

## Brest-Litovsk

(Brisk, in Jewish usage), administrative center of Brest district in south-western Belorussia. Brest-Litovsk has been known to exist since the eleventh century. It was there that the March 1918 peace treaty was signed between Soviet Russia and Germany. In the interwar period, Brest-Litovsk belonged to Poland.

Jews lived in Brest-Litovsk from the fourteenth century. Until the seventeenth century the city was the center of Lithuanian Jewry's spiritual life and religious scholarship. In 1897 Brest-Litovsk had over 30,000 Jews, constituting more than 75 percent of the total population. During World War I, however, many of the Jews were driven out and in 1931 its Jewish population was 21,440 - 44 percent of the total. The Jewish community maintained many public institutions, among them a Hebrew high school.

Soon after the beginning of World War II the Germans occupied Brest-Litovsk, on September 15, 1939, but they handed it over to the Soviets on September 22. In that one week the Germans arrested several prominent Jews and maltreated them. On June 23, 1941, a day after they had launched their invasion of the Soviet Union, the Germans occupied Brest-Litovsk for the second time; the town fortress, however, held out for another half year, until all of its defenders had fallen in battle. On June 28 and 29, Sonderkommando 7b of Einsatzgruppe B went into action, rounding up five thousand men on the pretext that they were being drafted for work, taking them to the outskirts, and killing them all. In August of that year a twenty-member Judenrat (Jewish Council) was appointed, a Jewish police force set up, and a collective ransom payment of 5 million rubles imposed on the Jews. In November, orders were issued for the creation of two ghettos, known as the "small" and the "large" ghetto. A month later the ghettos were sealed off; the gates were guarded strictly and no food was allowed in. Jews in the ghettos were starving despite the efforts made by the Judenrat to help the needy through its welfare

agencies. Workshops were set up in order to create employment for the ghetto population.

Early in 1942 a fighting underground with eighty members was established under the leadership of Aryeh Scheinmann. Those members of the underground who worked in the fortress or in the bombed-out airfield stole weapons and ammunition and smuggled them into the ghetto. Plans were made for a ghetto uprising. In late June, nine hundred skilled artisans were rounded up and sent on forced labor to the east. A few weeks later twelve of them came back; all the others had been murdered.

On October 15, 1942, the ghetto was cordoned off and its liquidation was launched. The Jews were rounded up and put on trains for the Brona Gora station, just north of Kobrin on the Brest-Litovsk-Baranovichi railway line. On arrival they were killed. Some of the Jews hid and others fled, but many days later they were apprehended and executed.

Prior to the liquidation of the ghetto the underground established contact with a group of alleged Russian partisans, and several armed groups left the ghetto to join these partisans in the forests. These so-called partisans, however, turned out to be gangs of robbers and murderers who killed the Jewish fighters and seized their possessions and weapons. On the day the ghetto was liquidated, two armed groups escaped from the ghetto, one consisting of thirteen fighters and the other of ten. While wandering in the forest, the smaller group encountered a "partisan" gang, which disarmed the Jewish fighters and murdered two of them; the others dispersed but some of them, too, were eventually killed. In the spring of 1943 Jewish fighters from Brest-Litovsk joined Soviet partisan units belonging to the Pinsk and Brest-Litovsk partisan formations.

Brest-Litovsk was liberated on July 28, 1944, and about ten Jews, who had been hiding, were found there. After a time some two hundred Jewish

survivors of the Holocaust gathered in the city, including some from neighboring towns.