

Remembering the Jewish Community of

Zhetel, now Dzyatlava, Belarus

Remembered by Eric Pomerantz

This tribute is dedicated to the memory of my maternal grandfather, Harry Namyet (Ayzer ben Shapsai HaKohen), who immigrated from Zhetel, Poland to the United States as a young man in 1905, settling in Chelsea, Massachusetts. I also dedicate this memorial tribute to Harry's son, my uncle Saul Namyet, who settled in Sharon and was a member of Temple Israel for over 50 years.

When I began to research my Zaydie's hometown, I never expected to find any Holocaust impact upon our family, as I was unaware that my grandfather had extended family members who remained in Europe. I was surprised and saddened by what I learned.

First, some background information: "ZHET-el" is the Yiddish name of the town; in Russian, it is called Dyatlovo. At various times, Zhetel was under Polish, Russian, and German control; now it is in the Republic of Belarus. Zhetel is a small village, south of Grodno. Nearby towns are Lida, Novogrodek, and Slonim.

Jews first settled in Zhetel in 1580. The town was the birthplace of Jacob of Dubno (the "Dubner Maggid") and Israel Meir ha-Kohen (the "Chofetz Chayim").

In 1880, Zhetel had a Catholic church, a Russian Orthodox church, and two synagogues. In the 1920's, there were two churches and four synagogues with 3,450 Jews out of 4,600 people (75% of the population). Between 1939-1941, many Jewish refugees came to Zhetel from Western and Central Poland to escape the German invasion of WWII. By 1941, the Jewish population of Zhetel had increased to 4,500.

Up until WWII, Zhetel was a vibrant Jewish community. There were two modern schools, a Tarbut school where Hebrew was taught and a Yiddish school. There were political organizations of many different parties, with Zionist groups in Zhetel producing some of the earliest pioneers to immigrate to Israel. There were various institutions for caring for the sick, for orphans, etc. There were Torah study groups including one for learning Mishna and one for learning Psalms.

There was a market square in the center of Zhetel. Tuesdays were market days, with farmers arriving as early as 4 AM to secure a good spot for their cart. Tuesday was also a traditional day for weddings, so after a long day at the market, the merchants and townspeople would dance to the music of the Klezmer street musicians well into the night.

On Friday mornings, stores opened early for pre-Sabbath shopping. A siren would go off alerting the merchants when it was time to close up shop for Shabbat. The women would set out white tablecloths at home with warm challah. Pots of cholent were brought to the bakeries or to houses with big stoves to be kept warm for the following day's lunch. A second siren went off indicating it was time to light Shabbat candles. On Friday nights in the streets of Zhetel, one could hear the singing of z'mirot and one could smell the aroma of the specially prepared Shabbat foods.

After existing in relative peace with their neighbors, life for the Jews of Zhetel was about to change dramatically.

In June 1941, German troops occupied Zhetel. On July 15th, 120 of the most respected Jewish citizens (rabbis, professionals, intellectuals) were taken away and murdered.

In February 1942, the Jews were ordered to leave their homes and moved into a crowded ghetto.

On April 30, 1942, the ghetto residents were forced to gather outside at dawn. A selection was carried out. About 1,200 Jews were marched to the forest on the southern edge of the town, where pits had been prepared in advance. The Germans, assisted by local Polish police forces, shot the Jews in groups of twenty.

On August 6, 1942, a second and final massacre began, lasting for three days. As the ghetto was cleared, between 2,000 and 3,000 Jews were shot and buried in three mass graves. This was the end of the Jewish community of Zhetel after 400 years.

A lawyer named Alter Dvoretzky had organized a partisan group which escaped into the forest. They were known as the "Zhetler Battalion" and they attacked railroad tracks, interfering with German trains. There were also some family groups hiding in the forest for over two years under extremely harsh conditions. Out of the thousands of Jewish residents of Zhetel, only a couple of hundred managed to survive.

I have recently learned that amongst those Jews killed in Zhetel were my grandfather's Aunt Nechama Namiot, along with most of her children and grandchildren including our cousins Moshe, Yerucham, and Shapsai Namiot; cousin Rivka Namiot Gordon along with her husband Yitzchak Gordon, and two daughters Chaya (age 12) and Henya (age 9); cousin Chana Namiot Mnuskin along with her husband Noach Mnuskin and two children Nachum (age 8) and Shayna (age 3). Also killed were my grandfather's Uncle Herschel

and Aunt Rachel Namiot and his Aunt Yudis Namiot Mansky, Uncle Peretz Mansky and their two children.

I am blessed that my grandfather Harry who was already in America prior to WWII, lived into his nineties, married my Bubby Jennie, had five children, 16 grandchildren, 30 great-grandchildren, and so far 38 great-great-grandchildren! While the Jewish community of Zhetel has been destroyed, we will continue to carry on their legacy.