Chapter One
History of Jews in Gombin, Poland

Early History

Gombin (1) is a small town in central Poland, located at 52° 23' 51" North and 19° 44' 8" East. The town is about fifty miles west of Warsaw and a few miles south of Plock (*Plosk in transliteration),* the provincial capital of Mazovia (*Mazowsza*). The larger town of Plock is on a bend in the Vistula (*Wisla*) River. A road from Gombin goes directly north to the wharf area on the Vistula River in Plock. Small towns nearby are Gostynin on the east; Dobrzykow on the North, also on the Vistula just a few miles down stream of Plock; and Sanniki, a small village southeast of Gombin. The surrounding area is flat and covered with pine forest. Much of the cleared space is agricultural, concentrating on fruit orchards, especially plums, apples and pears.

The Vistula River is a major river running generally west and north, flowing downstream from Warsaw through Plock and on to its mouth at Gdansk on the Baltic Sea in the north. Lodz (*Wooj in transliteration*) is the largest city near Gombin and is situated about forty miles south.

A few miles northwest of Gombin is Lake Zwordskia, a large lake with an area of 353 hectacres (872 acres). The lake is in a pastoral setting of pine trees and has a modest beach. It is a major recreational attraction in the area and the largest lake in the Mazovia district. Early maps show "*Gabine*" (Gombin) as an established town in the Mazovia Province. Plock was the first city in Mazovia, established by charter in 1237

(1) *Gabin* is the local Polish spelling. This account will use *Gombin*, the American version.

(Davies. God's Playground Vol I 226). Plock started on the Vistula River as the location of the castle of the Prince of Mazovia and even predates Warsaw (ca 1300).

The town of Gombin was established in 1322. During archeological excavations in 1920, artifacts of a shoemaker's workshop and fragments of earthenware were discovered. Also, some silver jewelry was uncovered and dated back to the eleventh century. Formal rights to establish the town were granted by King Ziemowit V (the Duke of Azov) who chartered Gombin as an official town in the year 1437. The town of Gombin was first mentioned in 1215 when legal records refer to Gombin as "the old-time monarchial estate" (Jadczak).

The first Jews to arrive in Gombin came in the twelfth century. These few, early arrivals were merchants from Western Europe including Prague in Slovakia (modern Czech Republic), Germany and Spain. The first record of Jews in Plock established that they had settled in sufficient numbers to be recognized as a community in 1507. (Map # 1) Jews were already located in the Germanic lands (modern Austria and Germany). These people were referred to as Ashkenazi, indicating their origin in Germany. They migrated to Poland in the thirteenth century at the express invitation of Prince Bolesdav V, the Prince of Kalisz. He is known as Bolesdav or Boleslaus the Pious. The Statute of Kalisz in 1264 specifically allowed Jews to carry out "money lending against pledges". (Encyclopedia Judaica. Vol 13, 710). The monarch was motivated to establish trade and industry and needed the money management skills and business experience only available from the Jews. These skills had been developed by the Jews in Western Europe in the centuries before. They had been prohibited from owning land and were restricted to earning a living through money management and trade. These pro-Jewish policies were encouraged by the landed aristocrats, the *Szlachta*.

Jews had been engaged in trade throughout Europe, including Western Europe and the Mediterranean countries for centuries. They traded goods and currencies with their associates in other lands using their co-religionists and the common Hebrew and

Yiddish languages as a means to network and profit. Accordingly, they had an extensive network of contacts in many countries. The Polish aristocratic class, the Szlachta had opportunities to expand business; they needed the financial skills, networks and business contacts the Jews possessed (Dubnow 29). The arrival of Jews in Poland was however, opposed by both the Catholic Clergy and the middle class groups (Bourgeoisie) then evolving in Poland and throughout Europe. The Church was concerned that educated Jews could undermine the monopoly on literacy maintained by the Church. Church hegemony was threatened by the arrival of these educated and non-Christian people. The vast majority of Poles were of the peasant class engaged in village oriented agriculture and had very little influence in society.

The Bourgeoisie opposed Jewish immigration because they risked the loss of their superior position in the society as the Jews were better educated and much more adept at financial management as compared to the Bourgeoisie. Consequently, in the thirteenth century, the Jews became a group protected by the Szlachta.

The Statute of Kalisz in 1264 was promulgated by the Prince as a royal decree; it established the legitimacy of the Jews. In addition to the money management authorization, the statute explicitly required that the aristocrats accept the Jews and that their rights be defended by royal power. Thus, the Jews were under the jurisdiction of the Princely Courts and exempt from the rule of the Municipal authorities, usually beholden to the local aristocrats. This, in effect, gave them self government. Coins minted by the Royal court show Hebrew letters and the images of a Rabbi and *Maggid*, an itinerant, religious teacher.

In 1492, a general expulsion of all Jews from Spain was initiated by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the same sovereigns that financed the explorations of Christopher Columbus to discover North America. Large numbers of Jews emigrated to Poland during the fifteenth century when Jews were expelled from Spain, Portugal and later, the Netherlands.

The Growth of the Jews in Poland

Poland existed as a distinct political entity from before the Crusades. After 1569, greater Poland included the region of Lithuania in the northeast and was known as Poland-Lithuania until 1795, when the third partition of Poland obliterated it from the political map of Europe.

The years from 1569 to the middle third of the eighteenth century were a long period of relative freedom for the Jews of Poland. I say relative because the times were characterized by ever changing decrees from the monarchs, some favorable, but then followed by reversals of these favorable edicts. In 1633, Vladislav IV confirmed the action of the Polish Parliament (the Diet, also *Sejm*) granting Jews basic economic freedoms. These included rights to export goods, establishing municipal, legal jurisdictions which implied equal rights under Polish law, and instructions to the municipalities to protect the Jews from the well known anti-Jewish riots that frequently broke out. (Dubnow 44). These protective rights for the Jews were eventually reduced by protests from the Christian merchants, who rapidly lost profit and market share to the more economically efficient Jewish merchants.

Poland–Lithuania included all of modern Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine (Kiev), White Ruthenia and Prussia. Its territory ranged from west of the Oder River in the west to Kiev in Ukraine in the east (Map # 3). In 1569, 200,000 Jews lived in this large territory. By 1795, at the last partition, the Jewish population had grown to 800,000. At the peak of its population, Poland-Lithuania contained eighty percent of world Jewry. Jews comprised about 10% of the greater Poland-Lithuanian population (Dubnow 128). This large population growth is indicative of peaceful times and a benign indifference by the political leaders. The decrees of the Princes (e.g., Bolesev) had made Poland a reasonable haven and peaceful enclave for the growing Jewish population.

The population of Jews in Poland in 1648 reached 2.5 – 3 % of the total Polish population. Of the Jews in Poland, approximately 10 – 15 % were located in urban

centers. Gombin was still a small town, but may have had some of these commercially oriented Jews.

Both the Polish peasants and the growing Jewish population relied on agricultural activities, small scale manufacture and retail sales. Jews produced and had businesses in basic needs such as shoe making, tailoring, meat butchering, restaurant and inn management and food distribution. They produced goods and sold to both Jewish and Polish customers. The Jews were poor but free to pursue a living and follow their own unique religious practices without much interference from the local Christian population. Rabbi Moses Isserles, "*Remuh*" (1510 – 72) said: *"It is better to live on dry bread, but in peace, in Poland"* (Davies. God's Playground Vol II 176).

The intellectual center of this Jewish world was now in Poland and led to the establishment in Poland-Lithuania of major Yeshivas and Synagogues. They were located in Krakow, Posnan, Lvov and Lublin. The Lublin Yeshiva was about 200 miles west of Gombin. It was at the height of this period of relative cultural freedom and population growth that the Gombin Synagogue was built (Photograph # 14). By 1710, enough Jews lived in Gombin to warrant its construction.

Gombin and Partition.

Continued Prussian Influence with Eventual Russian Control

Poland had always been subject to invasion and political domination by its neighbors: Prussia (Germany) on the west, Austria in the southwest and Russia in the east. In addition to constantly changing political pressures from these geographically contiguous neighbors, the population of Gombin, and especially Jews were adversely affected by

continual wars and multiple invasions (1648 – 1717) of Poland by other adversaries: Ukraine, Sweden, Turkey and Tatar (Holzman: www.zchor.org/heritage /history).

The lands of Poland - Lithuania were eventually taken over by Prussia, Austria and Russia in three stages from 1772 to1795 (Map # 2). Jews were recruited into the Polish army and participated in military actions in defense of the country (Rozenzweig 10). This three phase Polish Partition led to ever, smaller residual Polish lands until, by 1795, all of the former state of Poland had been completely absorbed by Prussia, Austria and Russia. For the Jews, the relative political stability under the Polish authority of the past two centuries ended.

During the first partition in 1773, Frederick the Great (Prussia) and Maria-Theresa (Austria) appropriated the western territory of Poland to Prussia (Map # 2). Jews in the western lands were now part of Prussia (later a part of Germany). Gombin, in the Polish province of Mazovia became part of the new Prussian-Polish state. (Map # 4)

Jewish autonomy had been established in the thirteenth century (Statute of Kalisz 1264). The local municipal authority for the Jews was organized under a rabbinic-led political system, the *kahal,* a religiously based municipal authority for the local town with the local Rabbi having autonomy. The earlier Polish government had compelled the political, legal, religious and cultural isolation of Jews from the surrounding community. The kahal served as local government for the Jews of the area, separate and apart from the Christian Poles who lived in the same streets.

By decree of the Polish authorities, the kahal had full control of all local secular and religious activity. Under this system, the local Jews had relative economic and political freedoms under the supervision of the local Rabbis. In 1782, these relative economic freedoms were reversed by Joseph II of Prussia. His approach was to encourage assimilation of Jews into the mainstream Christian and Polish culture. He introduced compulsory state education and military service (Davies Vol II 177). Prior to this attempt

at cultural assimilation, the Jewish communities had been segregated from the Christians. Both Jews and Christians lived near each other but in segregated parts of the towns and farming areas. All were poor, both Christians and Jews alike. This was certainly the case in Gombin in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In the eastern region of the former Poland, including Mazovia and Gombin, Frederick II of Prussia extended limited protection to wealthy Jews in certain specific professions (Dubnow 130). Full civic equality was established in 1812. Gombin was in the Prussian influenced territories and benefited from the relative civic freedoms. However, no Jews meeting the wealth criteria lived in Gombin. Theoretically, improved civic rights were available, yet none actually applied to the Jewish *Gombiners*. Additional non-Jewish, German speaking peoples immigrated into the area and became a major economic factor in the life of the town. The general area of what had been Poland after the last Partition was then known as Congress Poland.

In 1793, the second Partition still left Gombin within the Prussian area. Many Jews living in both Prussia and the newer Prussian/Polish territories were expelled to the residual Polish area east of and including Warsaw. Many of these Germanic, Ashkenazic Jews may have passed through Gombin and Plock, traveling up the Vistula River. The Rissman name may have derived from Germanic origins. Moshe, born in ca. 1819 is the earliest Rissman which can be documented. We do not know when Moshe or his ancestors arrived in Gombin. It is purely speculation, but the Rissman family might have been included in that forced emigration of Jews from Prussia to Poland in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. This might have been the beginnings of the Rissman family in Gombin.

The authority of the kahal began to decline with the advent of the integrationist policies of the Prussians in Galacia under Joseph II. Later, in the nineteenth century, these kahals continued to lose their full measure of control as the level of secular education and military experience of Jewish men increased (Davies Vol II 177).

In the eighteenth century, Catherine the Great of Russia decreed (1786) that a large section of Poland and western Russia should be a designated location in which Russian Jews were to settle (Davies Vol II 177). The motivation of the Empress was to preserve the main areas of central and traditional Russia for the Russian middle class which was then evolving. The area became known as the Pale of Settlement. The term *Pale* is derived from the Latin *palus,* meaning stake or boundary indicating a border marker.

The geographic area of the Pale of Settlement (Map # 4) changed many times during and after the Polish Partitions (1772 – 95). During the decades of the three-phase Polish Partition, control of Mazovia and the Gombin region alternated. The Prussian monarchy demanded from Russia and received control of the Mazovia region, including Warsaw, Plock and Gombin. The Prussian/German political and economic influence continued until the final establishment of the territory of the Pale of Settlement in 1835 (Davies. Vol II 177).

It was as a result of these changing political events that a local joke developed in Gombin. It was said that "It is a good thing to live in Gombin and be in Prussia as it would be much colder if Gombin were in Russia" (Gertzman, Anna).

After the French armies under Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Russia in 1812, the Russian armies mounted a strong defense driving the French armies out of Russia and back, eventually to France. During this historic retreat in the winter of 1812, units of the fleeing French army passed through Gombin. A building in the main square of contemporary Gombin is referred to as *The Napoleon House* where legend has it, the French Emperor himself is said to have rested. The building (Photo # 18) now houses a small one room museum which displays exhibits about the history of Gombin. This museum also has an exhibit on the Jews of Gombin which is occasionally displayed.

By 1835, towns nearby and south of Gombin also entered the Russian zone, the Pale of Settlement. Most of the former Polish territory east of Warsaw became official Russian territory. The net result was that after Partition, the Polish nation ceased to exist as a political entity.

The economic opportunities available to Jews in Gombin and Mazovia were always limited. In the period of national Polish control (1569 – 1795), the Szlachta attempted to force Jews to avoid commercial enterprises. The Jews were limited to tavern keeping, distilling of spirits, brewing and liquor sales and some retail agriculture. The Polish authorities were quick to tax the Jewish communities. The kahals and rabbinic leaders often colluded with the local aristocrats. Many rabbis used their authority to collect taxes and engage in bribery and corruption to maintain their position of control (Dubnow 133 - 34). Anyone attempting to resist these control tactics was pressured through the threat of *herem* or excommunication and social isolation. In contrast to these negative influences, the kahals did provide essential social services required by Jewish law. These included providing for the poor and hungry, a bridal dowry when not available from the family, burial services, cemetery management and other traditional services.

In a survey of the population after the first Partition (1772), Jews constituted about twelve percent of the total, comprising about one million people out of the nearly nine million total Polish population. The survey revealed that about seventy-five percent of the Polish national export trade and ten percent of the imports were managed by Jews! (Dubnow 128). Further, Jewish merchants were much more efficient at business and enjoyed a larger profit margin. This enabled them to maintain a dominant market share as they could offer better services at lower prices. According to Dubnow:

> *"In the provinces...half of the all artisans were Jews. Shoemakers, tailors, furriers, goldsmiths, carpenters, stone-cutters, and barbers, were particularly numerous among them. In the whole country...only fourteen Jewish families were found to engage in agriculture" (Dubnow 128)*

As the middle class in Poland developed in the nineteenth century, Jewish control of such a major component of the Polish economy was increasingly resented by the emerging middle class as represented by the town burghers. This was true in Gombin as restaurants and taverns owned and operated by Jews were increasingly taxed and even usurped by local Poles and German immigrants.

After the third partition and transfer of political control to Russia, the Russian authorities attempted to organize society and its many new subjects in the Russian area. This was done so taxation could be more effectively imposed. Similar policies occurred in the German controlled territories. The government bureaucrats decided that everyone needed to be registered with formal surnames so an accurate census could be taken. Until this time in the late eighteenth century, Jews were named as "child of their Father". I would have been known as Avraham ben Meir, Abraham, son of Meyer. The surnames were selected mostly by the German government officials who may have lacked imagination (Davies Vol II 178). Hence, we have many Jewish Apfelbaums (Apple Tree), Rosenbergs (Rose Mountains) and Nussbaums (Walnut Tree). Many were named after their type of work, e.g. Goldschmidt (goldsmith), Schneider (tailor) or Fleischer (meat handler). Some Jews provided their own names, some based on their religious status. Hence Katz is an abbreviation of the Hebrew *Kohain ha Tzedek* referring to the priestly affiliation of the family. The surname Ball is a contraction of *ben ha Levi*, son of the Jerusalem Temple caretakers. The name Liberman (2), meaning "lovely man" may have been selected based on personality or more likely have been a whimsical choice.

(2) See Chapter Five for a discussion of the spelling of the Liberman/Lieberman name.

Mazovia was in the far northwest corner of the newly defined Russian Pale of Settlement (Davies Vol II 178). The Mazovia province directly abuts Prussia. The area of Congress Poland including Gombin was included in the final geographic designation of the Russian Pale of Settlement after 1835. Thus, Gombin and Plock in Mazovia were then politically a part of the Russian Empire. It must then have gotten "colder" in Gombin.

Many of the peasants and the landed nobility were of German origin. Nevertheless, after 1835, official government control was established from the Russian monarchy in Moscow. Yet, a distinct German influence in Mazovia and Gombin area persisted.

After 1835, Jews in the now Russian "Pale" territory experienced a different approach to the earlier, integrationist system set up by the Prussian authority under Joseph II. Russian Jews experienced significantly more oppression under the strict Czarist policies. It was during this post-partition period that Russia implemented the army conscription policy. Jewish boys as young as twelve years old were taken into the Russian army for a twenty-five year term. They were pressured to convert to Christianity to be accepted socially. Many young Jewish boys and men were lost from the Judaic faith by these policies. This provided another good reason for Gombiners to believe that they would have been happier in Prussia/Germany than Russia.

In the new Russian areas, Catherine II attempted to resolve the persistent "Jewish problem" by employing segregationist policies, reversing the integrationist policies of the Prussians. The inherent anti-Semitism of the Russian monarchy became institutionalized. Increased taxation, laws constraining Jewish merchants and government incited violence were introduced. The Czarist government, in 1882 issued the "May Laws", regulations that were to be strictly enforced. Jews were now barred from senior rank in the Russian Army and government bureaucracy. They were prohibited from buying land. Jews were prohibited from living in, or even traveling to the

large cities such as Warsaw. The kahals were abolished resulting in a further loss of authority of the Rabbis. (Dubnow 166). The elimination of the kahals had a mixed result. The rabbis lost local authority and the average Jew then had to deal only with the Polish government to address commercial questions. However, the economic abuses and corruption of the kahal were eliminated, opening new commercial opportunities for Jews.

Economics: From Stable Poverty to Turmoil

In the early Polish kingdom up to the first Partition in 1772, Jews lived in a semi-feudal economic and political environment. They were able to utilize their skills in international and local trade. Jews began to develop commercial skills at artisan activities (tailors, shoemakers, butchers, etc.) that allowed them to "*Macht a Leb*" (make a living). The commercial position of Jews was protected by the aristocratic class as the aristocrats had no skills in such commercial endeavors.

The Jews' ability to read and write probably helped somewhat. The religious teachings of Talmud and Torah were not well developed outside rabbinic groups. The rule of law inculcated by Jewish religious principles and the use of local rabbinic courts (*Sanhedrin*) to settle disputes, provided the mechanisms which enabled useful commerce. The aristocratic Polish, German, Russian and other national groups, however, resorted to violence to settle their disputes. Throughout the feudal period, these national groups usually resorted to war because the ruling aristocrats relied on military means to assert their point of view. They had no legal system of laws and courts. These aristocrats correctly perceived the value that the Jews' commercial skills provided to the ruling Polish class. These activities were heavily taxed to the benefit of the aristocrats. They protected the Jews to maintain this Jewish economic activity, so lucrative for the aristocratic class.

With the advent of Partition, the Polish hegemony ended. The Prussian, and later, Russian governments recognized the importance of the emerging middle classes and

instituted reforms designed to improve the economic condition of their local national people. This inevitably brought the Catholic Poles and newer Lutheran German citizens of Gombin in conflict with the Gombin Jews. These economic pressures added to the long standing anti-Semitism prevalent from the earliest years of Jewish presence in Poland. The anti-Jewish forces had been kept in check by aristocratic decrees. These constraints were eliminated by both the Prussian, and later, Russian governments. After the third Partition and eventual complete Russian hegemony in 1835, life for the Jews became ever more difficult. That they survived and even grew in numbers throughout the nineteenth century is a testament to the ingenuity, flexibility and perseverance of our ancestors. The Rissman family and other Jews made life in Gombin tolerable within an inherent and increasingly hostile environment. Nevertheless, the Jews of Gombin and greater Poland emigrated in huge numbers as soon as the opportunity presented itself in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In addition to the political and economic forces at work, factors for change leading to the mass migrations included cultural developments originating with the Enlightenment in Europe.

The Enlightenment: Shifts in Culture

This Enlightenment movement began with the French Revolution in 1789. The value of individuals and their personal rights were recognized over the sole authority of the State or Church. These liberal trends led to cultural revolutions in literature, art and music, e.g. Beethoven's third symphony, the "*Eroica*" breaks with the classical eighteenth century tradition and appeals to the bourgeoisie rather than just the aristocrats. Painting styles and subjects changed to portray the people in their simple rural life (Gardner 755). This resulted in an eventual break with the classic style led by Cezanne and other pre and post Impressionists. Humanitarian trends led to literary change with authors such as Dickens, Voltaire and Goethe.

These liberal and humanitarian perspectives occurred in religious life, the arts and philosophy. These new forces significantly affected life in Gombin. The changes in the

political climate had already decreased the authority of the kahal, the system in which the official government left local jurisdiction of Jews to the rabbinic authority. Enlightenment ideas came into Gombin from the German influences.

The Jewish Enlightenment or *Haskalah* originated in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century (Davies Vol II 180) under the initial influence of Moses Mendelsohn. This liberal philosophy led to efforts to modernize the education system of the Jews. The existing rabbinic system emphasized literal interpretation of the Jewish Bible, the Torah. As given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, the text was considered sacred and immutable. All the Talmudic and later commentaries prescribed specific rules for all aspects of life from daily prayer and eating to legal rules, dress and interpersonal relationships. All this was founded on absolute rabbinic authority in all religious and secular matters. As the kahal was the only authority affecting the local Jews, the rabbis had full political control. The Haskalah threatened this rabbinic dominance and was strenuously challenged by many rabbis.

The Haskalah continued to impact Gombin society. Social and political experimentation grew after the last partition: Many new laws were promulgated. The social and political upheaval encouraged integration and secularization for Jews into Polish-Christian society. The orthodox rabbinic leaders resisted their loss of authority and the attendant economic privileges available to them. They were motivated by their long and deep held belief in classical, religious orthodoxy. Enlightened Jews particularly welcomed the new ideas and opportunities.

The population of Gombin (Holzman www.zchor.org/heritage) grew nearly five fold in the century after Napoleon was driven out of Poland and defeated at Waterloo (1815). The Russians controlled the area after 1835 by oppressive policies thereby achieving political stability. It is noteworthy that during the politically stable years of the nineteenth century, the Jewish population in Gombin grew significantly. For a period of over a hundred years, Jews represented almost half the town's population:

Gombin Population

Year	Total Population	Jews	
		Number	*Percent*
1808	1183	577	49
1827	2926	1472	50
1857	3926	1897	48
1897	5137	2539	49
1921	5777	2564	44
1939	7500 (est.)	2312	31 (est.)

While the first third of the nineteenth century was relatively free of harassment and political pressure, anti-Semitism still was fundamental to Russian policies. In 1835, the use of the Hebrew language in schools and daily commerce was banned (Davies Vol II 179). This was more an inconsequential restriction, as Yiddish was the everyday language of the people. Hebrew was used only in the Synagogue and home as the holy language of prayer. From 1800 through the 1890's, the Jewish population continued to grow in the original, Polish areas. These territories, known to my grandparents as *"Russki-Polski"*, expanded its Jewish population by over 400%.

The effect of the Enlightenment created new pressures on the Jews of Poland. The Jewish world was evenly split between the conventional Orthodox and the Hasidim. All Jews were affiliated with some religious activity controlled by the rabbinic system. The advent of liberal thinking resulted in two new broad schools. First, the Zionist movement was formalized by Theodor Herzl when the first Zionist convention in 1897 adopted the goal of establishing a Jewish national home in Palestine. Many young Jews were motivated by this and flocked to meetings and new clubs to discuss and plan for these goals. In the 1890's and first decade of the twentieth century, many young people emigrated to Palestine in the first major wave of immigration to that then desolate land.

A second philosophy evolved to address Polish and Russian tyranny: The Bund also opposed Russian controls on Jewish life but sought freedom through Socialist and Communist political-economic philosophies. The effect of the Socialist-Bund thinking led to long standing loyalties in our family even on to the 1930's and the pro-Communist/Socialist and pro-labor affiliations of the next generation Liberman family.

These social changes were a major factor in Germany and to some extent the Russian territories in Poland. It affected the Gombin Jews who retained pro-German views based on commercial relationships with the Prussian/German landowners. However, to quote Davies (Vol II 186):

> *"It is all too common...to exaggerate the influence of new ideas on the ghetto communities of Eastern Europe. Unlike the Jews of Britain, France and America, or even of Germany, the Jews of Galacia and of the Pale clung to the old ways with tenacious conservatism. They were as distinct from the world-wide Diaspora, as they were from their Christian neighbors. Life in the small Jewish towns of the East had a self-perpetuating quality which proved impervious to innovations. The practice of arranged adolescent marriages, the ritual importance of Sabbath observance, the obligatory dietary and hygienic rules,..., the Kaftan, and the side-curls: all served to make people dependent on traditional norms from a very early age. Youngsters who defied the rules in thought or deed, risked outright rejection by their relations..."*

We know that both Zionist and Bund groups developed early in Gombin. The first Bund groups had meetings in Gombin as early as 1900. These political groups thrived in Gombin in the period after WW I, i.e. in the 1920s and 1930s. These developments may have been influenced by the close proximity to Germany and to the residual influence of Prussian policies all throughout the nineteenth century.

A well known and significant bloody pogrom occurred in the city of Kishinev in 1903. Kishinev is in Moldavia-Bessarabia, in the far southern region of Poland. It is about 600 miles from Gombin. The local church clergy, with collusion of the police and with clear

direction from Moscow, incited a pogrom (Russian word for riot). The initial incident started with rumors of a dead Christian girl. The infamous blood libel was cited. Posters provided by the government were circulated *"granting permission to inflict a bloody punishment"* on the Jews during the Easter holiday (Dubnow 452). The town Christians attacked the Jewish homes, residents and people on 6 April 1903, the seventh day of Passover. The rioting and killing continued throughout the day in the full view of the authorities and without any police intervention. Late in the day the Russian government in Moscow finally gave permission to initiate intervention and local army units were sent in. The mobs stopped rioting and immediately left the scene without any need for applied force. Forty-five Jews were killed and almost six hundred injured. Most of the Jewish dead were of the poorer classes. The Jews of some position and wealth were able to bribe the police to protect their property and persons; the police deflected the rioters away from these locations (Dubnow 454).

These Kishinev riots were very well publicized in the aftermath. European, British and American newspapers ran extensive stories on the brutality of the attacks, lack of protection of the Jews by the authorities and the apparent support if not outright instigation by the government.

There are also examples of specific threats of pogroms to the Jews of Gombin. At least one event occurred in the late Spring of 1905 (Rothbart in www.zchor.org/rothbart/ROTHPROG.HTM). A rumor circulated that Polish peasants from the village of Stzerbna were planning a pogrom against Gombin. Stzerbna was on the road that went from the *Langer Gass* (Long Street) in Gombin. The Jews of Gombin and Plock had organized secret defense councils to defend against continued anti-Semitic threats. The Gombin Bund was the sponsoring club. The members were imbued with the excitement of Marxist philosophy and were anxious and willing to defend themselves by forceful means. Several of them owned pistols. The story is best told by a quote from a participating Gombiner, Jacob Rothbart:

*We knew that Gombin was not immune from similar experiences (*as in Kishinev, ed.*). Local Polish woodcutters and others who performed manual services for Jews openly pointed to fancy candlesticks and other objects of value. "See," they would say, "that is what I will take from you when the pogrom begins!"*

The defense council was called to consider a matter of prime urgency. For some time rumors had circulated that a mob of Polish ruffians, many of them from Stzerbna, was planning a pogrom against the Jews of Gombin. The Stzerbna poirim (peasants) were tall and powerful and exceptionally anti-semitic. Now it was reported to us that they had set a definite date for the pogrom to begin.

Why was the village of Stzerbna especially a hotbed of anti-Semites? That is hard to know for sure. Jews had done them no wrong. They were devout Catholics, so we could only conclude that their interpretation of the medieval catechisms stimulated great hostility toward Jews.

For several days the Jews of Gombin had been living in fear. Many Polish people spoke openly of the dreaded day that was near. Some Jews scoffed at the reports of an impending pogrom. "You will see, there will be nothing," they said. We of THE BUND self-defense brigade did not rely on gossip, pessimistic or otherwise. We went about the strain of preparing for decisive action. Our need for reliable information was vital, and we probed in many directions.

We obtained information both from common peasants and more sophisticated sources. Among the latter was a Polish physician and his wife who had established themselves in Gombin just a few years earlier. They were followers of the "P.P.S." (Polish Social Party) and we considered them to be among our most trustworthy friends. The P.P.S. did not have a branch in Gombin. The socialistic organization known as THE BUND was the Jewish parallel of the P.P.S. and drew the attention and sympathy of the enlightened doctor and his wife. From them we learned what was going on at City Hall among the Czarist chenovikes. We learned that the burgomeister (mayor) was a Polish patriot who secretly sympathized with us. We were constantly in touch with the doctor's wife, and her precise reports from the burgomeister and others verified the date that was set for the pogrom to begin.

At our strategy meeting several days earlier we had not only formulated our plans but had also appraised the possibilities of being aided by others outside of our membership. There were in Gombin Jewish toughs who hung around the marketplace. Some were powerful giants who would assuredly come to our aid if we called on them for help. One of them was "Avremele." He was not tall in stature, but his prowess was legendary. It was said of him that "his belly had an iron rim," and no man could stand up to him. There was a story that one day a gang of peasants got drunk and went looking for Jews to beat up. Avremele broke off the wooden tongue of a wagon and when he finished with them many lay half dead on the ground. The rest, bruised and bloody, fled in terror. We did not wish to

ally ourselves with such characters but we were sure that they would be on our side when trouble started. We knew that we could also count on the Jewish butchers, verovnikes (who loaded wagons), fish handlers and the like.

In the middle of the night before the fated day, we sent for help from the strong Jewish self-defense organization at Plotsk. Two of our comrades rode off hastily on the fifteen-mile trip in a rented wagon with two swift horses.

We expected that the Stzerbner poirim (peasants) would be the ones who would start the pogrom. We calculated that they would enter town from behind the yatkes (butcher shops). We plotted to waylay them at the edge of town and prevent them from entering. We hoped to surprise them from ambush by posting a strong platoon in concealed positions at the stodoles (barns). We would also patrol other roads that led from Stzerbna and head them off in case they chose a different route.

THE DAY did finally arrive. Our comrades were on their feet at daybreak. Each member went immediately to his assigned station. One problem was that we needed horses. Where would we get them? Our answer was simple and forthright. Some of us went into the street and wherever we came across a Jewish owned horse and wagon, we requested that the rig be turned over to us on the spot. None refused us, though it was usually their most precious possession, providing the means by which they earned a livelihood. We must have looked grim and determined and not to be denied. Also, it seems that everybody wanted to be helpful that day.

We sent out patrols to maintain liaison between our spread out positions to inform us quickly where fighting took place and help was needed.

Until mid-day we patrolled the streets and roads and manned our positions in poised expectation. All of a sudden there arose a loud noise. People started shouting and running in great excitement. We heard the piercing clatter of ironbound wagon wheels clanking over the cobblestone streets as there came into our midst two wagons loaded with members of the Plotsk self-defense brigade who had come in response to our call. They were "armed to the teeth."

Our joy was unlimited. We felt as heroes under siege, elated at the arrival of reinforcements. Our morale was sky-high. We began to feel that now we were in command of the town.

And where were the three or four policemen of the town? This remains a mystery to this day. Even Burra, the grober strajnik (fat policeman) who was a devoted Czarist puppet and always showed up where he wasn't invited, was nowhere in evidence. His downfall came in July of 1906 when extreme left-wing members of the Polish P.P.S. went gunning for anyone in a Czarist uniform. When they entered Gombin, they came across Burra at the marketplace and shot him immediately.

The day of the expected pogrom ended with no sign of an adversary. As it turned out, the Polish hooligans had been scared off. Some of our

> *preparations could not have been hidden. The Poles were not deaf. They could hear our shooting practice in the woods where we tried to develop accuracy by shooting at bushes and at the crotch of tree limbs. This class of Polish pogrom makers did not have firearms at this time. They prudently postponed their ambitious project to a time when they could do their dirty work in more favorable circumstances.*
>
> *Our Jewish townsfolk were astonished by all that happened that day. We were, after all, a group of youngsters barely out of our teens, posturing with youthful courage and chutspa (nerve) to confront a foe of potentially far greater numbers and strength. But our elders too were jubilant at the outcome and felt with us that a great victory had been won for all the Jews of Gombin.*
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> *... Now, a few words in conclusion. The self-defense movement that Jewish youth organized in the years between 1903 and 1906 in all Russian-ruled localities that had a large number of Jewish inhabitants began a new epoch in Jewish life. No longer would the threat of persecution be responded to with nothing but passive horror and resignation! This was the challenge of the times.*
>
> *The landsleit (townsfolk) of the small town of Gombin can be forever proud of having taken part in rising to the challenge of this historic era. (Rothbart)*

Many pressures collectively built on the Gombin Jews. These included conscription of Jewish boys to the army, ever increasing tax loads, the decline of the kahal and the attendant collapse of this key cultural support function, i.e., loss of rabbinic authority, the May laws (1882), and the pressures toward secularization driven by the Haskalah movement. The pogroms that occurred in the larger cities did not actually occur in Gombin. The Gombiners knew of these dangerous trends (they certainly knew of the Kishinev Massacres and the many local threats) which brought additional pressure to bear on an already harried Jewish community.

Emigration

Many in Gombin and other parts of Poland and Russia left in what became the huge wave of emigration from Eastern Europe to Palestine, Cuba, Central and South America and the United States of America. The Jews of Gombin left in large numbers beginning in the 1890s. Pinchas Rissman left in 1903 to come to Newark, New Jersey to deal with

his ill daughter, Chana. His other daughters, Brinah, Esther and Rivka all left at the behest of their father Pinchas, who was then in New Jersey. Manele, the only son of Pinchas Rissman remained in Gombin with his extended family. As noted earlier, Manele's grown children (except Nacha and Zelda) had all left Gombin before the beginning of World War II. He and his third wife Sara survived until Manele's death at age 70 in the Holocaust in April 1942. Many other Gombin Jewish families emigrated after World War I. The story of Pinchas and his children is extensively discussed in the following Chapters Two through Five.

Poland was reestablished as a free nation after the defeat of the Austrian – Hungarian Empire in the First World War. The new Poland was recreated by the Versailles Treaty of 1919, a result of the negotiations of the Allied powers as the victors in World War I. Poland had been reestablished as an independent state. While having its independence as a nation for the first time since the Partition of 1793, it was an infant nation in both physical ruin and deep economic turmoil.