

WORLD COMMITTEE
for the
PLOTZK MEMORIAL BOOK

IRGUN YOTZEY PLOTZK
BE-ISRAEL
(Plotzker Association in Israel)

PLOTZK

(PŁOCK)

**A HISTORY OF AN ANCIENT JEWISH COMMUNITY IN
POLAND**

Editor:
ELIYAHU EISENBERG
Vice-Chairman, Plotzker Association in Israel

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Notes

The English part is not a complete translation of the Yizkor book of Płock but rather a synopsis, summary, and should be treated as such. there are 684 pages in Hebrew and Yiddish but only 96 pages in English.

I have translated and added the titles and page numbers of articles which do not appear in the English summary. I added the code "H" if article is in Hebrew, or "Y" if in Yiddish.

I have added also the sub-chapters to the various articles, which are not included in the original Table of Contents. On many occasions I have added from the Hebrew and Yiddish parts of the book also names of people mentioned in the articles, when that was possible, mainly in the Holocaust chapters.

I have also added the names of people who appear in the photographs to the captions in English which did not include these names, see pages

I wish to thank the Płock Landsmanschaft who encouraged me and gave me and JewishGen the permission to post the Płock Yizkor book in the Internet.

It is my hope that this book will serve as commemoration to the Jewish ancient grand and holy community of Płock, exterminated by the Germans during the Holocaust.

Ada Holtzman April 18th, 2004 – Yom Hashoah , 27 Nissan, 5764

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FOREWORD

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It is with a feeling of deep respect and in a spirit of awe that we present the remnants of the Plotzk Jewish community and the Jewish public at large with this memorial volume. After collecting and editing a large amount of material over a period of five years, we now have the honor of putting the fruit of our endeavors into your hands. Whilst we, who have been engaged in this work, express our satisfaction that we were privileged to see it in its final form, we should nevertheless note that we did not succeed in bringing to light a number of chapters and happenings in the history of our community, which should have found their place in this book. Some events and personalities may also not have been fully or suitably reported or described since relevant information about them was not available.

We should therefore like to ask for the indulgence of all former Plotzk Jews, wherever they may be, in whose hearts the memory of their community is alive, as well as of all those, who engage in the study of Jewish history and are familiar with the history of our ancient community, and of thousands of other Jews, who are tied by family bounds or various memories to Plotzk. They will, we pray, regard our efforts in a favorable light, aware, as they surely are, that the flames of the holocaust fire have consumed much which can no more be reconstructed. In spite of these limitations, whatever we did was done in order to honor the sacred memory of our whole community; all its sons and daughters without exception. The whole community of ten thousand Jews, who lived there until the outbreak of the Second World War and who, - but for about 300 souls who survived, - all perished by fire and sword, by hunger and thirst, by epidemics and strangulation, through the hands of human beasties, the Nazi-criminals and their assistants. All of them, men, women and children, intellectuals and ordinary folk, rich and poor, all without difference of their ideologies or affiliation - are holy martyrs in our eyes and in the eyes of the whole people of Israel and hence entitled to an equal measure of honor and commemoration.

To honor the memory of our martyrs was the guiding light of our work. At the same time we saw to it that this book should not turn into a collection of family or individual memorial notations, but rather portray the whole Plotzk Jewish community throughout the ages, its struggles and achievements, its failures and successes, its greatness and final destruction. Descriptions of individual lives were included in this book only in as much as they contributed to an understanding of their period or reflected various trends of public life, or if the personalities portrayed led the community in one sphere or another.

For lack of reliable source-material it was virtually impossible to describe chronologically and pragmatically the history and activities of many of the communal institutions and public organizations in all their various facets of life. We therefore decided to append a biographical index of personalities, who were active for the common weal. Although we called several times upon ex-Plotzk people all over the world to let us have relevant background material on the lives and deeds of men and women who should be recorded in this index, we did not succeed in compiling a complete index, nor in some cases gather full details concerning individuals. The quantity of material in any item should therefore not be regarded as an indication of the respective person's importance and role in the community.

The same goes for the Yizkor-list in this book. We know only too well that it is virtually impossible to compile a complete name-list of our ten thousand brothers and sisters, who found their tragic death during the Second World War, since whole families were annihilated without any remaining survivors. Nevertheless we did our very best to collect over the years all available names of our martyrs through appeals to Plotzk survivors everywhere, so that they should at least find in the book some sign of their beloved ones who are no more. In the end only 2640 names were brought to our knowledge and among them many names of persons who were not residents of Plotzk before the war.

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The editors of this volume are conscious of the fact that they are but treading in the footsteps of their predecessors, who endeavored to secure Plotzk its rightful place in the annals of Jewish history. This aim found its practical expression in the activities of the committee set up as long ago as 1937 to commemorate 700 years of Jewish life in Plotzk, which culminated in the book published by Yeshaya Trunk in 1939. The present volume contains an abridged version of Mr. Trunk's work (which never reached the public because of the war), and includes as well the second part of the historical research compiled by the writer at the special request of the editorial board. We are convinced that the fruits of his labor are of great historical, social and cultural importance not only to Jews who hail from Plotzk, but to all those interested in the history of Polish Jewry.

Efforts by Plotzk Jews to commemorate their community in the form of a book were made immediately after the conclusion of the war. The first ones to bring out a memorial volume ("Plotzk, Blettlech Geschichte", Buenos Aires, 1945, 260 pp.) were the Plotzker Association in the Argentine. Dr. Jacob Shatzki in his lengthy review ("Yivo Bletter, Vol.27, 1946") praises their sincere efforts to commemorate the community in this way, but states that the need for a fully documented work on Jewish Plotzk still exists. Dr. Shatzki's evaluation and especially the extensive bibliographical list, which followed his article, undoubtedly contributed to the work of Shlomo Greenspan, of blessed memory, ("Yidn in Plotzk", New York, 1960, 328 pp.) which, although not constituting an all-encompassing review of the community, comes close to being a pure historical work of research. This book was verve favorably received by various reviewers in the U.S. A. and in Europe. S. Greenspan was regarded during recent years as the expert on the past of Jewish Plotzk. He left no stone unturned in order to reveal details of its history during the ages, and published many of his finds in the American Yiddish press. Devoid of the necessary financial means to bring out a full-fledged issue of his work, he devoted all his efforts to aid us in editing this book. The series of his articles on the great Rabbis of Plotzk, on A. 3. Papierna and especially his painstaking work collecting articles about Plotzk, which had appeared in the Hebrew press in the second part of the 19-th century, as well as the appr. 120 items of the biographical index which he edited, are evidence of the important contribution he made to the commemoration of our community. It should also be noted that he made available to us a great deal of material on the last period in the community's life and on the years of its destruction. This book, and especially its first part, would not have been the same without the collaboration of Shlomo Greenspan. We deeply mourn his untimely death and the fact that he did not live to see this work coming off the printing press.

Great emphasis was put on editing the third and last part of this volume, which describes the period of the Nazi-holocaust. The agony of our hearts was poured into the writing of this chapter, but in order to give an objective and true description of that terrible time, we introduce it by a historical review, specially written by one of the best known authorities on the holocaust, Dr. Joseph Kermish.

Letters written by Plotzkers in exile, which were contained in the Ringelblum archives

found in the Warsaw ghetto, are being published here for the first time. The last cries of our martyrs call to us from these pages...

Over 260 photos were selected from a wealth of pictorial material sent to us from many corners of the world. After screening them carefully, we believe that we have produced a Kaleidoscope of Plotzk Jewish institutions and organizations.

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The editors endeavored to give this book an aesthetic form and although this increased the cost of production, nothing was spared to create an impressive and suitable memorial volume. The assistance extended in this respect by the Plotzk-born painter Jacob Guterman, who adorned the book with his masterful drawings and illustrations cannot be appreciated enough.

The editorial board wishes to express its gratitude to all those who helped the work along in its various stages and who did their part with great devotion and full responsibility.

Mr. Adam Rutkowski of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw sorted and edited letters from the Ringelblum archives. He also choose for publication important historical material from the Plotzk Municipal protocols, but unfortunately these papers have not been received and could therefore not be included in this book. Mr. Zwi Yashiv, journalist and editor, corrected Hebrew and Yiddish texts and prepared the English synopsis. His professional advice was of value in editing this book. Mr. Abraham Frank inspected the English summaries and edited the English part of the book. Mr. Mordechai Sonschein, the publisher, showed great patience and understanding for the technical problems connected with the publication.

Last but not least: The accuracy and devotion with which the Printing-House "Arazi" Ltd. of Tel Aviv printed this book is most commendable.

We extend our sincere appreciation and gratitude to all authors of the articles, essays and reviews published in this book.

Thanks are also expressed to all those who sent us letters, written material and photos and to all our friends in Israel and abroad, who spared neither time, effort nor money to enable us to publish this book.

May they all be blessed, and derive satisfaction from their labor upon holding this volume in their hands and seeing that the work has been completed. We conclude with the words of the Psalmist (139, 36):

"And in Thy book they were all written ..."

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We express our sincere gratitude to our esteemed friend, Itzhak Grinbaum, who honored us

by serving as Honorary President of the World Committee for the publication of this book.

The Editorial Board

HISTORY OF THE JEWS IN PLOTZK UNTIL THE FIRST WORLD WAR (1237 - 1914)

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HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF PLOTZK FROM THE MIDDLEAGES UNTIL THE 17 TH CENTURY (1237-1657)

**(SUMMARY OF THE BOOK "HISTORY OF THE JEWS
OF PLOTZK" BY YESHAYA TRUNK - PUBLISHED 1939)**

FOREWORD

The Jewish community of Plotzk is considered, together with those of Kalish and Poznan, as one of the oldest in Poland. We have reason to believe that there were Jewish inhabitants in Plotzk prior to 1237.

In the years 1919-1939 (between the two world wars), Polish Jewry was engaged in a fight against official and unofficial anti-Semitic activities and legislation. It was then that proof was sought for the fact that the Jewish "Kehila" (community) of Plotzk was one of the oldest in that country, in order to refute thereby our enemies claims that the Jews were aliens on Polish Soil. A special jubilee committee was established for that purpose, composed of historians and other prominent personalities. The first part of a book, written in Yiddish, by Yeshaya Trunk M. A. on the history of the Jews of Plotzk was published by it in January 1939. This publication was, unfortunately, lost during the war years and only a few copies remained extant. Its contents form the basis of the article, of which the following is a summary in English.

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The first information about Jews in Plotzk dates back to the year 1237. No evidence of Jewish life in this town is available for almost two hundred years after that date. In 1425 - we are told by historical documents - a certain Misterlin, a Jew of Plotzk, appeared before a Court in a civil case. We learn that a Jewish community existed in Plotzk already in the 15th century from the fact that a rabbi held office there and that taxes due from the Jews were transferred from one Count to another. Their legal and political status changed as a result of the incorporation by the Polish Crown of the Principality of Mazovia (where Plotzk is situated). In the course of the 16th and the first half of the 17th centuries the Jewish community continued to grow, whilst many

other important Jewish communities vanished, as a result of deportations of Jews caused by anti-Jewish legislation by the Polish rulers.

An inventory list of 1572 states that "the Jews occupy one whole street of Plotzk and several houses in other streets". Another inventory mentions 25 Jewish houses there. Knowing the density of urban population in those times, we may assume the number of Jews to have then reached five hundred.

JEWISH TRADE

The town of Plotzk, on the banks of the Vistula River, served as an important trading center. Its merchants maintained commercial contacts with those of Gdansk (an important port on the Baltic Sea), and of other Polish and German cities. The Jews played an important role in developing trade relations, and many documents mention the names of those who were engaged in selling textiles, wool and other merchandise, some of whom became rich. Apart from wholesale merchants, most Jews in Plotzk made their livelihood from the local retail trade.

But, under the influence of Christian townspeople, Polish rulers began to impose trade restrictions on Jews in many Polish towns, including Plotzk. Rules and regulations confined Jewish commerce solely to fairs held in market places and their own shops. It is proved that these restrictions were not fully carried out because the Jews, deprived of their businesses, took advantage of the rivalry which existed between the local authorities and the King's representative. Various interventions resulted in the abolishment or gradual decrease in the enforcement of these restrictions and many historical documents prove that Jewish trade and commerce continued to prosper. Nevertheless, Jewish-Christian commercial competition continued to occupy the civil and royal Courts. In some instances Jews convinced the authorities that the restrictions imposed on them were to the detriment of the country's development. The King's attitude towards the Jews was in general more favorable than that of the local authorities, which were negatively influenced by the Christian population.

Some Jews made their living as money-lenders and among their main clients were Christian townspeople. These loans were extended against securities. Those who benefited from Jewish credit very often took their pawns back by force. Many such cases were brought before the Courts. It is also note-worthy that names of Jewish women appear among the moneylenders.

The weaving trade in Plotzk was highly developed and a weavers union existed there since 1494. Jewish participation in this trade was considerable. The names of Jewish glaziers and even of a Jew, who was licensed to manufacture weapons, are on record. Tension between Christian and Jewish artisans prevailed during all those centuries, and the former very often used their influence on the authorities in order to expel Jewish artisans from the Unions and to limit their rights to pursue their trade. The Christian bakers, for example, influenced King Zygmunt of Poland to issue a decree prohibiting Jewish bakers to buy wheat before their Christian colleagues had done so and to sell their bread in public markets.

As we know, Jews used to lease Government taxes from the authorities and collect them from the gentile population. This concession often caused anti-Jewish feelings and the ruling noblemen made constant efforts to abolish these concessions.

Even the "Council of the Four Lands" (*Vaad Arba Aratzoth*), an autonomous Jewish body which represented the Jewish population of four regions in Poland and Lithuania, prohibited Jews in 1581 to lease taxes from the authorities, thereby trying to eliminate an important cause of anti-Jewish feelings. Nevertheless, historical documents of those centuries contain many references regarding this "Jewish" source of income as well as court proceedings which show that Jews continued to benefit from their rights to collect several taxes from the population.

Various records mention Jewish farmers in the neighborhood of Plotzk as well as villages whose names (*Żydówka*) indicate that their inhabitants were Jews.

Historical documents of the 16th century mention Jewish physicians who lived and practiced in Plotzk. Some of them married gentile women, severed their relations with the Jewish community and even left Judaism.

LEGAL STATUS OF JEWS

When the region of Mazovia was coopted by the Crown, the status of the Jews changed. The general municipal laws regarding the Jews were replaced by special "Jewish" legislation which constituted special Courts for Jews and fixed special judicial and procedural court rules. These rules and regulations were sometimes very severe and treated the Jews as second-rate citizens. Jews were not regarded as "citizens", rather as "residents". Yet in many cases Jews benefited from special privileges accorded to them by the Kings, who regarded themselves as patrons and defenders of the Jews against their Christian neighbors, who succeeded to persuade the authorities to issue orders prohibiting Jewish "expansion", yet we gather from many sources that in spite of such anti-Jewish measures Jews continued to buy houses and establish themselves in all parts of the town.

The lists of Plotzk house-owners record at the beginning of the 17th century 25 Jewish houses and nearly 600 souls.

One of the famous conflicts between the Jewish community (*Kehila*) and the authorities concerned the right of the Jewish community to buy land for the establishment of its cemetery. That conflict lasted for almost 25 years and despite attacks and anti-Jewish outrages, the Jewish community continued to be recognized as the legal owner of the cemetery.

TAXES

The Jews were obliged to pay special "Jewish" taxes like all other Polish Jews. There were two categories of taxes: a) Royal taxes; b) municipal rates. The first category included: 1) Poll-

tax; 2) Property tax (on houses); 3) Tenant tax. The second one consisted of various fees and payments on immovable property, supply of water, watching and other services as well as special levies which were very frequently imposed. The Jewish rate-payers, who did not enjoy full civil rights, appealed in many cases to the higher authorities against illegal rates and even refused to pay them, as we learn from Court proceedings of the years 1538 and 1540.

In this connection it is worth mentioning that in 1616, when the City Hall was burned down, a special levy was imposed on the Jewish inhabitants to defray the costs of rebuilding the City Hall on the pretext that the fire which had consumed the building had broken out in the Jewish quarter. In some cases Jews were compelled to bribe influential officials in order to cancel evil decrees.

COMMUNAL ("*KEHILA*") ORGANIZATION

The Polish kings used the internal community organization (*Kehila*) as an instrument for the efficient collection of the taxes due from Jews (especially the poll-tax). On the other hand, the *Kehila* unit served the Jews as the nucleus of broader autonomous organizations, both regional and countrywide. Foremost among these was - at the end of the 16th century - the famous above mentioned, "*Vaad Arba Aratzoth*", representing Great Poland, Little Poland, Russia and Lithuania. This *Vaad* (Council) was composed of rabbis and key leaders of the most important Jewish communities and convened once or twice a year. The powers and duties of a community leader (*Parnas*) included: representation of the Jews before the King, ruler and general community; signing of documents in the *Kehila's* name; intervention in favor of community members against whom false charges were leveled; participation in Jewish courts, responsibility for collecting taxes from Jews, etc.

Lists of Jewish community leaders show that they mostly held office for lifetime and that the community leadership rested exclusively in the hands of a few families. Nepotism was characteristic for Plotzk as well as other communities.

Once a year elections to the Committee were held and every time 5 or 6 leaders (*Parnassim*) were elected. The results had to be ratified by the Wojwoda (District Governor). Every month a different leader presided over the Committee; hence the title: "The Leader of the Month" (*Parnass Hachodesh*).

The synagogue was the most important property administered by the Committee. Nearby stood the "*Mikveh*" (ritual bath) and the Hostel for the Poor. The Plotzk synagogue was burned down in 1616 and was rebuilt a year later on the strength of a license for which 30 Zlotys were paid. That synagogue was destroyed once more during the Swedish invasion in 1656.

Many historical records show that the Plotzk Jewish community was the most important and respected in the whole Mazovian region. It was for that reason that the Polish Jewish King Stephan Batory in 1580 handed his ratification of the Polish Jewish rights to the leaders of the Plotzk Jewish community as the *representatives of the whole Jewish population of Poland*.

JEWISH PATTERN OF LIFE

The cultural level of the Jews in Plotzk was a high one. The fact that among 600 inhabitants there were, in the second part of the 16th century, 5 persons who held the title "doctor medicinae", proves this. Some members of the community were richly dressed and possessed precious clothes, expensive personal effects and household goods. Even the name of a Jew who possessed a sword, is mentioned.

It is interesting to note that some Jews adopted non-Jewish first names under the influence of their Christian neighbors. Various court records mention such Polish names, although we may assume that in some instances the Court official himself "translated" the "odd" Jewish names.

The Jewish quarter was densely populated and its sanitary conditions deplorable. This was the cause of many complaints by the Municipality although the sanitary conditions in the non-Jewish part of town were far from satisfactory. When an epidemic disease broke out in 1603 most of the townspeople fled. Six fires broke out between 1511 and 1688 and some of them reduced the Jewish quarter to heaps of ashes.

BLOOD LIBELS

Blood libels and other false accusations were leveled quite frequently and the Jews made great efforts in order to defend themselves against them. To spread such rumors was forbidden by Royal legislation, but the hostile gentile population very often "invented" stories about the use of Christian blood for Jewish ritual purposes, stealing the "Holy Bread", etc. Five Jews (four men and a woman) were executed in 1556 on a charge of stealing and desecrating the "Holy Bread", brought against them by a Christian woman, who confessed before her death years later, that her testimony had been false. Some historians maintain that this accusation was staged by a bishop under the influence of a Papal emissary.

It should be mentioned that Christian women played prominent roles in many blood libel cases.

JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

The relationship between Jews and Christians in Plotzk was never quite normal although there were long periods of peace and mutual understanding. In some of the civic riots the Jews acted in self-defense and even attacked their persecutors. The clergymen very often led anti-Jewish mobs which invaded the quarter, destroying houses and wounding their inhabitants. The first of these riots, of which we have some information, occurred during Passover 1534. Other violent disturbances broke out in 1570, 1579, 1590 and 1656. Improper behavior of Jewish individuals sometimes brought about attacks on the whole community. On the other hand some documents record agreements entered into by representatives of the Jewish and Christian

communities with a view to secure peace and order, by virtue of which penalties were imposed on those who disturbed peace and order. We find Jews as arbitrators in inter-Christian conflicts as well as Christian witnesses who appeared before Courts in the defense of Jews against their persecutors.

PROMINENT *KEHILA* PERSONALITIES

One of the outstanding personalities who lived in the second half of the 16th century was **Josef**, the son of **Miriam**. He was one of the rich community leaders, maintained personal contacts with Polish noblemen and served as an intermediary between the Jewish population and the King's Court. His son-in-law **Shimon** was another well-known businessman and money-lender. A certain **Felix Berman** is also mentioned as a defender of Jews against blood libels and other accusations.

NON-RESIDENT JEWS

Plotzk was frequently being visited by a great number of Jews from outside, many coming from neighboring localities and some even from as far as Poznan. The municipality tried to impose restrictions on this influx, and Jews who wished to settle in town, had to pay special fees for the acquisition of that right. On the other hand many Plotzk-born Jews left the town for Lublin, Poznan, Lentshitsa and other localities, yet most of them did not sever their attachment to the place of their birth.

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CONCLUSION

The Swedes invaded Plotzk in 1655. A year later they were driven out again by a group of Polish partisans who celebrated their victory by attacking, plundering and slaughtering the Jewish inhabitants. The Poles accused the Jews of assisting the invaders, while the Swedish attitude to the Jews had not been less hostile.

After a short period the Swedes once more returned to Plotzk but finally left it as a result of an epidemic disease which ravaged among the citizenry. For three months Plotzk remained a "no man's land" until a company of Austrian soldiers took hold of the town. Their treatment of the Jews was no better than that accorded by the Swedes.

A historical document mentions a complaint by the Jews to the effect that many of them were killed and their houses, including the synagogue, destroyed during the Swedish invasion. Only seven Jewish houses remained in Plotzk in 1661.

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THE HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF PLOTZK