



The Jewish street-Myadel 1930

A Tale of Two Shtetls

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<<http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/myadel>> <<http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/kobylnik>>

In 1974 I received a letter from my mother's older cousin which read: *They said our grandfather owned a whole town. I don't know the name. It had a mill and a distillery and a cretchma. He was of the "Starosta" family. Our grandfather came from money and our grandmother came from yiches. They were married when they were thirteen and they had eleven children. Our grandmother counted the ages of her children by where they lived: Myadel, Kobylnik, and Muchanee.*

Myadel, Kobylnik and Muchanee (Mostviany)



Map of Myadel and Naroch (Kobylnik) showing the surrounding lakes and nearby communities. Vilna is west of Naroch; Postavy is north of Myadel. Myadel is 71 miles NNW of Minsk.

My historic roots are in these villages: Myadel, Kobylnik, and Muchanee. Myadel and Kobylnik are two communities whose Jewish families and destinies merged in the 20th century but whose Jewish origins in the mid-1700s are not connected. Using old maps, historic documents, letters and diaries, political records, *Reviskie Skazkie*, and newspaper accounts, I was able to identify these towns and learn about their histories. It has been interesting to contrast and compare them although the cultural and psychological aspects of living in either must be left to conjecture. Even basing this speculation on my own family stories and those of more recent émigrés, the exact nature of these communities rests heavily on the historic documents that are still available.

Kobylnik (Naroch) is located north of Myadel on the road to Postovy. It is on the largest lake and on the road west to Vilna. Muchanee turned out to be a small hamlet with no Jewish population except for the Gordon family who owned, not the town, but the land on which a mill and *cretchma* (tavern) operated.

From information gathered from the Vilnius Archives, I found that the "grandmother" of this letter, my great-grandmother, Merrie Horwitz came from Kobylnik, and the "grandfather," my great-grandfather, Meir Gordon, came from Myadel and Muchanee. Visiting the archives, and working with all the records for these two towns, I was able to study the progression of families, and the forces of history and geography, on their destinies.

Location: Log Houses and Lake Fish

Belarus, where it borders (present-day) Lithuania, is a land of lakes, marshes, and dense forests with pure water, beautiful sand beaches, and balmy pine woods along its shoreline. As a visitor, in search of her roots, I could understand my grandmother's longing as I stood on

the former Jewish Street, now empty shoreline at the edge of the town where she was born. Close to these lakes, generations before her birth, were ancient villages whose Polish barons owned large estates. My family leased land, collected taxes, and operated the crotchma and mill. After saving the life of the Baron in the 1830s, my family was deeded this property in the hamlet known as "Muchanee" (Mostviany).

A monument at the south entrance of Myadel points out that Myadel was established in 1324. It lies between two lakes, the Miastro and the Batorino. In 1812, the year that my great-great-grandmother, Dvora Chodosh, was born, history relates that Napoleon's army drowned in Lake Batorino as the ice which covered the waters was not strong enough to support the weight of the soldiers. All these lakes were bountiful with fish and supplied the fishermen, the Jewish merchants, and the population with essential food. My grandmother said she had only to walk out to the back to catch a fish for dinner. The forests surrounding the town provided the materials for the buildings as well as for heating their homes. The woods also had an abundance of berries and mushrooms to supplement the seasonal gardens.

Kobylnik (now Naroch, District of Svetsyany, in Vilna Guberniya) was first recorded as *Minori Medalo* (Little Miadel)¹ in the year 1434. It was located in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania until 1795, in the Russian Empire until 1990, and presently is in Belarus. Situated on Lake Naroch, Kobylnik was connected to Miadziol (Myadel) by a small road that ran from lake to lake. The territory is today part of the Naroch-Vileiya fir-tree forest (Oshmiany-Minsk district), the largest in the Republic of Belarus, which stretches along the western coast of the Lake Naroch, runs along the left-hand bank of the Narochanka River and almost the entire length of the Viliya river. The topography determined the life of the village and the livelihood of the residents. In the early 1800s these forests were the base for logging of trees bound for the Baltic. My great-great-grandfather, Boruch Chaikel Horwitz, worked in the Czar's forests with his sons, each year cutting the marked trees and floating them up the Viliya River in the yearly run. These same forests, so dense and deep, hid escaped Jews and Russian and Jewish partisans through much of WW II.

Placing my Family in History: How Old is Old?

Jews are said to have lived in the area of Svensionys and Vileika since the 16th century. In Oshmiany District alone, there were 7,124 Jews. The detailed accounting of families and their numbers began on a systematic basis in 1764 when King Poniatowski came to the throne. Each Kahal² was ordered, with the cooperation of the area controller, to detail an exact census in 1765. Under the new Polish *Seym* (parliament), taxation of Jews became more inclusive. This census was established to enumerate every man, woman, and child in order to increase the royal coffers directly and bypass the baronial system.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, and the beginning of the 19th century, the majority of Jews lived on the princely estates and in the surrounding villages. A study of early Oshmiany records shows that Myadel families came from Vilna directly and spread to nearby Komaie, Dolginovo, and

Vileika before 1784.

The Settlement of Myadel and Kobylnik

Kobylnik (Komaie Kahal) had a population of five families in 1765. Komaie, and the number of Jewish residents within the Komaie Kahal, was relatively small compared to shtetls and villages in the Oshmiany District. The larger communities had many generations of Jewish residents before the first Grand Duchy census. A small stable population lived in the crotchmas that made up Komaie Kahal. Five of those estates came under the geographical area that would later become Kobylnik proper. The 1795 census has so far not been found in the Lithuanian Archives but the information for those registrants is found on the 1811 along with ages and notations. Whether Kobylnik could not support the number of residents up to 1795 or some form of illness forced people to leave, many deaths are recorded and an exodus began even before 1800. An influx of new Jewish residents began with the Third Partition redistricting in 1795 and 1798.

Between 1798 and 1807, many young couples, moving from east (Minsk Guberniya) to west, made for almost a complete turnover from the few original Kobylnik families. Brides and husbands are recorded as having come together but from different villages, reflecting a continuing custom of marrying out. The original, pre-1795 families took the surnames Felszer and Planeta while living in Kobylnik but soon moved north to Postavy and Gluboki. Gradually the most numerous surnames in 1816 through 1834 became Krevitzky and Narotzky. 1798 was the beginning of my family's history in Kobylnik when my great-great-grandfather, David ben Efraim (from Krivichi) was fourteen years old and had just been married to Chasia Abramova, then fifteen, from Janov. They came together, according to the 1811 census. We know very little about him until he appears again in 1816. By then his family is joined by his mother and step-father and his brothers-in-law. This information expanded my knowledge of relationships, surnames, and David's standing as a community leader. His signature appears at the end of the 1816 revision list and his son's at the end of the 1834 list.

Unlike Kobylnik, Myadel (Oshmiany District) had a Jewish population from the beginning of the 1700s and, perhaps even earlier. Also there is evidence that Myadel Jewish community maintained a stable population.

One of the Myestetchkos (villages) in that region is that of Myadsiol. Its history goes back more than eight centuries and is quite prominent on mediaeval geographical maps. Local legends ascribe to it great prominence in the period of the ancient Lithuanian monarchy. Its Jewish community, numbering about 200 souls, is also of very remote beginnings. Most of them bear the family name Gordon, while the remainder of the surnames are Chodosh. The surname Chodosh is said to have been bestowed upon the latter settlers of Myadsiol to denote their recency; Chodosh, meaning "new" in Hebrew.³

My Gordon family, perhaps descendants of or related to Dr. Aaron Gordon of Vilna, were the earliest residents of Stary Myadel still remaining in 1765, then registered as

household #1. By 1765, members of this family had spread to nearby towns and villages and were no longer the most numerous sub-group. By comparing the 1811 residents (head of households, now with patronymic, and chosen surname) with the combined 1765 and 1784 lists (which had no surnames), it could now be determined that most families designated themselves as Chodosh. The ancestors of my Chodosh family could be determined in the 1765 residents by comparing common descendant-patronymic patterns and household membership. Even though Chodosh represented “new” (according to their name choice), they were prominent as early as 1765. Chodosh families continued to live in Myadel and multiply until the second half of the 19th century. The 1834 census, page after page, lists only Chodosh surnames. By 1850, seeking jobs and economic opportunity, these families began to move into nearby areas. The majority of original Myadel residents moved from the west (Vilna city) to east. Inter-marriage was encouraged and cousin marriages were common. On the other hand, the 1811 and 1816 lists show most names taken by the newcomers to Kobylnik reflected the town they came from and each new *Reviskie Skazkie* recorded new residents with toponymic surnames.

In the year my great-grandmother Merrie Horwitz of Kobylnik, married Meir Gordon of Myadel (1849), the Gordon family had been in Sary Miadel more than five generations and married Gordon and Chodosh cousins. In contrast, the Horwitz-Krivitsky family in Kobylnik were exogamous. Merrie Horwitz was only second generation, reflecting that her father came to Kobylnik and married into the Krevitsky household the year before she was born. By the middle of the 20th century all residents of both communities, although they could not follow the exact genealogical connection, could claim relatedness to all of the original settlers.

Reviskie Skazkie

If the purpose of the enumeration of Jews was for tax purposes, the *Reviskie Skazkie* gave as accurate a number of registrants in towns, villages and estates as possible. After 1795, newborns, newcomers, deaths, and those missing without leave were recorded along with the dates of these events. Often places of emigration and immigration were mentioned as in the large exodus to Southern Russia between 1843 and 1858. In Myadel, there were supplemental revision lists for 1818, 1828, 1851, 1852, and 1854. In Kobylnik, there were only twenty-four individuals reported in 1816 whereas the supplemental 1818 reported a total of sixty-nine. In Myadel, the supplementals after 1850 picked up at least eighty people missing from the 1850 accounting, pointing out the desire of individual families to protect themselves both from conscription and taxation.

We can study and compare the individuals and the family groups in the two populations of Myadel and Kobylnik from 1765 through 1858. We can view the growth of these two communities and the birth and death data as well as the notations of missing, conscripted, and reregistered in Southern Russia. The 1816 lists show the dead and missing from the events surrounding the 1812 invasion: burning of villages and fields, pillaging by troops, famine, cholera, and influenza.

The Front Line and the Hazards of War

The Naroch-Myadel villages, on the borders of Lithuania, Latvia, and Belarus today, are on a direct route from Vilna to Moscow. Situated only thirty miles from Vilna, they were affected by the rulers and the peoples of many nationalities. The Jews living within the borders of the Grand Duchy were taxed, catered to, maligned and murdered for economic, cultural, and political reasons. They were in the path of the Cossacks against the Polish nobles, the Swedes against the Russians, the French against the Russians, and the Germans in World War I, and the Germans and Russians in World War II.

Illustration

Using all the records up to the 1816 we can study Gordon family movement and the effects of the War of 1812 and the pandemic of 1813-14 on household #1.

Sary Miadziol 1765, Household #1: Josel ben Isaac Gordon, wife, mother and two young sons (Berko and Jankiel).

Sary Miadziol 1784, Household #1: Jankiel, wife and two daughters.

Mostviany (Muchanee) Cretchma, 1784: Josel, two married sons (Shimshel and Israel) and their wives.

Vileika 1816: Jankiel, wife and younger children.

Sary Miadziol 1816, Household #1: Josel, Shimshel and wife, Israel and wife, Jankiel's sons, Movsha and Isaac. Movsha married to Sora, the daughter of Shimshel, in the 1811 list. In 1814, Josel and Movsha died in the cholera epidemic and Isaac, Movsha's brother, was remarried to the widow, Sora.

In the book, *Memory, Myadel Region*, there is a short paragraph on the Insurrection of 1831 and its effect on the Myadel region. In 1831, the Polish Cavalry was stationed between the two lakes in Myadel. A large battle was fought on Svir Mountain placing a great number of soldiers and army followers in the immediate area of Kobylnik and Myadel. Between 1829 and 1831, an epidemic of cholera began in India and spread into Lithuania, Belarus, and Poland brought by these soldiers. Comparing population numbers for Kobylnik, we can document the effects of war and pandemics. In those sixteen years between 1818 and 1834, thirty males had died, one was conscripted and twenty-six were missing. Comparable numbers for Myadel show male deaths for the same years at twenty-seven, seventeen alone for the year 1831.

During WW I, a garrison of German soldiers was billeted in Kobylnik⁴ which was the border between the German and Russian forces. From there, poison gas was used for the first time on Russian troops killing 70,000 Russians and, most certainly, affecting the lives of area residents.

Laying waste to Jewish settlements (1648-1721)

In tracking the settlement of Jews in Myadel and surrounding communities from the late 17th century, I researched the history of Vilna—the place I assumed my Gordon family originated. In his book, *Vilna*, Israel Cohen⁵ gives several reasons for the movement of Jews out of the city. The City of Vilna was occupied by Muscovite

and Cossack troops and the greater part of the Jewish population fled the country or into the countryside in terror. The Cossack Massacres (1648-1658) were brought about by the harsh treatment of the Ukrainians by the Polish magnates who had colonized that territory at the end of the 16th century. Jews who were the stewards collecting the tolls and customs, and who leased farms, and sold the products of the mills, dairies, distilleries, fishing and game preserves belonging to Polish nobles, were targeted in the attacks. The Ukrainians, under the leadership of Bogdan Chmielnicki, penetrated as far as the borders of Belarus. In their assault, whole communities were burned, pillaged, and wiped out in a single day.

The 17th century was the most difficult period in the life of Jews in Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Russo-Swedish War (1654-1667) and the Great Northern Swedish War (1700-1721) brought with them repeated fires and slaughter resulting in the destruction of some three-quarters of Polish and Lithuanian Jewry. The Jewish communities that had rebuilt and reestablished themselves after the Chmielnicki massacres were invaded again. Mass persecutions and robberies of Jews began in all the surrounding areas.

The plague of 1708, linked to the cold weather of 1709, and other diseases related to advancing and retreating armies, is estimated to have caused the death of one-third of the inhabitants of the Grand Duchy between the years 1708 and 1711.

In the Times of the Russian Occupation, 1772 to 1914

Kobylnik started as singular Jewish families living on isolated estates within the Komaie Kahal. Five families lived close enough to share a *resznik* (butcher) and a school teacher. It was a community twice populated (1765-1784 and 1798-1805). This coincides with the changes in Russia, Prussia, and Austria due to the partitioning of Poland (1772, 1793, 1795) and the redistricting under Minsk Guberniya in 1798.

After the third partition (in 1795), when the largest part of Poland went to Russia, the Polish Jews found themselves under the rule of Catherine the Great. The borders of the living area for the Jews was fixed to the Pale of Settlement (*tkhum hameyshev*) which closed the land of Russia itself to Jews. The decrees began to multiply with prohibitions against Jews operating inns and taverns which were the distribution points for whiskey. They were permitted to deal without restrictions in trade and artisanry, but gradually Jews had to leave the small settlements, and were allowed to live only in the towns. The banishment of Jews from the countryside to the towns began in 1804. The expulsion was not completed, however, due to the invasion of Napoleon's Army into Russia. The French invaders caused the Jews great troubles: food was scarce, they ravished the synagogues and cemeteries, took high taxes, demanded that people mobilize into their army, and with their retreat, robbed Jews of their possessions.⁶

Conclusion

Births, marriages, and deaths take place within a backdrop of climate, floods, war, famine, pandemics, and politics. We cannot recreate a shtetl and the life experience

of its inhabitants with records alone. In trying to recreate generations of Jewish life and to accurately describe the Jewish experience in connected shtetls, we must look to the data available and coordinate it with geographical and historical information. Demographic analysis is the method I used to infer my towns' history using data most genealogists can find for their towns—revision lists, yizkor books and historical texts. I have studied dates of settlement, taking and choice of surnames, marriage age and customs and placed them in a geographic and historic context. Revision lists combined with historic data reveal both similarities and differences between the two shtetls. Movement was greatest in Kobylnik, in and out of the shtetl. Deaths for 1812-1814 were numerous in both towns. The 1834 revision for Myadel, enumerated twenty-six deaths in 1831. Therefore, I reasoned, time and place must be taken into account when we analyze raw data found in census lists. These events affect shtetl life and individualize the experiences of our ancestors.

The Death of the Shtetls

In the modern period, beginning perhaps with the railroads that made travel easier or with the breakdown of political barriers or with the increase of anti-Semitism, I believe that the culture of the two villages became more alike than they were different. Certainly the registry of surnames in Kobylnik included more Gordon and Chodos families. At this time, the populations had mixed to such a degree, that all families were related in some way to each other. There were synagogues in both shtetls, both communities had a rabbi, a *cheder*, *melamed* and *resznik*. There was a cemetery in both communities. Kobylnik continued to grow until both villages had large Jewish populations. The mass exodus to Southern Russia saw the creation of two agricultural colonies: Myadler Jewish Colony No. 12 (also known as Zelenopol'ye) and Kobilnye Jewish Colony No. 14 (also known as Sladkovodnoye), in Ekaterinoslav Guberniya, Mariupolskii District, which is detailed in the 1850-1858 lists. There were revisions in 1874 and an all Russian Census in 1897 but these are, perhaps, not the best or only forms of recreating the history of Myadel and Kobylnik in recent times. Certainly much of the Yizkor materials written after 1945 covers some of the period of the early 1880s and the InterWar period as well. ■

1. Memory, Myadel Region. Belarus Encyclopedia. Minsk: 1995.
2. The kehila (Jewish community) governed its own internal affairs. The tax collection and enforcement of various restrictions and compulsions imposed on the community, were arranged by the kahal. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kahal>> This typically included the village and about a thirteen mile radius (the landed estates, cretchma, and outlying hamlets where Jews lived). In 1765, the administrative officers were the rabbi, teacher, reznik and cantor. The kahal leaders signed in their own hand.
3. Gordon, Hirsch Loeb. Rabbi Elijah Gordon, 1926.
4. Kaganovitch, Meyshe. On the History of the Jewish Settlement in Ivye <<http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/ivyve/ivy018.html>>
5. Cohen, Israel. Vilna. Jewish Publ. Society of America. Philadelphia:1943.
6. Karlyukevich, Ales. Naroch: Memory Source <<http://belarus-magazine.by>>