

Wolbróm

(Olkusz county, Kielce province)

Year	Overall population	Jews
1765	..	324
1827	2,716	724
1857	2,479	1,466
1897	4,815	2,901
1921	7,229	4,276

Wolbróm was founded in the 14th century when several villages were unified, and King Wladislaw Lokietek granted it the rights of a city. In 1378 the monks operated a school for the children. In the early 80s of the 15th century the city was almost completely annihilated in a great fire, and in 1485 King Kazimierz Jagiello renewed the privileges Wolbróm was given when it was founded and allowed its residents to hold a weekly market and annual fairs. In 1564 the city contained 72 houses and had a small Catholic church erected in it. Most of Wolbróm's residents were craftsmen of various sorts – bakers, weavers, blacksmiths, shoemakers, furriers, butchers and so forth – and a few engaged in distillation of alcoholic beverages or made their living from the field of lodging. In the early 17th century a hospital was founded in the city. In 1660 Wolbróm contained 85 houses and a groat mill was built in it. In 1795, with the third partition of Poland, Wolbróm was annexed to Austria, in 1808 it was included in the Duchy of Warsaw and in 1815 – in the Congressional Kingdom of Poland.

In the beginning of the 20th century Wolbróm was connected to the railway and had a train station built, and it became a prospering city, Among the production factories established in the city were a small leather processing factory, a flour mill, a sawmill, a factory for enamel-coated dishes and rubber products factory. In 1915 Wolbróm was conquered by Austria, which held it till the end of World War I in 1918. With the establishing of the independent Polish state it was made part of Kielce province.

The Jews of Wolbróm Until the End of WWI

Jewish residents of Wolbróm are first mentioned at the beginning of the 18th century, but it is possible that a few Jews lived there even before that. At that time they were subordinated to the Olkusz community, which, although it numbered no more than one hundred people, was considered a major community and replaced the much larger Krakow community. Several larger communities were subordinate to the Olkusz

community with the status of daughter-communities. At that time Wolbróm also had its own rabbi, Rabbi Menahem Nahum Ben Rabbi Benjamin (d. 1790 in Krakow). Serving after him was Rabbi Yaacov Ben Rabbi Zvi Segal (d. 1819), who was described as "great in Torah". From Wolbróm he moved to serve as head of the Krakow Beit Din (rabbinic court of law).

In 1740 the communities affiliated with Olkusz began to strive for independence. Likewise, the Jews of Wolbróm, who until then buried their dead in Olkusz, designated their own cemetery and in 1751 began building a synagogue. In 1776 they were given a decree ensuring their right to reside in the city and trade without restrictions.

In the late 19th century Rabbi Haim Kaminski, author of *Zichron Haim* (Warsaw 1883), took office as rabbi, at the same time serving as rabbi of nearby Kaminsk. In 1850 the authorities acknowledged the double post. Rabbi Haim was also the leader for thousands of Hassidim. In 1864 he died childless and for over a decade the community had to make do with dayanim (judges in the rabbinic court) – Rabbi Hirsh Leib Katz and Rabbi Berish Gitler. In 1876 Rabbi Moshe Weinberg, author of *Ohel Moshe* (Pietrikov 1908) and an Admor (Hassidic leader) himself, came to Wolbróm. In his day, the Admor Rabbi Yitzhak Rotenberg (d. 1874) also settled in the city and turned it into a big Hassidic center. After his death the line was continued with his son, R. Alter Meir David and his grandson Rabbi Yosef Natan Halevi. Rabbi Yosef Natan died childless in 1915 and the role of Admor was assumed by his brother in law, Rabbi Shalom Rukeach, who died in the Holocaust.

In 1860 the synagogue was expanded and renovated.

The Jews of Wolbróm earned their living from trade in grains, leathers, eggs and other goods and from craftsmanship. The Jewish craftsmen included bakers, constructors, tailors, carpenters, shoemakers and furriers. Other Jews established production factories, the biggest of which was for weaving linen cloths. Another important occupation, the "profinacia" (leasing the right to produce and sell liquor) supported several Jewish families well. Other Jews found jobs in nearby estates as work managers, bookkeepers and so forth.

In the early 20th century the Jews of Wolbróm developed cultural, political and Zionist activity, and on the eve of World War I there was already a Mizrahi (religious Zionist movement) branch in the town. At that time there a blood libel spread in Wolbróm, but in the end it was refuted and no pogroms were perpetuated against the Jews.

When the war broke Wolbróm was at the front for a long time. The local economy was brought to a standstill, the city suffered from severe unemployment, and to top it all a typhus epidemic deprived the lives of many. Many Jews left Wolbróm at this period.

The Jews Between the Two World Wars

Even when the war ended, Poland's economy was in recession for several years, and the Jews had difficulties restoring their businesses and sources of income. In the 20s the American Joint and several other large Jewish institutions came to their aid, as did residents of the city who immigrated to the United States. Among other things, these Jews contributed to the rebuilding of the synagogue, which was destroyed during the war, to the restoration of the Talmud Torah and the complementary Hebrew school, to the fencing of the cemetery, to the establishment of a library with a reading hall and to the opening of several new Heders (Hebrew schools), which later served as meeting spots for youth movements.

In 1923 the Jews of Wolbróm were the owners of 356 workshops and small businesses, employing altogether 763 people. In only 156 of them hired workers were employed, since most were family businesses – the business was located in the owner's residence and its workers were mainly himself and the family members. Most of these factories – 230 in number – were in the textile field, 47 – in the food field, 19 in the leather industry and the rest – in metalworking, detergents and other fields. A few of the Jews were connected with Polish industry factories in the city.

In light of the hardships and the economic instability, the Jews, and first and foremost the apprentices and hired workers, were compelled to struggle ceaselessly for the improvement of their working conditions. In the early 1920s an organization of Jewish traders and craftsmen was established, to which petty merchants, peddlers and craftsmen from nearby provincial towns also belonged. In the late 1920s a cooperative Jewish bank and a charity fund were founded (1928). Although the fund received support from the Joint Distribution Committee, its scope of activity remained limited. In 1937, for example, it granted only 170 loans of small sums of 200-250 zloty.

Despite the economic crisis, the period between the two wars was a time of prosperity for Jewish public life. Branches of most of the Zionist and Jewish parties that were active in Poland were opened in Wolbróm. The largest, the "General Zionist" party, was represented in the community committee and had representatives in the city council as well. Secondary to it was "Hitachdut". The older "Hamizrachi" (the religious Zionist movement) branch also expanded, and with time a Revisionist

branch was also founded. "Hashomer Hatzair" was prominent among the youth movements. In 1926 a branch of "Hahalutz" was opened in Wolbróm, and in the early 1930s branches of Beitar and Gordonia were also established.

It is possible to learn about the balance of power between the various Zionist parties from the results of the elections to the Zionist congresses. 56 people from Wolbrom participated in the elections to the 15th congress (1927). The "Al Hamishmar" list received 25 votes, "Poalei Zion-Hitachdut" – 11, "Et Livnot" – 3 and "Hamizrahi" 3. In the elections to the 20th congress (1935), the "Eretz Israel Haovedet" list received 110 votes, "Hazonim Haklalyim A" (supporters of Greenboim) – 101, "Haitachdut" – 73, "Hazonim Haklalyim B" – 45 and "Hamizrahi" – 19.

Alongside the Zionist parties, branches of "Agudas Israel" and the "Bund" also operated in the city. The Zionists founded a public library with a reading hall, which also functioned as a lecture hall whenever necessary. The "Bund" and "Poalei Zion left" also had a library with a reading hall and a lecture club of their own (named after Sh. Anski), and they operated a drama group.

Many of the children of the community, even at this period, continued studying in private Heders and in Talmud Torah for the poor, maintained by the community budget. A few of them, and mainly the girls, studied in the public elementary school in the city. In 1932 members of "Agudas Israel" opened a school for girls belonging to Beit-Yaacov. In 1929 the city rabbi Rabbi Shlomo Eliezer Zilberberg founded a yeshiva named "Keter Torah". Rabbi Zilberberg was killed in the Holocaust.

The wartime community committee remained active until 1921. In 1922 the authorities appointed a new committee, and in 1924 there were elections for the community committee. The Zionists received half of the votes (4 representatives to the committee), and the rest of the mandates were divided between the lists of the craftsmen, "Agudas Israel", the Alexander Hassidim and the unaffiliated. In the 1927 elections to the city council, the united Jewish list (without the "Bund") won 8 of 18 seats in the council.

The wave of antisemitism that swept through Poland in the 30s did not skip Wolbróm. Antisemite incidences in the city increased, as well as cases of violence and assault (mainly in the nearby villages). The shattering of windowpanes and shop windows belonging to Jews became commonplace.

During World War II

With the breaking of the war several Jewish men enlisted to the Polish army, and some of them died in battle. Among the killed were Meir Roicher and Hanoch Rubinski's son. Quite a few Jews, mostly among the youth, fled east in the first days of the war. Some reached eastern Galicia and Lithuania. Most returned afterwards to Wolbróm.

Wolbróm was occupied by the Germans on September 5th, 1939. Immediately when they entered the city, the Germans assembled all the men in the market square. First to be released were the elderly and children under 16. The others, about 1,400 Jews and Polish men, were led running to Zawiercie, where they were locked up in an old factory. The Poles were then separated from the Jews and released after a day or two. The Jews were held under arrest for over a week and were subject to abuse. On September 13th, on the eve of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish detainees were released too. Around that time the Germans arrested several Poles and Jews from the intelligentsia and from the prominent residents of the city, among them the priest and Rabbi Zilberberg. They too were released after a while.

In the first weeks of the occupation the Jews were subject to repeated acts of violence and persecution. Soldiers would capture religious Jews, flog them and cut off their beards and sidelocks. Jews' houses and shops were broken into and plundered. And there was also a murder: a German soldier burned a Jewish woman, Esther Spiegel, to death. A few days after the occupation Jewish men were ordered to shave off their beards and sidelocks, and they were forbidden to wear traditional apparel outdoors. A night curfew was imposed on the Jews, they were forbidden to walk on the sidewalks or to leave the city, and were forced to wear a white armband with a blue Star of David. Every day groups of Jews were taken to forced labor, and from time to time they were obliged to register with the authorities.

In October 1939 Wolbróm was included in General-Government, and according to the new administrative division of December that year was included in the Miechow county in the Krakow province, and became the province's administrative center. The province governmental institutions, the police headquarters and other administrative institutions were located in Wolbróm. The police headquarters resided in the area where the rubber factory used to be, about two kilometers out of town.

Already in September 1939 a Judenrat was appointed in Wolbróm, headed by Yehiel Angelrad. He was apparently arrested in 1940 by the Germans and later killed in Auschwitz. His successor, Moshe Aharon Wolchinski, served in this role until the community was liquidated. The main role of the Judenrat was to fulfill the Germans' orders – recruit forced laborers, supply the Germans with furnished apartments, and collect and deliver goods, valuables and so forth for to the Germans. But at the same

time, the Judenrat did as best they could to maintain order and to assist the Jews. In March 1941 a Jewish police was also founded. A small post office was established next to the Judenrat to serve the Jewish population.

When the city was first occupied there were around 5,000 Jews living in it. By the end of 1939 and the beginning of 1940 many Jewish refugees from areas annexed to the German Reich joined them, and at the second half of 1940, 3,000 more people arrived who had been expelled from Krakow. The refugees were housed in the homes of local Jewish families and in various public buildings. Many needed aid and a refugee aid committee was opened next to the Judenrat. In October 1940 the Judenrat established a public kitchen. By March 1941 it dispensed 500 meals a day and in the summer of 1941, when the food shortage worsened, 900 meals a day were dealt out at a symbolic fee. That same year a branch of ZSS (Jewish Self-Help) was established in the town, and it assisted in funding the kitchen and the other welfare institutions.

One of the Judenrat's important departments was the sanitation department, led by two doctors and a pharmacist. The department operated a clinic and a pharmacologic laboratory, where they prepared medicines. In 1940-1941 all the children were vaccinated against smallpox. In the summer of 1941 a typhus epidemic broke out among the Jews, and the sanitation department opened a public bath and sanitization facility.

The labor department of the Judenrat dealt with recruiting forced laborers, mainly from among the refugees. Most worked in the cleaning of the city and service for local government officials. A large group of laborers was engaged in replacing the railway tracks between Olkusz and Charsznica, under the patronage of a German company from Duisburg. A few of the Jewish craftsmen continued working until 1941 and could even procure raw materials through their trade unions. Quite a few petty merchants also managed to keep their shops, apparently due to the relatively good relations with the German government at the town. Other Jews made their living from barter with the local farmers – food in exchange for household objects and various cloths.

A "Bund" group continued its activity until mid 1941. Its leaders – Meir Murman, Haim Wisokier and Moshe Rotmensch – maintained contact with "Bund" activists in Krakow and received financial as well as other aid from them. In Wolbróm the "Bund" members engaged mainly in mutual aid activities.

As Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, new and severe decrees were imposed on the Jews of Wolbróm. In July, the Jews living in the market square were banished from their homes, and a first group of 120 youths were deported to the

Pustkow labor camp near Rzeszow. Another group of at least 600 men was sent to various labor camps, mostly to the "Julag" in Plaszow and to a camp near a military airport in Krakow, where they were employed in hard, exhausting labor. In July 1942 there were still 50 youths from Wolbróm in a camp near the city, working in agriculture in the Polish farmsteads. By the end of 1941 the last Jewish-owned shops were confiscated. At that time also all the Jews' furs were taken from them.

The situation of the Jews worsened greatly in winter 1941/2, with the arrival of the new Gendarmerie commander Eduard Baumgarten. He sentenced the death penalty for every offence, be it severe or slight. According to witnesses, Baumgarten himself murdered tens of Jews (two of them "in honor of Hitler's birthday"), and after each murder he demanded from the Judenrat a monetary compensation for the bullets and a bottle of vodka. In autumn 1942, after the great Aktion in Wolbróm, the head of the Gendarmerie also murdered tailor Mendel Zoneband and shoemaker Maneta, who worked at his personal service.

At the end of Passover 1942, the Jews of Wolbróm were ordered to move to a ghetto. Thousands of Jews were crammed into a narrow area where the Jewish quarter had laid in the 19th century. When the Jews were moved to the ghetto most of their remaining property was seized. In the ghetto the Jews crowded in every vacant building and many had to live in the synagogue, in the Beit Midrash (house of learning and study) and in other public buildings, without having a bed to themselves. The overcrowding, the poor sanitary conditions and the hunger caused the outbreak of a new typhus epidemic.

Deportations to labor camps increased, as did the persecutions in the ghetto and the acts of murder. It was enough for the Germans to find people with a slice of bread or an egg in order for them to shoot them on the spot. From time to time Jews were summoned to the government offices in the building of the old rubber factory. Several days later Baumgarten would call Hevra Kadisha (the burial society) to come and collect the bodies. At the end of May 1942 the Germans arrested Jews that had escaped from labor camps and returned to Wolbróm, and took them to an unknown place. None of them returned.

In the summer of 1942, when the deportations from neighboring towns to the death camps began, a workshop was opened in the Beit Midrash in Wolbróm, in which several hundred Jews worked, enabling to receive work certificates. In August about 200 Jews were brought to Wolbróm from small towns in the area. Around that time the authorities demanded 20 kilograms of gold from the Judenrat and promised that this payment will save the Jews of Wolbróm from deportation. However,

although the sum was paid, an Aktion was held in Wolbróm on September 5th 1942, after which almost no Jews were left in the ghetto.

On the day before the deportation, on the evening of September 4th, the ghetto was surrounded by hundreds of Polish "Junaks" (workers of the German construction service), who together with Polish policemen and the local firemen blocked out all the exits of the city. Polish neighbors approached the Jews and asked for various objects, saying: "you will no longer need these anyhow". The rabbi and several of his followers managed to take the Torah books out of the synagogue and bury them in the Jewish cemetery. The Jews were ordered to assemble at the market square on September 5th at dawn. That night the Bidlovsky couple acceded to the pleas of their handicapped son Yitzhak and poisoned him. At midnight unidentified airplanes bombed Wolbróm. The bombs fell near the lake between the town and the river. At dawn the Jews were taken out of their houses with curses and blows, and those who refused or had difficulties walking with the others were shot on the spot. Among the murdered were several sick and elderly people, among them the baker Haim Shlomo Weisbecker. Motl Shenkar's family members remained standing where they were, wrapped in their prayer shawls, and continued praying till they were shot to death.

Ukrainian and German policemen already surrounded the market square. When the Jews arrived at the square, the Germans separated the elderly and the sick, drove them in wagons to the Jewish cemetery and shot them on the edges of pits that had been prepared in advance. The rest of the Jews were led running, with blows and shots, to a swampy area near the train station. In the afternoon they were joined by the Jews of Pilica, Zarnowiec and other towns in the district. Thousands of men, women and children spent the autumn night under the open sky, and the following morning Baumgarten conducted a selection. About 2,000-2,500 men were selected to work and were separated from their families. That same day the remaining 6,000-7,000 women, children, and elders were crammed into freight cars, the floors of which were covered with slaked lime, and were deported to the Belzec death camp. Among the deported was also the city's Rabbi, Shlomo Eliezer Zilberberg, with his family. It is possible that on September 7th another train left Wolbróm for Belzec.

The men that were selected for work were held for several days in a field outside the city, with hardly any food or water. Every day representatives from various labor camps came and took workers with them. On September 11th there were still several hundred men left. They were transferred to the Beit Midrash and several days later they too were taken to labor camps. A few of the workers worked in the iron factories in Stalowa Wola, others were employed in a factory manufacturing airplane engines in Rzeszow, another 400 Jews were sent to assemble kerosene and gas pipes in eastern Galicia and were housed in the Przemysl, Wiazowna and Radymno camps,

and a few hundred worked in other camps. The living conditions in the labor camps were inhuman and many workers died. A few managed to escape and reached the camps in the vicinity of Krakow – Plaszow, the camp on Jerusalimska Street and others. In 1944, when the Red Army was close, the Germans transferred the surviving workers to the camps around Krakow, and those who survived towards the end of the war were sent to camps in Germany.

After the Aktion of September 1941, about 50 members of the Judenrat and the Jewish police along with their families, among them several children, remained in Wolbróm. The adults were employed in collecting and sorting the abandoned Jewish property. After several days they were joined by several of the Aktion survivors, who left their hiding places after the murders in the synagogue yard had ceased. At the end of September the Germans executed several Jews who had escaped from labor camps and were caught on their return to Wolbróm. The Jews that remained in the city all lived together near the Batei Midrash. The small Beit Midrash served during this period as a hospital.

In the beginning of November 1942 there was a second and final Aktion in Wolbróm. Large German and Polish police forces took the Jews out from their homes and brought them to a gathering point. From there they were led under patrol to a forest near Wolbróm and were executed by shooting. However, as one day earlier the Jews received information about what was to take place, a few managed to escape from the city towards Silesia, where there were still Jews remaining. Many of those who escaped were murdered on the way; others reached Bendzin and Sosnowiec and in December 1942 were transferred to special camps set up by Moshe Merin for the refugees from the General-Government; some snuck into existing work camps. Their fate was the same as that of the Silesian Jews. Several of them were deported to Auschwitz and at the end of the war were taken on the "death marches" to camps in Germany.

After the September 1942 Aktion, ten Jewish youths from Wolbróm joined the Polish resistance, among them the two Feigenblat brothers, Eliezer Nayer, Yaakov Skovron, Alter Szklaz, Yenkel Rynski, Mendel Glaser and Ida Weitzman. Before they left the city they collected food, cloths, shoes and other essential objects for the partisans. Ida Weitsman, whose friends worried she would not survive the rough forest life, hid for a while at the house of Polish people. She was later deported to the camps, but survived. During the second Aktion several other youths from Wolbróm fled and joined the partisans in the forest. Shimon Keller from Wolbróm joined the rebels in the Warsaw ghetto, and in April 22nd 1943 died in battle. Herschel Springer from Wolbróm was among the organizers of the Jewish resistance in Bendzin.

After the War

At the beginning of 1945 several survivors returned to Wolbróm, but after a while they all left the city.

A few years after the war, the Polish government set a memorial plaque in the Jewish cemetery in Wolbróm in memory of 800 Jews from the city and its surrounding who were murdered in the nearby forest and buried there. In 1988 a monument was built at the site for the city's 4,500 Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust, funded by a fund established by the Nissenbaum family. At that time a few gravestones at the cemetery still remained standing, but nothing remains of the community's handsome and unique synagogue, since the residents of the city and its surroundings dismantled the building and used its bricks for their houses. The big Beit Midrash serves as a warehouse and the small Beit Midrash was turned into a women's monastery.

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