. Kraków 2004, p. 351.

¹² J. Szczepański, *Dzieje społeczności żydowskiej...*, p. 8.

¹³ J. Szczepański, *Spoleczność żydowska Mazowska w XIX–XX wieku*. Pułtusk 2005, p. 30.

¹⁴ A. Kaźmierczyk, op. cit., pp. 352–355.

In terms of organization, Jews were related to religious communities – kahals and subordinated kehilas (przykahalki), and if the population was small (or they appeared later) they belonged to the nearest kahal¹⁵. According to the census of 1765, there were 2763 Jews over the age of 1 living in the area of Łomża; they all belonged to the kahal of Tykocin (tab. 1). Nearly half of them lived in the Stawiski parish; within the Zagajnica region Jews were found in the eastern part (the Lipniki parish was established only in 1838 and its account occurred in later censuses of Jewish communities).

Table 1

Jews on Łomża Land in 1765 according to Catholic parishes

Parish	Organization of Jews	Kahals they belonged to	Number of heads*
Stawiski	Kehila	Tykocin	1005
Zambrów	Kehila	Tykocin	197
Jabłonka Kościelna	Kehila	Tykocin	92
Rudki	–	Tykocin	83
Zawady	–	Tykocin	105
Śniadowo	Kehila	Tykocin	718
Lipniki	Kehila	Tykocin	64
Goworowo	–	Tykocin	109
			Total: 2373

Source: J. Kleczyński, F. Kluczycki, *Liczba głów żydowskich w Koronie z taryf roku 1765*. Kraków 1898, pp. 20–21.

Notice: * – the census did not include infants below the age of 1; it probably gives a lowered number of Jews as the amount of *pogłównie* depended on that (compare with J. Kleczyński, F. Kluczycki, op. cit., pp. 4–6).

The main sources of information about Jews living in the parishes within Zagajnica range are actually the protocols of visitations in the Płock Diocese. The area neighbored on the Duchy of Prussia (the Kingdom of Prussia since 1701), whose authorities did not tolerate Jews, and therefore they resided in local places. In a secular parish of Myszyniec, which was established at the site of a Jesuit mission in 1774, it was noted that 23 Jews lived there (out of 4300 of the total population); however, there was no information on the number of Jews from the neighboring villages in the Łomża Starosty, who “are sitting in taverns and

¹⁵*Atlas historii Żydów polskich*. Ed. W. Sienkiewicz. Warszawa 2010, pp. 80–86; M. Bałaban, *Z zagadnień żydostwa polskiego*. Lwów 1932 (the work refers to the organization in Małopolska and western Ukraine).

breweries”¹⁶. During the parish visitation in 1782, there were listed 9 Jewish men, 12 women and 17 children; nonetheless, the parish was at that time expanded by 11 villages (the total population increased to 5871)¹⁷.

The increase in the Jewish population in Myszyniec should be related to the transformation of this settlement into a town, which had certain trading laws and whose inhabitants were exempt from some feudal charges. In the light of the convincing arguments¹⁸, it ought to be assumed that it happened already during the Prussian governance.

Synagogue District in Myszyniec

As a result of the The First Republic of Poland partitions, Mazovia fell to Prussia. The region of Zagajnica was included in New East Prussia, Płock Department and a smaller part – Białystok Department (for the first time the Forest was located on different “voivodships”). In 1802, King Frederick William II approved of the Prussian government abolition of the cities’ privileges *de non tolerandis Judaeis*, which resulted in the migration of Jews from rural areas. In 1808 (already at the time of the Duchy of Warsaw), the number of Jews in “Kurpian and close-to-Kurpie” cities of the Płock Department was: Chorzele – 175 out of the total population of 375, Ostrołęka – 99 in 2036 inhabitants, Myszyniec – 122 out of 725¹⁹.

Table 2

Non-agricultural occupations in Myszyniec and Jews’ participation in them (September 2, 1830 status)

Occupation	Total number	Number of Jews	Jews: first name and surname, the amount of annual tax in zlotys
Stallholder	4	4	Hersz Rozen (18), Lewin Lewitan (18), Herszek Kofman (18), Hersz Rozner (18)
Butcher	5	1	Mosiek Zysman (45)
Soap maker	1	1	Icek Wolfowicz Rozen (20)
Nailer	1	1	Icek Rodbel (4)

¹⁶Archiwum Diecezjalne Łomżyńskie, sign. II 160, k. 1–2, as cited in: M. Przytocka, *Parafia myszyńska od 1773 do 2009 roku*, [In:] *Dzieje parafii i kościoła pw. Trójcy Przenajświętszej w Myszyńcu*. Ostrołęka 2009, p. 104.

¹⁷Archiwum Diecezji Płockiej, Visitation Acts No. 307, k. 16–18 (Myszyniec, 19.09.1782), as cited in: W. Paprocka, *Myszyniec. Studium z dziejów miasta*. Warszawa 1993, p. 100.

¹⁸W. Paprocka, op. cit., pp. 26–30.

¹⁹*Struktura wyznaniowa mieszkańców departamentu płockiego – 1808 r.*, [In:] *Mazowsze Północne...*, pp. 28–29.

Occupation	Total number	Number of Jews	Jews: first name and surname, the amount of annual tax in zlotys
Turner	4	–	–
Needlemaker	1	–	–
Carpenter	2	–	–
Blacksmith	4	1	Kuszel Tobiasz (4)
Woodworker	2	–	–
Coppersmith	1	1	Boruch Sztein (4)
Hatter	9	–	–
Tailor	9	5	Lewin Berliner (4), Leyba Szerman (4), Josk Perner (4), Leyzer Szerman (4), Ajzyk Szejnfeld (4)
Furrier	3	1	Leyba Czapnicki (4)
Wheelwright	3	–	–
Cooper	2	–	–
Shoemaker	8	1	Abraham Szumar (4)
Potter	13	–	–
<i>Obraznik</i>	4	–	–
Tanner	11	2	Jankiel Gerber (4), Icek Bączek Zysman (4)
Baker	13	8	Fizel Gutman (4), Boruch Tobiasz (4), Waliwia (?) Beylach (4), Boruch Sztein (4), Leyba Golfinkiel (4), Aron Blank (4), Leyzer Miller (4), Leyzer Tobiasz (4)
Glassmaker	5	4	Dawid Inerfeld (4), Icek Inerfeld (4), Leyba Inerfeld (4), Mosiek Inerfeld (4)
<i>Plockarz</i>	7	–	–
<i>Vodka producer</i>	5	2	Mortek Bursztyn (20), Icek Tobiasz (20)
Dyer	2	–	–
In total	119	32	

Source: AGAD, KRSW, sign. 4411, The Personal List of Wage-earners in Myszyniec City, Ostrołęka District, Płock Voivodeship, dated 2 September 1830 r., as cited in: W. Paprocka, op. cit., pp. 117–124.

Due to the fact that Chorzele, Ostrołęka (and Nowogród) were situated on the edges of Zagajnica (called the Green since the 18th century, in comparison to the White), particular attention shall be paid in this respect to the development of Jewish community in *the very heart* of the Forest – Myszyniec. The population gradually increased, mainly because the city was becoming an attractive place for worshippers of Judaism, due to the process of expelling them from rural areas. According to the report of mayor Ignacy Zaleski made in 1820, in the city alone lived 291 Jews²⁰ next to 924 Christians, and they also inhabited local villages²¹. An interesting source of insight into the lives of the Myszyniec Jews is the *Personal List of Wage-earners* preserved in the records of the Government Commission for Internal Affairs (KRSW), which is dated 1830 (tab. 2) so from the times of the Kingdom of Poland. The list contains 119 “job positions”, including 32 Jewish “jobs” (4 stallholders, 1 butcher, 1 soap maker, 1 nailer, 1 blacksmith, 1 coppersmith, 5 tailors, 1 furrier, 1 shoemaker, 2 tanners, 8 bakers, 4 glassmakers, 2 liquor tavern keepers), which represented 26,89% of the whole. The number of “wage-earning Jews” alone was slightly lower – Boruch Szein worked at the same time both as a coppersmith (probably a producer of cauldrons) and a baker.

Similarly to other towns, the following professions can be distinguished: “Christian”, “Jewish” and “mixed”. There were interesting “pre-Jewish” occupations such as *obraźnik* (probably a folk sculptor, a person who made of wood sculptures of saints and other people) and *płockarz* (the name presumably derived from a “fence” – in Polish “plot”, therefore they were people who made wooden railing for fences). As far as Jews are concerned, it is worth noting a “nailer” (so far, probably, nails were rarely used, and, if needed, they were brought from outside) as well as “glassmakers” – this profession was almost entirely in the hands of the Inerfeld family. The stallholders, thus the owners of small trading “stalls”, were only Jews.

Unlike in Ostrołęka²², for instance, the amount of tax for particular “wage-earners” in a profession was undiversified. This demonstrates the lack of property disproportion, less developed “tax system”, and as a result – a later development of “Professionals” and a city in general.

Urban concentration of Jews during the successive governments (Prussian, the Duchy of Warsaw, and the Kingdom of Poland) resulted in the formation of the so-called synagogue districts, the “inheritors” of kahals. An effort to create their own

²⁰ AGAD, KRSW, sign. 4206, The historical and topographically-statistic description of Myszyniec city made by Ignacy Zaleski the mayor of this city in 1820 r., as cited in: W. Paprocka, op. cit., pp. 112–115.

²¹ According to the 1817 census of the Diocese of Płock, in the whole Myszyniec parish out of the total population of 9966 people (at that time it was a parish with the largest population in the entire diocese) there were 385 Jews – *Parafie Diecezji Płockiej z największą liczbą Żydów i innowierców – 1817 r.*, [In:] *Mazowsze Północne...*, p. 51.

²² J. Mironczuk, *Żydzi w powiecie ostrołęckim do I wojny światowej*. Ostrołęka 2011, pp. 41–44.

religious community was also made by Jews from Myszyniec. When the November Uprising broke out, “The Jews, who had the Material prepared, from which in the Revolutionary Ages with the Mayor’s consent, and for saving it from damage by the Troops during marches, they established a Synagogue, before having a proper permission from the authorities to do so”²³. It is worth noting here that the Jewish observed the outbreak and the course of the Polish-Russian war with great concern, and with little belief in Poland’s victory, and the harassment of Polish troops even deepened the unwilling attitude towards the uprising²⁴; of course, there were also cases of Jews’ involvement on the uprising side²⁵.

With regard to founding a synagogue, the Jews of Myszyniec approached the Commission of Płock Voivodeship about the approval for construction, and they then addressed the inquiry to the Administrative Council of Governmental Commission for Internal, Clerical and Educational Matters – KRSWDiOP (formed from “combining” internal, religious and educational affairs), informing that the synagogue in question “requires not much to be finished – demanding for now that a consensus for that purpose is given, that is building Synagogues in other places, apart from those with Jewish Communities”²⁶.

KRSWDiOP applied with regard to the above-mentioned case to the Jewish Committee (the central authorities’ consultative body concerning Jews), and it noticed that: “the rules of Jewish Religion do not allow on public holidays, prayer services and fasting, when every Israelite has to be in a Synagogue, to travel such long distances as the one from Myszyniec City to Ostrołęka [approximately 40 km – J.M.]; and so, the inhabitants of Myszyniec may not belong to the Community in Ostrołęka nor this Community to Myszyniec [...] The Committee’s opinion is to release the Jews in question from the punishment for not having the permission to build the so many times mentioned Synagogue”²⁷. KRSWDiOP agreed on the requests, but with the reservation that: “as long as there are no obstacles in terms of

²³ AGAD, The Central Religious Authorities (Centralne Władze Wyznaniowe), sign. 1675, k. 6–8, A letter from the Jewish Committee (Pismo Komitetu Starozakonnych) dated 6 July, 1833 to KRSWDiOP.

²⁴ J. Szczepański, *Dzieje społeczności żydowskiej...*, p. 58: “In Różan, were hanged a Jewish waiter and a crossing guard Antoni Darewski from Ostrołęka, who led gen. Sacken’s troops near Różan and pointed him a crossing route over the Narew”.

²⁵ *Patriotyczna postawa płockiego Żyda Behr Mendel Kurtzbanda – maj 1831 r.*, [In:] *Mazowsze Północne...*, pp. 94–95: “The commander [...] presented to me a dressed entirely according to the rule in the uniform of the Mobile Guard Star. Behr Mendel Kurtzband, «dziesiątnik setni dziesiątnej» of the Security Guard. That man, having left all the superstitions, was the first to set an example of a well-thinking inhabitant of the country, where he resides”.

²⁶ AGAD, CWW, sign. 1675, k. 3, Letter from the Płock Voivodeship Commission dated 16 December, 1832 to KRSWDiOP.

²⁷ AGAD, CWW, sign. 1675, k. 6–8, Letter of the Jewish Committee dated 6 July, 1833 to KRSWDiOP.

police legislation and the due rounding of the Jewish Communities of Myszyniec and Ostrołęka”²⁸.

However, some obstacles must have arisen (lack of relevant records) as no independent synagogue was established at that time. Another effort was made in 1855: “The Jewish inhabitants of Myszyniec [...] established with their own means a synagogue, a beth-midrash and a bathhouse, they organized a cemetery and, regardless of the contributions to the Synagogue district in Ostrołęka, they maintain in Myszyniec an assistant rabbi, a Cantor-Scholar and lower synagogue service [...] furthermore, the village of Goworowo and other villages in the area, although less populated by Jews than Myszyniec and only 2 miles away from Ostrołęka – have their own separate district, and so Myszyniec City – with more than 120 Jewish families – and situated far away [written above, exaggerated by 6 miles – J.M.] from Ostrołęka deserves the consideration”²⁹. The following documents were attached to the letter: 1) Name list of Jews in Myszyniec and in the area (741 people), 2) Protocol of the “synagogue supervision” selection, 3) Project for a job position in *Kassa Bożniczna*, 4) Name list of the collection among Jews from Myszyniec, 5) Their application dated November 20/December 2, 1851. On December 18/30, 1855 KRSWiD approved of “separating Myszyniec City from the synagogue district in Ostrołęka”³⁰. As a result, a synagogue district was established in Myszyniec.

In August 1857, “the Builders from Ostrołęka Powiat”, together with the mayor of Myszyniec and a local “synagogue supervisors” carried out an inspection of the synagogue: “made of wood and built on a foundation, with tiles on the roof and in a medium condition, it is 48½ feet long, 37 wide, 16 feet high and it consists of one main room and a hallway leading to the gallery [...] The population of Jews in Myszyniec is about 800 people, therefore the size of the synagogue is too small in terms of the population. For that reason, next to the synagogue (the main house of prayer) there was also a so-called beth-midrash (a study hall) in which they carry out religious rites during bigger Jewish gatherings”³¹.

The Fund of *Kassa Bożniczna* in Myszyniec district in the years 1857–1860 was as follows: **Income** 1) From leasing a bath in a bathhouse – 10 rs. 2) From burying the deceased – 3 rs. 3) From reading the *Rodale* – 5 rs. 4) From selling yeast to Jews for baking on holidays and celebrations – 8 rs. 5) From donations of the faithful – 205 rs. 6) From donations collected in the moneybox – 2 rs. In total: 233 rs. **Expenditure** I. On salaries: 1) Assistant rabbi – 60 rs. 2) Cantor – 40 rs. 3)

²⁸ AGAD, CWW, sign. 1675, k. 12–14, Letter of KRSWiDiOP dated 24 November, 1833 to the Płock Voivodeship Commission.

²⁹ AGAD, CWW, sign. 1675, k. 20–22, Letter of the Guberniya of Płock Authorities dated 19/31 October, 1855 to KRSWiD.

³⁰ AGAD, CWW, sign. 1675, k. 23–26, Letter of KRSWiD dated 18/30 December, 1855 to the Guberniya of Płock Authorities.

³¹ AGAD, CWW, sign. 1675, k. 27–28, Protocol of the Myszyniec synagogue inspection dated 1/13 August, 1857.

Scholar – 30 rs. 4) Assistant in burial – 20 rs. 5) Office stationery for the cashier – 4 rs. 50 kop. 6) Office stationery for the “synagogue supervisors” – 3 rs. II. Fuel and lighting in the synagogue: 45 rs. III. Taxes and fees: 12 rs. 38 ½ kop. IV. Different needs: 1) 5% of all the income for the Cashier – 11 rs. 65 kop. 2) At the disposal of the Guberniya of Płock – 6 rs. 46½ kop. In total: 233 rs. The years 1861–1863 were granted with the fund of 258 rs. 30 kop.³² Among the documented references of the Myszyniec rabbis in the second half of the 19th century there were known: Elias Sorekom, Lejzor Lerner, Abram Goldszlak³³

Just before the administrative reform, when the region in question was incorporated to the newly-established Guberniya of Łomża, and Myszyniec was denied its city-status, in 1864 in Myszyniec only there was the following number of Jews: “individuals” – 304, “their families” – 704 (Poles respectively: 298 and 667, Germans: 10 and 20). Among them there were: “Townsppeople-farmers, i.e. persons who owned settlements and arable soil on the law of perpetual usufruct of land” (respectively: Jews – 1 and 6, Poles – 160 and 356, Germans – 2 and 6), “Townsppeople-non-farmers having settlements in the town on the law of rent-owned usufruct but not having gardens or land outside the town” (respectively: Jews – 60 and 226, Poles – 80 and 185, Germans – 2 and 7), “other inhabitants of the town” (respectively: Jews – 243 and 469, Poles – 58 and 126, Germans – 6 and 7)³⁴.

In 1866, an administrative reform was carried out and, as a result, the Guberniya of Łomża was created. At the same time, the tsarist authorities took effort leading to “arranging” the status of towns which did not fulfill specific requirements – as a consequence of the ukase (a decree) of June 1869, over 300 towns in the Kingdom of Poland lost their city rights, and among them there were also Kurpian Chorzele, Nowogród and Myszyniec; only Ostrołęka and Kolno as the county capitals remained cities. The above places were still Jewish “parishes”, thus synagogue districts.

The financial situation of synagogue districts in the Guberniya of Łomża improved during the overall economic progress at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Unlike in the beginning of their existence, they dealt much better with rising expenditures, both on rabbis’ salaries and other people employed by religious communities, as well as the organization of education, hospitals, maintenance of synagogues and other). City districts in Kolno and Ostrołęka had considerable savings in their annual budget, in smaller districts of Nowogród and Myszyniec the income and expenditure were balanced, which was still quite a good result, concerning the fact that “rural” Jews were rather poor.

³² AGAD, CWW, sign. 1675, k. 31–33, A Job Position for Kassa Bożniczna of Myszyniec District in the years 1857–1860; also, k. 35, Letter of the Guberniya of Płock Authorities dated 28 April/10 May, 1861 to KRWRiOP.

³³ As cited in: J. Mironczuk, *Żydzi...*, pp. 62, 80.

³⁴ AGAD, KRSW, sign. 4412 (statistic data of Myszyniec city, 1864), as cited in: W. Paprocka, op. cit., pp. 125–126.

The decline, extermination and legacy of Jewish community in Kurpie

The World War I outbreak drastically changed the situation of Jews in the Kurpie Forest, which was basically in the frontier zone: “In Myszyniec city [actually, it was no longer a city – J.M.] ... first, as a result of the denunciation of Poles, the rabbi of the city and some representatives of the Community [Jewish – J.M.] were captured, and then, on 29 August [1914 r.] the order of massive displacement of Jews from the city was issued. All the Jewish families in the number of 300 went out – men, women, children and the elderly – onto the field and gathered by the commandant’s tent, shivering with cold and indignation, and started to sing Psalms, asking him to reverse the evil and to call the order off, but the commandant did not care about them. And so the Jews had to leave their hometown and disperse, wander through the fields and paths, and look for a new place to live in the nearby towns and villages. After a few weeks, the governor obtained permission for them to return but the city had already been completely burnt down”³⁵. Equally tragic was the fate of Jews from Ostrołęka, when the front reached this city in July 1915, turning especially the Jewish district into a complete ruin³⁶.

The data from the population census on 30 September 1921 (tab. 3) correlate well with the 1906 data³⁷, which illustrate in detail the amount of Jewish population in particular municipalities and villages. Striking is the fact of the “disappearance” of over a half of the Jews from Myszyniec: in 1906 there were 1996 Jewish people; on the other hand, the number of Jews in Kadzidło increased – from 107 to 150 in total. The above-quoted mention was therefore supported by the census data.

Table 3

Jewish population in Kurpian municipalities of the Ostrołęka County, 30 September 1921

Municipality	Total population	Jews	Catholics	Other Christians
Dylewo	6426	170 (Dylewo Stare 14, Kadzidło 133, Kadzidło Poduchowne 17, Obierwia 6)	6230	26
Myszyniec	7671	927 (Krysiaki 15, Myszyniec 912)	6719	25
Nasiadki	5162		5115	47
Wach	8104	5 (Charcibałda 5)	8094	5

³⁵ A. Litaj, *Rozdział z dziejów zniszczenia*, as cited in: *Księga Żydów ostrołęckich* (2nd ed.). Trans. A. Ćwiakowska, Z. Drezner, S. Raczyńska, introduction J. Gołota. Ostrołęka–Tel Awiw 2002, p. 49.

³⁶ J. Mironczuk, *Żydz...*, p. 73 and photographs (unnumbered insert).

³⁷ *Pamiętna książka Łomżyńskiej Guberni na 1906 god* (Nasielenije Ostrolenskogo Ujezda), as cited in: J. Mironczuk, *Żydz...*, pp. 121–124.

Source: *Skorowidz miejscowości Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej na podstawie wyników pierwszego powszechnego spisu ludności z dnia 30 września 1921 r. i innych źródeł urzędowych*, Vol. V: *Województwo białostockie*. Warszawa 1924, pp. 56–60, as cited in: Z. Niedziałkowska, op. cit., pp. 197–206.

The archival sources, including the most important “Situation reports of the provincial governor of Białystok”³⁸ (both Łomża and Ostrołęka Poviats were included in the Białystok Voivodeship, only a small part of the Kurpie region was in the Przasnysz Powiat – the Warsaw Voivodeship), confirm the opinion of a prominent expert on social relations in the Białystok region about the Polish-Jewish relations: “coexistence preponderated, examples of cooperation and healthy competition were noted”³⁹. This opinion cannot be changed even due to anti-Semitic excesses during a village fair in Kadzidło in May 1938 and anti-Jewish pledge near the church in Myszyniec in November 1938⁴⁰. Besides, even the Holocaust survivors left a similar opinion: “the relationships between Kurpie people and Jews were very good. Jews were called starozakonni and they trusted them as well as traded with them”⁴¹.

When the war broke out in September 1939, the Jewish community living in the Kurpie Forest, which shared a border with East Prussia, and where the Nazi atmosphere was particularly noticeable (for instance, the arson of all the synagogues during the *Kristalnacht*), started to depart in the southern and eastern direction, e.g. the Lewińscy family from Kadzidło. In October 1939 most areas in the Forest, including Ostrołęka, Myszyniec and Chorzele, were incorporated to the Third Reich, only the eastern lands, with Nowogród and Kolno, fell under the Soviet occupation. All the Jews had to leave the lands incorporated to the Nazi Germany and they headed towards Łomża, some of them to Ostrów Mazowiecka, occupied by the Soviets, and then further, into the so-called West Belarus, established by the USSR. Later, after the outbreak of the German-Soviet war, the Jews were taken over by the Nazis and directed to ghettos (e.g. the majority of Jews from Ostrołęka were placed in the Vilnius and Słonim ghettos, but most of them were murdered in November 1941), and next they were transferred to death camps, mostly in Treblinka and Oświęcim (Auschwitz)⁴².

The period of war deepened mutual relations, both in its positive and negative meaning. On the one hand, the war and occupation brought out some heroic

³⁸ APB, Weekly and monthly management reports of the Białystok Voivode 1928–1938.

³⁹ J.J. Milewski, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie w Ostrołęckiem i Łomżyńskiem w latach trzydziestych i w czasie II wojny światowej*. Zeszyty Naukowe OTN 2002, Vol. XVI, p. 164.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, pp. 166–167.

⁴¹ *Księga Żydów...*, p. 328 (report of Izrael Lewiński from Kadzidło).

⁴² The most important studies of this subject are: M. Grynberg, *Żydzi w rejencji ciechanowskiej 1939–1942*. Warszawa 1984; J. Gołota, *Losy Żydów ostrołęckich w czasie II wojny światowej*. Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego 1999, No. 3(187).

attitudes (hiding Jews, who survived in the number of a dozen or so near Ostrołęka thanks to the help of Polish people), but, on the other hand, even more unworthy and treacherous behavior was noted (e.g. a few months before the liberation, armed Polish forces carried out genocide of the Jews hiding between Ostrołęka and Łomża)⁴³. Besides, Jews themselves were not always only passive participants of events, which is supported by a report from the Kurpie region (it may be assumed that the report refers rather to White Kurpie) dated 1943 and addressed to the Delegate of the Polish Government: “Nonetheless, a lot of Jews escaped to forests forming bands and joining in many cases the Bolshevik airborne army. These bands are hostile towards Polish people, murdering every wealthier householder. The German army will liquidate such band from time to time, but generally it is quite indifferent to the news about attacks on Jewish villages”⁴⁴. However, a full clarification of the phenomenon requires further research and analysis.

The period of communism did not foster remembering about the Kurpie Forest co-inhabitants. The situation improved during the Third Republic of Poland. The effort made by the Landsmanshaft and local authorities led to collecting the remaining traces of the Kurpian Jews generally in their “centers”. In fact, it refers to Jewish cemeteries (*kirkuts*); the renovated *kirkuts* in Chorzele and Kolno should be distinguished⁴⁵, a slightly worse situation is in Nowogród; in Ostrołęka and Myszyniec, the “capital” of Kurpie, former Jewish cemeteries were “developed” and commemorated only by monuments.

Conclusion

The Kurpie Forest, also called Zagajnica in past times, had been the hunting ground and the area of the exploitation of wood and other forestry goods up until the 17th century, without any permanent residences. The “exit” to the Forest were urban settlements established on its edges; the eldest and the biggest of them is Ostrołęka. The “drive wheel” of settling in the Forest, apart from the local people who escaped there from Prussia, was also the Jesuit mission (*Mysiniac*), resisting the “heretical” Prussia. To some extent, the Catholic-Protestant competition favored the appearance of Jewish population.

The number of Jews in the Forest was not great until the end of The First Republic of Poland. In the vast Myszyniec parish there were only a few Jewish families, there were slightly more in the eastern part, in the Łomża County Starosty. All of them belonged to a kahal in Tykocin.

⁴³ *Księga Żydów...*, pp. 340–358, 360, 377, 391–392; J. Mironczuk, *Ostrołęka bez Żydów – kwestia żydowska w powiecie ostrołęckim po II wojnie światowej*. Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie 2014, No. 2(284), pp. 379–382.

⁴⁴ The Archive of New Files, the Government Delegation for Poland, Press and Information Department. Eastern section, sign. 202/III/149, k. 2, Report from the Kurpie region, as cited in: J.J. Milewski, op. cit., pp. 179–180.

⁴⁵ Online: <http://www.kirkuty.xip.pl/chorzele.htm>; <http://www.kirkuty.xip.pl/kolno.htm> [17.06.2017].

The development of Jewish settlement took place during the time of annexation, starting from the Prussian authorities, who enabled Jews to live in cities, just like in other districts of The First Republic of Poland. Apart from the cities on the edges of the Forest, Jews also brought together in Myszyniec, where they established their own synagogue district in 1855.

The Jewish community in Kurpie played an important role in the economic development of the region by introducing new products among local people and spreading a faster trade in goods. The increase in wealth of Jews at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries also brought out negative attitude of some Poles towards them. However, it did not result in any conflicts – both communities coexisted and sometimes cooperated; there were also – in fact, rarely but still – mixed marriages.

This quite consentaneous coexistence was demolished by two cataclysms – the world wars. The First World War brought “only” the material destruction whereas World War II led to a total extermination of Jews in Kurpie as well as in the rest of Poland. What remained is the memory, remembrance and few material traces.

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SUMMARY

The dissertation refers to the history of Jewish community in the Kurpie Forest (also called Green, in the past known as Zagajnica). Jews appeared there only in the 18th century. At the beginning of the 19th century they started to move to cities, including Myszyniec, where they established a synagogue district. The border with Prussia/Germany eventually turned out to be extremely dangerous.

STRESZCZENIE

Praca odnosi się do dziejów społeczności żydowskiej na obszarze Puszczy Kurpiowskiej (inaczej Zielonej, dawniej zwanej Zagajnicą). Żydzi pojawili się tam dopiero w XVIII w. Na początku XIX w. zaczęli się przenosić do miast, w tym Myszyńca, gdzie utworzyli okręg bożniczy. Pogranicze z Prusami/Niemcami okazało się ostatecznie dla Żydów bardzo groźne.

Key words: Jews, the Kurpie Forest, Myszyniec, Prussia

Słowa kluczowe: Żydzi, Puszcza Kurpiowska, Myszyniec, Prusy