The Jewish Community of Brańsk, 1795–1914

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Introduction

This study describes life in the Jewish community of Brańsk, in Bialystok province. In pre-partition Poland, Brańsk was the capital of the Bielsk Podlaski province, situated on the Nursk River. After partition, Brańsk was relegated by the authorities to the status of a nadetatowy (secondary) centre, and only chance saved it from the complete economic decline that occurred in similar places in the region. One significant factor in its survival was its Jewish community. This study focuses on the Jews who came to dominate the town in many areas of nineteenth-century life, and traces the circumstances that produced their vital community. The emphasis of this work is on the period of partitions, 1795 to 1918; its geographical scope is confined to the town of Brańsk.

I have utilized some relatively unexplored documents from the Belorussian Historical Archive in Grodno (BDGA) The most useful of these proved to be the archives of the Governor’s Chancellery (KGG) and the Grodno Province Directorate (ZGG). A complementary source is the collection of the State Archive in Bialystok (AP), home to important and very detailed records of the Chamber of War and Dominions (KWID), encompassing the years 1796–1807, as well as other less important archival materials. The Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw yielded no relevant material. I found several documents on Brańsk Jews in the University Library in Jerusalem and at YIVO in New York. Unfortunately, these papers are primarily limited in scope to the period of the Second World War.

The most important documents on early Jewish settlement in Brańsk are the town books stored in the Central Historical Archive in Minsk (Belarus) and the birth records of the Brańsk Roman Catholic parish at the Diocesan Archive in Drohiczyn. Documents and records issued by town authorities and the Jewish communal authority in Brańsk were completely destroyed during the world wars. In addition, I have drawn from my own collection of original relevant documents.

Jewish settlement in Brańsk has not yet been the subject of a separate comprehensive study, though I indirectly have touched upon the topic in earlier articles.1 Adam Dobroński, Anatol Leszczyński, and Tomasz Wiśniewski also have written on the history of Jews in the Białystok region.2 Their studies have enabled me to compare the

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2 A. Dobroński, Z dziejów Żydów . . . , pp. 84–94, and other publications by this author, indirectly related to this subject: Infrastruktura społeczna i ekonomiczna guberni
background of Brańsk with that of other towns in the region. Among the numerous and uneven general surveys of Jewish history, works by Arthur Eisenbach\(^3\) are outstanding, as is the study *Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce w zarysie*, edited by Jerzy Tomaszewski.\(^4\) Among neighbouring towns, only Ciechanowiec has been the subject of a study of its Jewish history, and that work concerns just the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\(^5\)

I also used several foreign-language reports, primarily as a means of clarifying the genealogy of local Jewish activists.\(^6\) *Pamyatnye knizhki Grodnenskoi Guberni*, as well as the results of the 1897 census of Russia, provided me with statistical data.\(^7\)

Brańsk’s memorial book, published in Yiddish, requires further discussion.\(^8\) Almost all former Jewish communities in Central Europe created similar publications, of varying historical value. Compared with others, *The Brańsk Memorial Book* is particularly useful, and was written by two Jews from the town—Juliusz Cohen and Alter Trus. It must be kept in mind that their backgrounds informed their viewpoints and that the contents are of uneven value: part of the book is infused with Trus’s leftist views and obvious negative bias toward Poles; furthermore, Juliusz Cohen left Brańsk for the United States before the First World War. It is clear that the authors were familiar with the original *kehilah’s pinkas* (chronicle). Most of the information on the 1800s is confirmed in other historical sources. The authors were neither historians nor writers, but strove simply to record everything they could remember or glean from others; only occasionally did they consult original documents.

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\(^5\) L. Budlewski, ‘Żydzi w Ciechanowcu w XVIII i XIX w’ (Masters thesis, Warsaw University, Białystok campus, 1992).


\(^7\) *Piervaia vsieobshaia pierepis naseleniia Rossiiskoi Imperii 1897 goda*, vol. XI, Petersburg, 1904.

The recent fashion for genealogy has prompted a few former residents, now living in the United States, to create interesting private collections. Some have reconstructed family histories using their memories, family documents, and immigration and other records. I read three such studies, and have also made use of an unpublished survey of the Jewish cemetery, which I completed at the request of the Provincial Curator of Antiquities in Białystok.

The ambiguous notion of Jewish community (gmina żydowska), also known as kehilah (from Hebrew kehilla) requires a brief comment. I use the term congregation interchangeably. In the case of a small community without full rights and attached to the kehilah of a neighbouring town, I use the commonly accepted term, ‘sub-kehilah’ (przykahałek). Note that the house of prayer (synagogue) that served as a school is considered a synonym for a religious community; in such cases, ‘sub-school’ serves as the equivalent for ‘sub-kehilah’.

This study is not exhaustive. Due to my language barrier, I could not utilize certain Yiddish and Hebrew documents and sources. I also did not consult the civil records of Jews from Białystok, Ciechanowiec, Sokoły, Tykocin, and Zabłudów. These are valuable resources for studying the contacts of Brańsk Jews with Jews in other towns.

Appendices, maps and graphs supplement the study.

1. JEWS IN BRAŃSK BEFORE 1795

The first Jews of Brańsk, confirmed in sources, appeared in Podlasie circa 1479. Because of the economic activities of owners of private towns, strong kehilah organizations emerged in Tykocin, Orla, Bočki, Siemiatycze, Ciechanowiec, and other towns during subsequent centuries. In royal towns (Brańsk, Bielsk, Drohiczn, and others), the Jewish community followed a different mode because the towns resisted Jewish settlement. Town councils demanded the privilege De non tolerandis Iudaeis from the king, a decree that presented a powerful barrier against an uncontrolled influx of Jews. This privilege prevented Jews from living permanently in royal towns; even a temporary stay required the town council’s permission. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, some Jewish families stayed in Brańsk temporarily.

Until recently it was believed that the first Jews appeared in Brańsk in 1578 or 1613. However, my detailed research points to an earlier date of 1560–1561. Jews were

brought there to increase profits from the royal starosta’s mills and inns. King Sigismundus Augustus leased the mills in the Brańsk Starostwo to two men, Israel and Dawid Isaakowicz, who supervised the millers. Even from the first, a conflict developed between the heirs of the former Brańsk miller Franciszek Borkowski and a Jew named Moszek, who was brought to the town by the new arendarze [lessees]. In 1562, Hrahel and Iliasz were Jewish lessees in Brańsk.

A. Leszczyński recently proposed the erroneous hypothesis that, based on the Jewish poll tax register for 1578, a community (kehilah) could have existed in Brańsk even at that date. His conclusion is the result of a misinterpretation: the large number of Jews cited in that document refers to the whole area of the Brańsk district, not just to the town. It is not possible to document the simultaneous existence of at least ten adult Jewish men (a minyan) until the end of the eighteenth century in the town. A minyan was the prerequisite for communal prayers (enabling the existence of a synagogue) and communal autonomy.

During the 1580s and 1590s we know of only one Jew, a man named Matiasz, living in Brańsk. By the mid-seventeenth century, individual Jews stayed temporarily under the permission of the town authorities, leasing the starosta’s mills and inns. Jews who did so were subject to the Jewish communal autonomy of Tykocin.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, several Jews from Brańsk converted to Catholicism. Whether the converts actually lived in the town or just documented their conversions there is not known. In 1650 a Jew named Daniel was baptized; his godparents were a soldier named Kacper Poznański and Katarzyna, a sister of the Brańsk burgrave Krzysztof Bystrzycki. In 1700 a Jew named Anna received baptism; her godparents were Stanisław Sutkowski, a collector (poborca) for the Bielsk region and Katarzyna Brolinia of Mokrzyce. In 1732 another convert assumed the name Józefa Marianna Nowicka; her godparents were Eleonora Biszkowska (the wife of the starostwo administrator) and a nobleman named Andrzej Wyszyński. Characteristically, godparents were members of the nobility.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the town magistrate permitted several Jewish families to temporarily settle in Brańsk to improve the supply of goods and


15 Ibid. No. 4, p. 95, 463.
19 The Diocesan Archive in Drohiczyn, the Archive of the Brańsk Parish, ref. I/B/1, pp. 62, 610; ref. I/B/2, p. 413.
services to the citizens, and to increase profits from the town mill. In the 1780s, four Jewish families (20–25 people) lived in Brańsk. In several nearby villages the Jewish population was numerous enough to allow the creation of communal organizations (village kehilahs, sub-kehilahs, and sub-schools). These were located in Wyszonki (1735), Olszewo (1750), Rudka (1787), and Topczewo (1787). Many Jews attached to kehilahs lived in the neighbouring villages of Brześcianka, Brześnica, Mien, Oleksin, Patoki, Poletył, Poplawy, and Załuskie. The nearby private towns of Boćki and Ciechanowec had large long-standing Jewish communities and well-organized communal bodies.

As early as 1792, burghers from towns in the Bielsk region petitioned the diet of Brańsk. It recognized the burghers’ plea and declared, ‘We oblige our delegates by not allowing settlement of Jewry in the free towns in our land, and to maintain their privileges [i.e., those of the burghers] with all power, as confirmed by the present diet.’

The sizable Jewish population in the area surrounding Brańsk during the first decades after the partitions contributed to the growth of the town’s Jewish population.

2. PRUSSIAN RULE (1796–1807)

As a result of the third partition of Poland (1795), Brańsk fell under the rule of Prussia, which had created the province of Neu-Ostpreussen (New-Eastern Prussia). Towns in Podlasie tried to maintain their old privileges with the Prussian authorities, including restrictions on sources of livelihood accessible to Jews. In the first months under Prussian rule, the old privileges of the towns were respected. On 26 February 1796, the Magistrate of Brańsk allowed Szmul and Jankiel Pejsowicz, merchants from Ciechanowice, to settle in Brańsk for ten years: ‘Considering public convenience in regard to conducting commerce . . . therefore providing the town with benefits and further profits by continuous . . . supplies of merchandise and other similar goods.’ After that time, ‘were they not to be granted a similar permit by the Magistrate, they must leave the town’. Jews could sell ‘all kinds of spices and other foreign products from Nuremberg such as scarves, cloth, fabrics, and the like’. However, they were prohibited from selling liquor, following a declaration that the Magistrate ‘will not allow permanent settlement to any merchant of such trade’.

Another Brańsk merchant, Hansel Berg, dealt in long-


22 Z. Romaniuk, ‘Zarys dziejów…,’ p. 15.

23 J. Siedlecki, op. cit., p. 129.

24 A Dobroński, Z dziejów Żydów..., p. 85.

25 The State Archive in Białystok (henceforth AP Białystok), The Chamber of War and Dominions (henceforth KWD) call 2392.
distance trade, and brought in sugar and coffee from Gdańsk.26 Berg was a subject of the 
kehilah in Boćki, and received a permit to live in Brańsk for fourteen years.27

The Prussian General Statute on Jews (General-Juden Reglement für Süd und 
Neu-Ostpreussen) of 17 April 1797 regulated the Jewish legal situation. This law limited 
the authority of the kehilah to religious matters; it also categorized Jews as either 
protected or tolerated. A trend to remove Jews from villages and concentrate them in 
towns followed, mainly for economic reasons. Jews had to take surnames (until then they 
had used first names and paternal first names) and list their permanent residence and 
occupation. These steps were intended to help stabilize their situation. Jews were also 
permitted to participated on a limited basis in the towns’ self-government; each town 
allowed a set number of Jewish councilors to be elected proportionally to the percentage 
of Jews in the general population. Prominent Jews who governed the kehilah also 
represented the Jewish community in the city administration. As Eisenbach pointed out, 
this representation was largely unfulfilled due to the opposition of town councils that 
quoted old privileges, mainly De non tolerandis Iudaeis.28

The statute and the fact that Brańsk lacked trade and some crafts led to growth of 
the Jewish community. Prussian statistics noted eighty Jews living in Brańsk in 1799;29 
among them were a dozen or so adult men. The number suggests that this group, larger 
than a minyan, may have developed some form of communal autonomy and might have 
wished to erect a synagogue.30 Details, however, cannot be confirmed.

Prussian officials, aided by new legislation, gradually overcame the resistance of 
towns that had tried to stop Jews from arriving. Statistics for Brańsk in the year 1800 list 
seventeen artisan occupations typical of Jews, a relatively large number. Initially, only 
four of the forty-three artisans in the town were Jews. In subsequent years, however, Jews 
broke the monopoly in trade and some crafts; by the beginning of the nineteenth century, 
the majority of Jews in the town earned their living from the alcohol trade: there were 
eleven innkeepers and three brewers.31

With its Declaration of 6 February 1802, the Prussian government abolished all 
feudal privileges for towns and guilds, including De non tolerandis Iudaeis. Chambers, 
regencies, and magistrates were instructed not to recognize old Polish privileges.

26 Ibid., call 2403.
27 Ibid., call 2392.
28 Eisenbach, Emancypacja Żydów na ziemiach polskich 1795-1870 na tle europejskim, 
Warszawa, 1988, pp. 128–129; see also: Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce w zarysie (do 
pp. 84–85.
29 J. Wąsicki, Pruskie opisy miast podlaskich z końca XVIII wieku. Departament 
4–5.
However, the 1802 Declaration did not grant Jews full rights. A subsequent Declaration of 8 February 1808 allowed Jews to settle in any town and to belong to guilds.\textsuperscript{32} These acts, combined with the fiscal policy of Prussian authorities, resulted in a steady influx of Jews from neighbouring villages and hamlets to Brańsk.\textsuperscript{33} The 1807 Russian census indicates that their numbers had doubled since 1799.\textsuperscript{34}

It is not clear if a Jewish kehilah in Brańsk existed under the Prussian partition: it is possible but cannot be confirmed. The only indication of a form of communal autonomy is an 1850 document that claims ‘already under the Prussian rule the Brańsk Jewish community was autonomous . . . and paid taxes to the Jewish district in Tykocin.’\textsuperscript{35} However, the negative attitude of the town authorities toward Jews, and Prussian legislation, argue against the existence of a kehilah.

3. THE SECESSION FROM THE BOCKI KEHILAH

After the 1807 treaty of Tilsit, the department of Białystok (which included Brańsk) was transferred to Russia. The Jewish legal situation in the tsarist empire was regulated by the statute \textit{Položen’е o ustrоystve Evreev} of 21 December 1804. Essentially, this statute codified the acting laws regarding Jews. From my perspective, the most important articles of the statute preserved the ‘settlement zone’, maintained some of the burghers’ rights restrictions, and accepted the principle of expulsion of Jews from villages after three years. It also abolished kehilah administration, subjected Jews to the local administration, and removed judiciary branches from rabbis. After the Tilsa treaty, resettlement from villages to towns slowed.\textsuperscript{36} If an earlier Jewish communal autonomy in Brańsk had indeed existed after the 1804 Statute, it would have folded after 1807.

A statement from the 1850 Bocki kehilah maintains that in 1811 about ten Jewish families lived in Brańsk; they belonged to kehilahs in Bocki, Ciechanowiec, and Siemiatycze. It also states that Jews moved to Brańsk from neighbouring villages.\textsuperscript{37} This document reflects the partiality of Bocki Jews who were feuding with Jews from Brańsk. The absence of a kehilah organization in Brańsk at that time is confirmed by the authors of the Brańsk Memorial Book, who noted that ‘in 1813 . . . Brańsk was restored . . . we find Jews in Brańsk. Initially there were few but then their number gradually increased.

\textsuperscript{32} A. Eisenbach, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 131.

\textsuperscript{33} AP Białystok, KWiD, call 2329 and 2376a containing the confirmation of the influx of Jews to Brańsk from Ciechanowiec and the village of Brześnica.

\textsuperscript{34} Oddział Dokumentacji Zabytków w Warszawie [The Department of the Documentation of Antiquities in Warsaw], \textit{Teki Glinki}, 182, ‘Statystyka części zaboru pruskiego przyłączonej do Rosji po pokoju tylżyckim 1807,’ pp. 3–5.

\textsuperscript{35} The Central Archive of the History of Belarus in Grodno (BDGA), f. 1, op. 13, e. 512, p. 48.

\textsuperscript{36} A. Eisenbach, \textit{op. cit.} pp. 139–140.

\textsuperscript{37} BDGA Grodno, f. 1, op. 13, e. 512. ‘The request of the representatives of Jewish community in Brańsk to separate them from the Bocki kehilah 1848–1851,’ pp. 63–63v.
We should assume that Jews from the neighbouring villages in which they lived until then, gradually moved to town. The town records note the presence of a Jewish community. However, there is no mention of a Jewish kehilah.\(^{38}\)

Brańsk’s Jews (about 103 persons) suffered many inconveniences and were unable to fully meet the religious, economic, and social needs that only their own kehilah could provide.\(^{39}\) Some Jews had to attend synagogue in Popława (two km away). The dead were transported to the cemetery in Orla (ca. forty km) and from about 1816, to Boćki (ca. twenty-nine km). Boćki’s kehilah charged high fees for burials, as well as unfair taxes. The authors of the Memorial Book noted that for the privilege ‘of burial, the Boćki kehilah made the harsh demand that Brańsk [a sub-kehilah - Z.R. note] pay part of the taxes, and sometimes even demanded an additional thousand guldens per burial.’\(^{40}\) Furthermore, they wanted Brańsk’s Jews to provide recruits to replace Boćki draftees at the rate of one recruit for every ten prepared for burial, and one cemetery plot. The recruit was to be provided in advance because burials were not always settled in time. Sometimes a body was returned to Brańsk from Boćki: ‘Such troubles forced the poor Brańsk community to seek’ a solution for these issues.\(^{41}\)

The year 1816 marked a turning point in the history of Brańsk Jews. The first evidence of communal autonomy was recorded as a sub-kehilah (przykahalek), a limited form of congregation subjected to the larger and older kehilah in Boćki. A memorandum issued by the Bielsk district land court has survived, addressed to ‘the sub-kehilah of the Town of Brańsk’, concerning the establishment of reviskye skaski (review reports) in accordance with the 1815 district government circular and decree.\(^{42}\) The Memory Book also confirms the existence of a self-governing organization: ‘in the 1816 Pinkas was an entry about a meeting in which Jakub Chaimowicz and Dow Jakubowicz participated, among others. . . . The subject was the construction or purchase of a building for a prayer house.’\(^{43}\) Brańsk Jews henceforth began to grow independent of other kehilahs. The sub-kehilah, which existed from as early as 1816, gradually established the necessary elements for religious life: a cemetery; a synagogue; a bathhouse (mikvah); the kehilah structure; and, finally, a permanent rabbi. Establishing full legal communal independence from other kehilahs was more complicated and difficult to achieve; this took several decades. In the beginning they developed the internal traditional structure of the kehilah as required by the laws, customs, and practice of Jews.

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39 BDGA Grodno, f. 1, op. 13, d. 512, pp. 15–18. In 1816, a total of 103 ‘souls’ are mentioned.

40 The fact that gulden appears as the unit of currency in memoirs from 1816 to 1821 instead of złoty, talar, or rubel can mean that the person recording the Pinkas came from the Austrian partition. It is possible that this person escaped from the Habsburg monarchy after 1788 when many Jews subjected to draft escaped to Poland. The so called gulden konwencyjny equaled 0.5 talar.


42 BDGA Grodno, f. 1, op. 13, d. 512, k. 52.

After 1816, the burial society *Hevrah Kadisha* was established to transport the dead to Boćki. Another significant factor in the *kehilah*'s autonomy occurred in 1820 when a cemetery lot was somehow obtained from the Brańsk town authorities. Located at *Katusze* ['Torments'], a site that had served as an execution place during the pre-partition period, the area had been a subject of contention between the town and nobility in the neighbouring village of Brześnica since the seventeenth century.\(^{44}\)

In 1820, the Jews of Brańsk solicited contributions of 70 guldens for the construction of a synagogue. They purchased an old brick building near the market square and the former *starosta*’s manor. A year later the building was ready; it also housed the rabbi’s apartment and the *kehilah* jail.\(^{45}\) Meir Nechis was the first rabbi, confirmed by the *kehilah* elders in 1822 and described as ‘highly educated and deserving to be the leader of the generation’. His salary included lodging and a weekly salary of 27 guldens.\(^{46}\)

While the *kehilah*’s internal organization was developing, the Jews of Brańsk still had not achieved full legal independence from Boćki’s *kehilah*. In 1823, they filed a lawsuit accusing Boćki Jews of taxing them unfairly, arguing that due to the distance between the towns, Brańsk’s Jews were not always able to attend *kehilah* meetings and were consequently exploited. Conversely, the Boćki *kehilah* accused Brańsk Jews of avoiding their community obligations. The Białystok District Court on 23 July 1823 ordered separate entries for each community in the tax records maintained by the Boćki *kehilah*, decreeing that the Boćki *kehilah* should tax only 111 eligible Jews in Brańsk. Brańsk Jews also argued that they had been included in the Boćki *kehilah* under no legal grounds in 1816 (after the Jewish state census). They accused the Boćki *kehilah* of conducting policy designed to destroy the Brańsk congregation in order to hold influence over and gain profit from Brańsk Jews.\(^{47}\)

In the meantime, the universal conscription manifesto was published, possibly prompted by the war against Turkey. A separate section required Jews to serve; previously it had been possible to avoid the military. Each year, four to eight Jewish recruits (per 1,000 members of the population) aged twelve to twenty-five were called. If under eighteen, they served in cantonists’ battalions. Subjected to brutal discipline, these recruits were separated from their families and were often forced to convert. Service terms frequently lasted longer than twenty-five years. The changes of 1827 increased and aggravated conflicts in Jewish communities.\(^{48}\) The problem likely influenced the Brańsk congregation in its quest to gain full independence from Boćki.

The tsarist prescript ordered town authorities to register Jews in order to secure the army draft. Young Jews in Brańsk panicked. To evade the draft, they registered in

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\(^{44}\) *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23. The oldest surviving tombstone dates from 1839; see Z. Romaniuk, ‘*Dokumentacja historyczna cmentarza żydowskiego w Brańsku*’, BBiDZ (manuscript), Białystok, 1993. It is possible that the cemetery was established several years after 1820.

\(^{45}\) A. Trus, J. Cohen, *op. cit.* pp. 21, 32.

\(^{46}\) *Ibid.* pp. 35–36. According to the authors, the information about this was in the community *Pinkas* (chronicle).

\(^{47}\) BDGA Grodno, f. 1, op. 13e. 512, p. 13 and 13v; and f 2. op. 14 e. 1909.

Boćki and Orla, and not in the place of their actual dwelling. The draft, which also started in 1827, designated three recruits for Brańsk (for 1826, 1827, and for unpaid taxes). Those who registered in other towns were drafted nevertheless because the communities to which they escaped treated them as strangers. Brańsk’s elders saw a profit in this, and the poor who were not able to bail themselves out were drafted. In addition, Brańsk Jews hired a special ‘soul catcher’ agent called Lejb Tate, who hunted the town for Jews registered in other kehilahs in order to bring them before the draft board. If there was an urgent need, children were abducted from the street or their houses. This caused fierce conflicts between poor Jews and community elders. The compulsory draft must have consumed much time and energy of the community elders, and diminished their interest in working toward full independence for the congregation. The Brańsk Memory Book contains many dramatic descriptions of Jews drafted into the cantonists, and reflects the importance of the situation. Those drafted were considered dead. If they survived they never returned to their place of origin. As a result, the Brańsk Jewish population decreased. Some who feared the draft ran away to the Austrian partition (the reverse of 1788), some registered in other communities, and of course an unknown number were actually drafted. This problem persisted until the Crimean War.

Several years after the introduction changes to the military, the congregation elders grew more confident, and after the November insurrection they undertook new steps toward secession from the Boćki kehilah.

On 14 August 1832, representatives of the Boćki kehilah and of the Brańsk Jewish community signed an agreement in the Brańsk town hall. The nine-point document stated that the Boćki kehilah would place no obstacles in the full separation of Brańsk Jews as an autonomous kehilah. This change was to be effected at the next Jewish census. In exchange for this promise, Brańsk Jews were to accept 100 Jews from Boćki, and until the new division were to pay 2731 rubles, 70 kopecks in taxes and a poll tax for 211 people. The additional hundred taxpayers probably were meant to take part of the burden from the Boćki kehilah, though some of the Jews likely lived in Brańsk. However, the Brańsk town authorities did not approve of this plan, fearing too strong Jewish communal autonomy and an increase in the number of Jews.

On 25 April 1835 the law ‘on the situation of the Jews’ introduced significant legal changes to kehilah structure. Jews living in the Russian Empire were granted the status of citizens. New representative organs of Jewish communities were created, the so-called synagogue directorates.

The new Jewish representatives were elected for three-year terms. The directorate included the official rabbi, the elder (starosta), the treasurer, and the ‘wise man’ (uczony). The rabbi was the official representative of the community before the tsarist authorities; only a person with lay education could hold this post, unlike previous rabbi-theologians. This law limited the function of Jewish kehilahs to that of fiscal offices

focused on tax and other public collections. The 1835 statute initiated the end of the kehilah as a separate self-governing organization. It did not bring substantial changes to the Jewish social position.

The 1835 law probably helped Brańsk Jews to some degree to gain the kehilah’s independence. Curtailing kehilahs’ rights and turning their principal focus to tax collection was a part of the conception created in 1838 by Governor Dolgorukov and the minister of interior. They felt that Jewish kehilahs should only exist in district and secondary towns, as they provided better tax collection.52 Synagogue directorates were easier to control in towns. Between 31 October and 12 November 1831 in the regional office of Białystok, a Bielsk Land Court employee filed a petition of unification and submission by Boćki Jews to the Brańsk community to create an autonomous kehilah in Brańsk. The employee argued that ‘it would bring not an insignificant profit . . .’ (in fiscal terms) and since a large number of Jews lived in Brańsk it would solve the conflict between these two communities.53 The issue fell through, however, due to an old debt incurred by the Boćki Jews that Brańsk Jews refused to pay. The next year, at the request of Brańsk Jews, the case landed in the senate by way of the governor’s office. In response, Boćki’s Jews, afraid of losing their influence, started spreading false rumours accusing their adversaries of bribing officials. In addition, they levied various fines on Brańsk Jews. The district authorities sent an official to Brańsk to collect these dues. A settlement covering eight years was proposed. Brańsk Jews would pay 1250 silver rubles per soul per year for 314 ‘tax souls’. In addition, they were to pay 30 rubles annually for kehilah expenses, and were to share a third of other dues imposed by the Boćki kehilah. In exchange, Brańsk kehilah’s internal affairs would be excluded from the supervision of Boćki. After long bargaining and some resistance, the Brańsk kehilah was compelled to sign this agreement.54 However, efforts to gain full independence for the Brańsk community continued because the burden of various dues fell upon approximately half the members of the Boćki kehilah living in Brańsk. The Brańsk kehilah leaders were Nachum Lejzorowicz Gurwicz, Ajzik Zekielowicz Szotland, and Ber and Lejbko Ickowicz Rozen.55

In 1844, Tsar Nicolas I issued a decree entirely abolishing the autonomy of Jewish communities in the lands incorporated in the Russian Empire. Jews were freed from the duty of belonging to a kehilah, and communal issues were under the control of the town administrations.56

As it turned out, this 1844 decree did not abolish all forms of Jewish communal autonomy. It is evident from documents dated 1848, 1850, and 1852 that Brańsk Jews

52 BDGA Grodno, f. 1, op. 14, d. 512, p. 13v.
54 Ibid.; see also: f. 2, op. 14, d. 1909, p. 5 and 5v.
55 BDGA Grodno, f. 1, op. 13, d. 512, p. 14 and 48v. They signed documents for the Brańsk kehilah, among the others on 23 December 1848, 18 March 1850 (according to the Julian calendar).
56 A. Dobroński, Z dziejów Żydów..., p. 89.
repeated their attempts to gain independence from the Boćki kehilah.\textsuperscript{57} The activities of these kehilahs has not yet been researched, though certainly they were entitled to collect taxes, maintain civil records, and provide recruits. We do not know if the kehilah was directly subjected to the town administration or to the official district rabbi (urzędowy rabin powiatowy).

Traditional Jewish self-government continued to exist illegally in Brańsk because of the great internal role of kehilah in religious matters.\textsuperscript{58} The centuries-old Jewish community structure was too strong to be completely abolished by administrative decree. Certainly this was the case in other large Jewish communities as well. We know that an illegal traditional kehilah existed in the second half of the nineteenth century in Białystok.\textsuperscript{59}

The struggle to establish a fully independent kehilah came to fruition on 5–17 December 1852. Brańsk’s Jews, unwilling to wait for the termination of the 1842 agreement (indeed, it ended in 1850), applied again to province authorities, who finally granted their request. By the tsar’s decree they created the Bran’sk’e Evreiske Obchestvo, independent from Boćki.\textsuperscript{60} At that time, about 170 Jewish families lived in Brańsk, representing almost 38 per cent of the population. Protests from Boćki Jews continued for a few years, to no avail. The issue of separation of both kehilahs finally was concluded on 14 January 1856.\textsuperscript{61}

The topic of kehilah establishment in former royal towns in Podlasie in the nineteenth century has not yet been comprehensively studied. My research indicates that Brańsk’s situation was not unique; indeed, a similar case existed involving the independence of Jews in Bielsk (Podlaski) from the kehilah in Orla.\textsuperscript{62} Bielsk Jews had to pay dues of 4000 rubles to the Orla kehilah; their quest for independence occurred between 1839 and 1848.

As we see, former private towns with old and strong kehilahs (Orla, Boćki, Siemiatycze, and Ciechanowiec) were reluctant to give up control over their compatriots who in the first half of the nineteenth century had settled in former royal towns (Brańsk and Bielsk). Because of the economic growth of these towns, by the mid nineteenth century they were able to gain independence from their original kehilahs. Around 1850 there were eight kehilahs in the Bielsk district: Bielsk, Boćki, Ciechanowiec, Drohiczyn, Kleszczele, Niemirów, Orla, and Siemiatycze. Brańsk joined them in 1852.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Jews as a nationality and an ethnic group played dominant roles in Brańsk. By the turn of the century, Brańsk had one of the most active Jewish communities in the Bielsk district, and was only smaller than Bielsk, Siemiatycze, and Ciechanowiec.

\textsuperscript{57} BDGA Grodno, f. 1, op. 14, d. 512, and f. 2 op. 14, d. 1909.

\textsuperscript{58} A. Trus, J. Cohen, \textit{op. cit.} pp. 22–123.

\textsuperscript{59}A. Leszczyński, ‘Struktura społeczna…,’ p. 61.

\textsuperscript{60} BDGA Grodno, f. 2, op. 14, d. 1909, pp. 4–8, ‘The decree on the separation of the kehilahs in Boćki and Brańsk in 1852’.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 160.

4. THE STRUCTURE OF THE KEHILAH

The internal structure of the kehilah was based on the age-old tradition of the Jewish Diaspora, and was shaped by religion, law, customs, and everyday Jewish practice. Kehilah authorities were chosen by a combination of elections and a lottery system. The candidate’s financial status played a significant role, leaving only the wealthiest a chance to win a community position. Only the kehilah’s spiritual leader, the rabbi, was appointed in a different manner.

A fully developed Jewish community usually contained several elements: a kehilah directorate; a rabbi; a synagogue (house of prayer and school); a cemetery and burial society; a mikvah; a judicial court; and charitable institutions. These elements (except the cemetery) were most often located near each other and constituted a cultural center. In Brańsk a Jewish community complex developed west of the market area, mostly in the location of the former manor of the town’s starosta.

The tsar’s decrees issued between 1835 and 1844 were the most effective agents of change for the traditional kehilah structure during the period 1795 to 1918. The paucity of documents (which we discussed with relation to the struggle with the town of Boćki) from the first half of the nineteenth century prevents a full reconstruction of the kehilah’s activities.

This section concentrates, then, on the most visible elements of Brańsk’s kehilah structure: the rabbinate, synagogues, cemetery, and the synagogue directorates.

1. The Rabbinate

Every Jewish communal autonomous kehilah had its spiritual leader, called rabbi in Hebrew (in Polish, rabin), meaning ‘my master’. Because of tradition and function, a rabbi was indispensable. He is frequently confused with a Christian clergyman, though his functions were not the same. A rabbi had to be a well-respected authoritative figure versed in interpreting and explaining the Bible (The Tanakh) and the Oral Law (The Mishna and Gemara, which together form the Talmud). These qualities are only attained through long study in yeshivas, religious schools, and colleges. A rabbinical candidate was most often recommended by his teacher, ‘the Master’, to a kehilah that sought to fill the position. After being accepted, the future rabbi received credentials from his yeshiva.

The kehilah signed a contract granting him accommodations, a salary, and other minor benefits. The range of the rabbi’s obligations was also recorded in the contract. We know his primary duties included officiating at marriages, granting divorces, settling disputes, and explaining the Torah and its commentaries.

At the formative stage of the community, kehilah elders often sought a rabbi only after establishing a cemetery and erecting a prayer house. This was true in Brańsk. After purchasing a lot for the cemetery and adapting an existing building for the synagogue, in 1822 the community decided to hire its own rabbi. As one of the primary reasons, they stated that the community lacked a mediator for disputes.

Brańsk’s first rabbi was Meir Nechis. We know that he was educated and probably came from a nearby area. According to the contract signed by the local Jewish

community elders, he was given an apartment in the prayer house, fuel, and 27 guldens per week. In addition, on Passover he received a bottle of wine, tea, and sugar, and his wife was granted the concession for selling Shabbat candles. The rabbi’s income also included fees for resolving disputes and for the symbolic sale of bread and flour products (chamets) before Passover.

The brick building adapted for the prayer house had thick walls and small windows. It was dark and damp. Near the rabbi’s apartment was a cell where young Jewish cantonist draftees were held. As the authors of the Memorial Book wrote, Meir Nechis had to listen day and night to the wailing of the future cantonists’ mothers. It is said that because of this, he broke down and died at a young age. More likely, difficult living conditions hastened his death.

The second rabbi was Judel Harif, ‘a great Torah and Talmudic scholar’. Very little information is available about him. We know that he lived in the same apartment as his predecessor, and that he too died young. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery close to Nechis.

Szaul Denenburger, the next rabbi, did not want to live in the damp apartment. He was in a constant dispute with the kehila elders over this issue. Not being assured that his living conditions would improve, he left to be the rabbi of Łomża around 1870. Denenburger was well respected by the local Jewish community, a fact confirmed on the day of his departure, when some tried to stop him from leaving. Some tried to hold the carriage, others threw themselves before it, pleading, ‘Rabbi, don’t leave us.’

Meir Szalom ha-Kohen became the fourth rabbi of Brańsk in 1870. He was from an old rabbinical family. Although respected and well liked, the Brańsk elders did not appreciate him; they treated him as poorly as his predecessors and gave him a shabby apartment. As with the earlier rabbis, poor conditions caused his death, which occurred in 1884 when he was forty-three. Local Jews took care of his widow and children.

The fifth rabbi was Szlomo Szmariahu Margolis. Some memoirs describe his patriarchal appearance which invited respect. Despite advanced age evident from his silver-white beard, his gait was brisk. He was also appreciated by the Christians who accepted his judgement in their disputes with Jews. The rabbi supported religious book publishing in Hebrew by subscription, for example; among the titles produced were The Deer’s Antlers (1885), The Deer’s Beauty (1883), Shmuel’s Cover, and The Garment of Tsvi (1897). Margolis refused to accept the living conditions and rented an apartment,

64 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., pp. 37–40.
69 Ibid., pp. 40–41
first in a house belonging to Leizer Smurżyk, and then in the house of the butcher Szepsel. The rabbi’s wife Kindrel helped the poor. Margolis died in 1906.71

The last rabbi of Brańsk in this period was Szymon Jehuda ha-Kohen Szkop, son of Izaak Samuel.72 He was born in 1860, probably in Latvia,73 and was quite educated; he ran well-known yeshivas in Telza and Malcz.74 Invited by the Brańsk elders in 1906, he came to the town with his disciples. Szkop was already famous among the adherents of rabbinical Judaism. Religious Jewish youth flocked to study in his yeshiva in Brańsk, where he was assisted by Rabbi Olszwang. In addition, twice a week Szkop taught in the so-called ‘old synagogue’.75 According to the authors of the Memorial Book, he played an important role in saving the town from being burned by the evacuating Russian army in August 1915, bribing a Russian officer with his own gold watch. He also organized the extinguishing of a fire started by the Germans in the town, for which he was beaten.76 The Jews of Brańsk were proud of this famous spiritual leader but could not meet his demands. He complained about his poor apartment, low salary, responsibility for the community’s internal matters, and the kehilah’s refusal to erect a new building for his yeshiva.

In 1920, a tobacco factory owner named Szereszewski invited Szkop to Grodno. His decision to move was sealed when Szereszewski agreed to build a new yeshiva, Sha’arei Torah. Soon the rabbi moved there with his students.77 In 1927, Szkop visited the United States, where he raised funds for his yeshiva and also temporarily headed Rabbi Israel Elchanan’s Theological Seminary in New York. He refused an offer by the Association of Jewish Rabbis in the United States and Canada to remain in America, as Orthodox leaders in Europe continually urged him to return; they feared that without his presence, the famous Grodno yeshiva would decline.78 Szkop died in Grodno in 1939. A delegation from Brańsk attended his funeral.

A well-known Israeli rabbi, Mordechai Man, born in Brańsk, knew Szkop personally. In his opinion Szkop was ‘the greatest authority on the Talmud in all of Poland’.79 The period during which Szkop lived in Brańsk is regarded as his most fruitful time. Even today, religious Jews over the world study his writings. The best known of his

73 Ch. G. Cohen, Street Finder, Bowie, Maryland, 1989, p. 10.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
79 The relation of Mordechai Man of Bnei Brak, Israel, recorded by the author in November 1992.
works is *Sha‘arei Ished* (The Gates of Honesty), written during his staying in Brańsk, containing Talmudic interpretations. It was reprinted many times, including in Warsaw (1928), Jerusalem (1931), New York, Bnei Brak, and Jerusalem (1970). On the title page is a note, ‘from our great rabbi, Israel’s great light, a brilliant rabbi, Szymon Jehuda ha-Kohen Szkop, who headed yeshivas in Telz, Malcz, and Brańsk, and at the end, The Gates of Torah yeshiva in Grodno’.

2. Prayer houses

A prayer house, also called synagogue (*synagoga*), God’s house (*bóźnica*), or sub-school (*przyszkolek*), was indispensable for every *kehilah*. That they were often regarded as synonyms for Jewish community indicates their importance. This was due to the separate self-government at each synagogue, even though each one was somewhat accountable to the governing body of the whole community. Synagogues were multi-purpose institutions, a factor indirectly reflected in their names, *Bet Hamidrash* (The House of Study) and *Bet Knesset* (The House of Gathering). They were the sites where Jews prayed, studied, discussed, held meetings, held courts with *kehilah* jails, and sometimes even had apartments (for the rabbi, *shames*, or *gabbai*). As the Jewish community grew, new synagogues were built. At first even small groups of Jews would pray in separate synagogues. In 1835, legislation was introduced in the Russian Empire regulating the development of religious schools (*beitim midrashim*) and synagogues. The number of these institutions was dependent upon the number of Jewish dwellings. For up to thirty houses, one religious school was allowed, whereas a synagogue and a *bet midrash* could be built for thirty to eighty houses. If the number of Jewish houses exceeded eighty, the community could build one religious school for every thirty houses, and one synagogue for each eighty houses. Evidently the law distinguished between a religious school and a synagogue. Actually all religious buildings in small towns were religious schools. More sumptuous buildings, known as synagogues, were built in larger towns. Today the terms *synagogue*, *religious school*, and *God’s house* are often used interchangeably. Usually even small Jewish communities of several hundred people had several prayer houses, a result of inter-kehilah division according to property, occupation, and religious group. However, one of the religious buildings was always considered the main synagogue, and was the place where the rabbi prayed. Locations and architectural requirements for prayer houses were regulated mainly by the construction laws of 1844 and 1850. The first Jewish prayer house in Brańsk could possibly have existed by the beginning of the nineteenth century, but this cannot be confirmed.

The sub-kehilah, which certainly existed in Brańsk in 1816, attempted to build its own prayer house to accommodate the needs of local Jews. In 1820 Brańsk Jews started a collection to purchase one of the town’s three brick buildings; a house was then bought on Senatorska Street between the Main and Horse Markets, on a lot adjacent to the river.

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82 Ibid., pp. 71–74.

According to Alter Trus and Juliusz Cohen, who relied on the *kehilah pinkas*, the building was converted into a synagogue by 1821. As stated above, the prayer house also housed the rabbi’s apartment and the *kehilah jail*.\(^84\) We know from the synagogue’s 1927 reconstruction plans that the building was 22.3 meters long, 11.8 meters wide, approximately 10 meters high, and was covered with a gable roof.\(^85\) Its architectural style was almost classical (see Appendix 1). The building had three entrances: the main from the north; the women’s gallery from the west, and an additional one from the south. The main entrance led to a vestibule (*pulish*), to the left of which was the main prayer hall, and to the right a room (probably the rabbi’s apartment). A small southwest room probably served as the jail. Above the rabbi’s apartment and the jail was a balcony with the women’s prayer space (*babiniec*, or *esrat noshim*). In Max Wołkow’s (Wulkan’s) memoir from the turn of the century is a description of the main prayer hall: ‘on both sides were wooden benches. In the center of the synagogue was a wooden *bimah*. . . . Some *kehilah* members had their own “stands” instead of benches where they stood, not sat. These places, benches and “stands” were hereditary, passed from generation to generation. In order to maintain a steady temperature for the small case of books, especially during winter, a special stove was built out of long and narrow bricks in the middle of the lower [i.e., men’s] part of the synagogue.’\(^86\) Furnishings came from community purchases and private donations. For example, the psalmists’ association donated a twenty-four candle candelabra.\(^87\)

When other prayer houses were built, this synagogue became known as the ‘old one’ (*Alter Bet Midrash,* or the ‘brick one’.\(^88\) According to custom it was the main synagogue of the town; because the local rabbi prayed there, it was also called the ‘rabbinical one’.

After the November Insurrection, local Jews purchased ‘the wooden house adjacent to the first synagogue from a Christian named Pawłowski’.\(^88\) Because of a lack of funds, adapting the building for the *bet midrash* took almost twenty years. The completion was also hindered by changes in architectural and construction laws, imposed by tsarist laws. The building was not listed as a synagogue in town statistics until 1847,\(^89\) though it informally served religious purposes. According to a document from 1894, the synagogue had been standing for more than fifty years, and nobody remembered when it was built.\(^90\)

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87 Z. Romaniuk, ‘Żydowskie domy…,’ p. 6.
89 BDGA Grodno, The yearly report from Brańsk for 1847, f. 1, op. 22, e. ch. 322, pp. 1–22.
90 *Ibid.*, f. 8, op. 2, d. 910, p. 3.
The full conversion of the building in accordance with regulations occurred in 1851 when ninety-eight local Jews applied to provincial authorities for a permit to build a sub-school (przyszkółek) that in reality already existed. The application stressed that the town had more than seventy Jewish houses but just one very crowded ‘prayer school’; hence, another bet midrash was desired.91 After checking that the synagogue was built according to regulations, and was located the appropriate distance from Christian religious buildings, the construction board issued the permit for the sub-school.

The surviving 1894 reconstruction blueprint of the synagogue (the ‘new one’; Benies Khodim) shows its design (see Appendix 2). It was a wooden building oriented east–west, with a rectangular stone foundation, covered by a gable roof. The Bet Midrash was 9.5 sqżeń long, 5.5 sqżeń wide (approx. 20x11.5 m).92 From the blueprint and accounts of Brańsk Jews, we know that the main entrance led to a small foyer that in turn led to the men’s prayer hall, connected by ornamental rounded banisters to the women’s hall (babiniec). The babiniec was on the same level as the men’s hall (the only example of such a layout in Brańsk); it could be entered through a separate doorway from the west. From the women’s hall, a stair led to the attic that was used as a prayer room by the tailors guild in 1858.93 Later this part housed a yeshiva. The main ‘men’s’ hall occupied two-thirds of the first floor. The façade had five windows on one level, positioned asymmetrically in relation to the main entrance (two windows to the left of the women’s side, and three to the right of the men’s side). The attic also had windows in the gable. The entire building was heated with a tile stove.

During the restoration of the synagogue in 1895, supports, windows, construction beams, and the floor were replaced. The work was entirely financed by Jews.94 The synagogue stood out among the surrounding one-story wooden buildings simply because of its great size. According to Jewish residents, ‘only the rich and respected people [prayed there]. . . . Ordinary citizens had no place.’95 An exception was on the second day of the Jewish High Holidays, when the rabbi prayed there by the gabbai’s invitation. During the epidemics of 1892, the building was used as a hospital.

The next Jewish religious building erected in Brańsk was the Dritter Bet Midrash (Bet Midrash Shlishi in Hebrew—‘Third Study House’) synagogue. We have no details about its construction. According to the authors of the Memory Book, it was built in the third quarter of the nineteenth century on the corner of Folwarczna Street (now Jana Pawła II) and Glinicka Street (now Mickiewicza).96 The rectangular wooden building was much smaller than that of the ‘new’ synagogue, which it resembled. On Folwarczna Street, a few stairs led to a small and low entrance to the building. The synagogue had large rectangular windows, and the babiniec was located in the mezzanine. The structure

91 Ibid., f. 2, op. 11, d. 1284, p. 7.
92 Ibid., f. 8, op. 2, d. 910, p. 3.
93 Z. Romaniuk, ‘Żydowskie domy…,’ pp. 7.
94 BDGA Grodno, f. 8, op. 2, d. 910, k. 1.
96 Id., See also: BDGA Grodno, f. 2. op. 10, d. 1910, p. 3.
was founded by wealthy Jews and hence was called the ‘noblemen’s’ (szlachecka).\textsuperscript{97} The \textit{Dritter Bet Midrash} was the only building of its kind located outside the traditional Jewish centre near Senatorska Street. The existence of three Jewish religious buildings in Brańsk in 1889 is confirmed by provincial statistics.\textsuperscript{98}

The growth of the Brańsk Jewish population and increasing internal stratification of the Jewish community prompted attempts to build additional religious structures. In 1876, Icko Kapłański and Jakub Ajzykowicz applied for a permit to build a prayer house on a lot between the market square and Senatorska Street. Almost an entire block in that neighbourhood had burned down earlier, making the construction of new buildings possible. The lot was donated by Mosze Grodzieński.\textsuperscript{99} However, the authorities rejected the project, probably because it was too close to an Orthodox church.

Among the provincial construction board’s documents is an application dated December 1887\textsuperscript{100} from representatives of the cloggers’ guild to open a ‘prayer school’ in Abram Wajner’s house on Szeroka (Senatorska) Street. The applicants were Chaim Szafran and Wolf Topczewski of Brańsk. Because the owner of the building did not include a written statement allowing the project, the authorities rejected the application.

These formalities were likely resolved in the next years, for the \textit{Memory Book} mentions that in 1892 Brańsk artisans (cloggers and butchers) purchased a wooden house that they adapted for a prayer house; they referred to the structure as ‘Wajner’s prayer school’. This building’s poor condition caused its collapse around 1902.\textsuperscript{101} A new brick synagogue immediately took its place, built between 1903 and perhaps 1907. The new synagogue was called Poael Tsedek (The Workers of Justice). Because of fire danger in 1907, the authorities ordered that an additional entrance (from the west) be built.\textsuperscript{102}

The prayer house \textit{Poael Tsedek} was a tall red brick building in an eclectic style (mostly neo-gothic), covered by a tiered roof. The façade had tall and narrow windows. The entrance, guarded by two lion sculptures, revealed the internal division of the men’s and women’s sections. The synagogue had a rich interior with frescos and an exceptional altar (aron ha-kodesh) carved from walnut and with gold leaf. Besides prayers, the synagogue held cantorial concerts, supposedly also praised by Christians.\textsuperscript{103}

The building of the ‘Emperor’s’ synagogue by the Brańsk tailor’s guild presented a special situation. Since 1858, tailors had their own prayer room in the ‘new prayer house’. Subsequently, the tailors’ guild became the largest in the town and its members, following the example of the cloggers, decided to build their own synagogue. At the beginning of the twentieth century they began construction at the horse market and Senatorska Street. Russian authorities objected, however, and stopped the work, claiming bad design. In order to obtain the permit to continue, the Jews used the occasion of the

\textsuperscript{97} A. Trus, J. Cohen, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 32–33.

\textsuperscript{98} BDGA Grodno, f. 14, op. 1, d. 611, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{99} \textit{Ibid.}, f. 8, op. 2, d. 120.

\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Ibid.}, f. 2, op. 32, d. 1977, pp. 1–2.

\textsuperscript{101} Z. Romaniuk, ‘Żydowskie domy…,’ p. 8.

\textsuperscript{102} BDGA Grodno, f. 8 op. 2, d. 1897, p. 61.

\textsuperscript{103} A. Trus, J. Cohen, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 33.
birth of the ‘prayed-for and desired’ heir to the tsar’s throne, Alexis. In 1904, in applying to the governor in Grodno for the permit to build a prayer school, they promised to name the altar after the Naslyednik Cesaryevich Aleksei Nikolaevich (the Heir of the Emperor’s Son, Alexis Nikolaevich; see Appendix 4).\textsuperscript{104} After the design was reviewed, the authorities granted consent. On behalf of the guild, Icek Slowik, Arie Krac, Benjamin Rybko, Berko Rybko, and Szulem Krac supervised the construction. In 1904 the foundation was laid; it measured 22 arshins long, 18 arshins wide and 1.5 arshin deep.\textsuperscript{105} Stones for the foundation were purchased, along with 38,400 bricks for the 8 arshins-high walls (two bricks thick) and 6,600 bricks for stoves and tops. The total expense in 1904 was 3448 rubles, 60 kopecks.\textsuperscript{106} Supposedly a large quantity of wood for the construction was donated by Count Potocki from Rudka near Brańsk.\textsuperscript{107}

Both recorded tradition in the Memorial Book and Jewish oral tradition maintains that the application was written by Natan Zelwin, who lived in Moscow. His request on behalf of the entire Brańsk community supposedly reached Tsar Nicholas II, who ordered his clerks to issue the proper permits.\textsuperscript{108} In fact, the tsar never saw the request; it was approved by the governor in Grodno.

In March 1905 the Jews again deviated from the accepted plan. Construction was halted by the officials but resumed in the late summer of the following year.

According to the Memorial Book, the ceremonial opening of the ‘Emperor’s Synagogue’ (also known as Shneider Bet Midrash [The Tailors’ House of Study]) occurred in 1909.\textsuperscript{109} However, the tsar’s report for 1911 mentions that at that time there was no established self-governing body in this synagogue.\textsuperscript{110}

The tailors’ prayer house was one of the medium-sized buildings in Brańsk. It was plastered and covered with a gable roof. The interior was heated with a tile stove located in the wall bearing the mezzanine with the babiniec. This traditionally oriented building had three entrances and windows with semi-circular top panes. The front (north) façade had a Hebrew inscription. The shames (the synagogue assistant) lived in a small room within the building.

A few hasidim living in Brańsk at the beginning of the twentieth century received a lot located between the market square and Folwarczna Street from Mordechai Hersz.

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\textsuperscript{104} BDGA Grodno, f. 20 op. 2, e. 2339, pp. 3 and 3v.
\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Arshin}, Russian measure of length equal to 28 inches.
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{107} A. Trus, J. Cohen, \textit{op. cit.} p. 34.
\textsuperscript{108} \textit{Ibid.} The oral narration of Avram and Benjamin Rybko, the builders of the synagogue was published by their nephew Chone Rybko in South Africa in the article ‘A Shul for the Prince’, \textit{Zionist Record and SA Jewish Chronicle}, 26 September–3 October 1986, pp. 26–27.
\textsuperscript{109} A. Trus, J. Cohen, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{110} BDGA Grodno, f. 2, op. 20, d. 2339, p. 38.
\end{flushleft}
Here they erected their wooden *shtibl* (school).\(^{111}\) Details about this building are not known.

During this period five Jewish synagogues and one Hasidic *shtibl* were built in Braňsk. With the growth of the Jewish population and the process of internal community stratification increasing, members of individual professions and religious divisions built separate prayer houses. A Jewish cultural center emerged around little Senatorska Street with as many as four synagogues (see Appendix 3).

### 3. The Cemetery, Burial Society, and Synagogue Boards

Jews went to great pains so that every Jew had a proper burial according to religious prescription and custom. Death reconciled the rich and the poor, and therefore all received equal treatment.

In Jewish tradition, the ritual of the funeral ceremony culminated at the cemetery. Accordingly, almost all *kehilahs* had their own necropolis. The burial society \(\text{Hevra Kadisha}\) arranged details connected with burials; that association existed in Braňsk before 1820. The organization prepared bodies for the ceremony and carried them to the cemetery in Bočki.\(^{112}\) The society’s first president was Dawid Berlin. \(\text{Hevra Kadisha}\) charged high fees for its services and was considered to be an elite organization.

During the initial attempts to secede from the Bočki *kehilah*, Braňsk tried to obtain a cemetery lot in town. The inconvenience and conflict over the Bočki cemetery forced Braňsk Jews to find their own lot and acquire a necropolis permit quickly.\(^{113}\) According to the *Memorial Book*, by 1820 town authorities had allocated a small plot of wasteland known as *Katusze* [‘Torments’] to the Braňsk sub-*kehilah*; the conditions are not clear to us. The land was at the heart of a dispute between Braňsk and nobility from the neighbouring village of Brześnica. In the pre-partition period, it was the site of the scaffold where Braňsk held its executions.\(^{114}\) In addition, the location’s distance from the town enabled it to meet the sanitary requirements.

The first lot, however, was located on too low a surface, on clay flooded periodically by the Nurzec River. Due to the *kehilah’s* efforts, this lot was soon enlarged and extended to an adjacent hill. The *Memorial Book* records the first burial. Eight months after the land was purchased, a young woman died. Her grave had to be guarded for several weeks because Jews feared that people from Brześnica would disturb the body in order to enforce their claim to the contended ground.\(^{115}\)

The cemetery was first mentioned in historical sources in 1837. The Jews were ordered to close down the ‘choleric’ cemetery and pay 75 rubles in addition to 50 rubles

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114 Z. Romaniuk, *Dokumentacja historyczna cmentarza żydowskiego w Brańsku*, BBiDZ, Bialystok 1993, p. 4.

per year for the ‘proper’ cemetery. In 1847 a town report confirmed the existence of the cemetery.

The almost total destruction of population records and Jewish tombstones during the Second World War by the Germans prevents an assessment of the number of burials. The oldest preserved tombstone (matseva) dates from 1839, and its location suggests that the cemetery had already been in use for several years. However, it is not possible to confirm its establishment in 1820. It is possible that it was founded a few years later.

The epidemics of 1837, March 1844, and 1852 quickly filled the cemetery despite careful use of the ground. In 1852, the kehilah purchased another large lot in the adjacent area from a Pole named Maroszewski. This was called the ‘new’ cemetery to distinguish it from the other, called henceforth the ‘old’ cemetery.

Burials in the ‘old’ cemetery took place until 1868. At the end of the nineteenth century, it was full. Max Wołkow remembers that he always enjoyed reading the tombstone inscriptions in the old section. The oldest preserved tombstone in the ‘new’ cemetery dates from 1871.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Iechiel Lejb and Wewel Daniels headed the burial society. During an 1892 epidemic in Brańsk, the mortality rate was so high that the Hevra Kadisha’s members were not able to prepare all the bodies for burial. As a result poor Jews were allowed into the society.

Most of the tombstones were made of stone. Made by Brańsk artisans, such as Efraim Kiwe in the 1800s, they lacked ornamentation and just had Hebrew inscriptions. Beginning in the 1870s, many ornamental matsevas were brought at shops outside the town. A tombstone was placed on the grave a year after the person’s death.

4. Representatives of the Jewish Communal Authorities

The establishment of Jewish communal autonomy involved creating a governing body of the kehilah to run all matters relating to the community.

The Jewish community was represented by the elective directorate (zarząd), headed by its president. The directorate was in charge of religious matters, justice, education, welfare, finances, and other matters. It also represented the Jewish community to the outside.

116 BDGA Grodno, f. 1, op. 5, d. 547, p. 6.
117 Ibid., f. 1, op. 22, d. 322, p. 12v.
118 Z. Romaniuk, Dokumentacja historyczna cmentarza..., pp. 6, 26.
119 Ibid., p. 5.
120 A. Trus, J. Cohen, op. cit., pp. 120–121.
121 M. Wołkow, op. cit.
122 Z. Romaniuk, Dokumentacja historyczna..., p. 6.
123 A. Trus, J. Cohen, op. cit., p. 73.
124 Z. Romaniuk, Dokumentacja historyczna cmentarza... p. 14.
In Brańsk, the first known president of the sub-kehilah was Dawid Berlin, a strong leader. Iechiel Zeifman, a merchant and owner of a tannery and candle factory, held the post after him, and Jake Berlin, Dawid’s son-in-law, then followed. Although we know little about their activities, they certainly contributed to the establishment of the Brańsk kehilah.

In 1835 the Statute on Jews introduced significant changes in the old kehilah structure within the Russian Empire. The so-called Synagogal Directorates (Zarządy Bóźnicze) were established to represent Jewish communities. In the new structure, each synagogue elected its own representation, and authority was reduced to religious matters and the keeping of civil records. The kehilah directorates, temporarily preserved, were responsible for supervising fiscal matters, public tax collection, and allocation of communal money. Eventually, former kehilah directorates were dissolved by new tsarist legislation in 1844. Kehilah autonomy was abolished and the Jewish community was subject to town authorities. Town directorates assumed the keeping of Jewish civil records, the draft, tax collection, and the registration of estates.

Synagogue directorates included an official rabbi (rabin urzędowy), a gabbai (starosta), a treasurer, and a religious-spiritual rabbi. The official rabbi had to be a lay person and had to know Russian. He represented his synagogue community before the authorities, officiated at marriages, granted divorces, and kept community records. The religious rabbi officially dealt only in religious matters. By contrast, the gabbai dealt with economic issues, maintained the synagogue’s building, and was responsible for administration and the prayer schedule. The synagogue directorate members were elected for three-year terms, and the validity of election was confirmed by provincial authorities. The directorate was entitled to certain privileges, including to hold the rank of a second-guild merchant.

In 1835 and 1844, the only synagogue officially open in Brańsk was the ‘brick bet midrash’; therefore, only one directorate was created, to represent all the Jews of Brańsk. A merchant named Gedalim Berl Szlomis was elected to be the first official rabbi, an election influenced by the fact that he could sign his name in Russian. After fraud and false testimony and an attempt to get compensation, he ran away to America. Subsequent rabbis were Wewel Danils, who was very active in the community, wholesaler Ezra Goldberg, and innkeeper Icie Gimpels Grodzieński.

The provincial archive in Grodno holds many documents related to the election of synagogal directorates at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Elections to the directorates of betim midrashim in Brańsk were held separately in each synagogue. Votes were considered valid if at least two-thirds of the members participated. The candidates had to be burghers, know Russian, and have no criminal record.

127 Ibid., p. 56.
128 Ibid., p.59.
130 Ibid., p. 52.
In 1882 the directorate of the ‘new’ synagogue included Lejb Zajerman and Icek Szapiro; the ‘rabbinical’ (old) one included Chlawne Ber, Kalman Abram Goldberg, and Icek Rozenbaum.131

Twenty-five Jews voted in the 1892 election of the synagogue Alter Bet Midrash. The established directorate included the official rabbi (uchonyi) Chlawne Ber, age fifty-eight; the gabbai Aron Zejerman, forty-six; and the cantor (kaznachei) Icko Rozenbaum, forty-five. Twenty-three Jews participated in the ‘new’ synagogue, electing the uchonyi Szepsel Sielc, age fifty-two; the starosta, Icek Szapiro, forty; and the kaznachei, Chilko Lejb Zejerman, sixty-eight. The local police chief and the town starosta validated the elections.132

In 1899, the elected directorate of the Naie Beit Midrash included the uchonyi Szawel Pitel; the starosta, Lejbko Zejerman; and the kaznachei, Icko Szapiro.133 In December 1901, the directorate of the Dritter Beit Midrash (third synagogue) for the term 1902–1905 was elected, including the starosta Ezra Goldberg, the kaznachei, Jankiel Meir Charlap, and the uchonyi, Dawid Makowski.134 The directorate of ‘Wajner’s’ prayer school was elected at the same time. Elections took place in the town hall and were attended by twenty-eight persons of the forty-eight eligible voters. For the term 1902–1905, Szymon MyŚlibocki was elected starosta, Szajko Lew kaznachei, and Fiszel Bag uchonyi.135

We know little about the office of the government district rabbi (rzadowy rabin powiatowy) and his deputy rabbis (podrabinek) in other towns of the district. Certainly this institution existed in the Bielsk district by 1865.136 In Brańsk, a podrabinek was confirmed for the first time in 1875. Zelman Wrona held this title for many years, until 1885.137 After his death, Gedali Wilk was elected to the office.138 Like directorates of the synagogues, the podrabinek was elected for a three-year term and was chosen by representatives of all the synagogues. We know that the podrabinek kept civil records for Jews; most likely he was similar to the uchonyi rabbi.

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were several disputes in Brańsk during the podrabinek elections. In 1898 all of the town’s prayer houses were represented by thirty-two delegates. Gedali Wilk received twenty-two votes and was elected for the term 1898–1901. His opponents protested that two of the Jews on the election lists did not exist. An inquiry confirmed the complaint but had no impact on

132 Ibid., f. 2, op. 33, d. 1173, pp. 4–6.
133 Ibid., f. 2, op. 33, d. 2895, p. 2.
134 Ibid., f. 2, op. 10, d. 1901, p. 3.
135 Ibid., f. 2, op. 10, d. 112.
136 Pamiatnaia Knizhka Grodnenskoi Guberni na 1871 god, p. 94. From 1865, Sz. Szerszenowski was the district rabbi in Bielsk.
137 BDGA Grodno, f. 2, op. 10, d. 1969, pp. 12, 18–37; f. 2, op. 32, d. 486, p. 29.
138 Ibid., f. 2, op. 32, d. 1615.
Wilk’s election. The next election, in 1901, was invalidated. Then Mordko Gecht submitted his candidacy as a ‘volunteer’. He had completed the district school in 1889 and had lived in Brańsk for three years. His proposal got no response. In August 1902, another election was held with twenty-six delegates from four prayer schools. From among three candidates, Abram Brański was elected as district podrabinek; he owned a photography shop. The next election had to be repeated three times before Szawel Pitel was finally elected podrabinek in 1905.

Brańsk Jews also elected a representative to the town council. According to documents, Jews were not represented in the inner town directorate from 1910 to 1914. Of ten councilors, only one, Ezra Goldberg, was Jewish. In 1892, Jewish participation in town self-government had been legally limited to 10 per cent of the appointed members.

This situation changed when Brańsk was captured by the Germans in 1915. The occupying German authorities introduced new legislation regarding communal autonomy in towns with populations under 20,000. As a result, Jewish representation in the town office increased. The members of the town directorate were Jeruchem Goldberg, Elia Gotlib, and Icchak Rozenbaum.

In 1916, the Jewish religious kehilah was reactivated. Its president, Ezra Goldenberg, was known as ‘Kuchinskale’.

5. THE JEWISH DEMOGRAPHIC AND RELIGIOUS POSITION IN BRAŃSK (SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC DATA)

The issue of demography in nineteenth-century lands of the Russian partition is difficult to research because of gaps and inaccuracies in tsarist official statistics and the scarcity of remaining records. I primarily consulted the available administrative statistics. For critical analysis, the data from 1799, 1807, 1879, 1888, 1893, 1897, 1900, 1904, and 1914 appear to have the greatest statistical value. As the list indicates, the major problem concerns the gap between 1808 and 1879, which I will attempt to fill with corroborating data.

Jews in a number exceeding a minyan had appeared in Brańsk at the end of the eighteenth century. Prussian statistics for 1799 indicate 80 Jews among 1,155 town

139 Ibid., f. 2, op. 33, d. 2643, p. 7.
140 Ibid., f. 2, op. 10, d. 1969, p. 48.
142 Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce..., p. 24.
143 Gazeta Âwiątecna, 1916, no 1860, p. 2.
145 Ibid.
inhabitants (6.9 per cent).\textsuperscript{146} Fourteen Jewish families included 13 men, 24 women, 38 children, and 15 servants.\textsuperscript{147} Prussian fiscal issues and later Russian expulsions from villages caused Jews to concentrate in towns.\textsuperscript{148} The statistics for 1807 show 156 Jews among 1,303 inhabitants of Brańsk (12 per cent of the population).\textsuperscript{149} The Jewish population almost doubled shortly, whereas growth in the Christian population was only 7 per cent. A Jewish census conducted in all parishes at the beginning of 1808 listed 21 heads of families in Brańsk, and an additional 1 Jew in Majorowizna, and 5 in the village of Poletyły.\textsuperscript{150} It is therefore possible that the data for 1807 included Jews living in the surroundings of Brańsk. The poll was taken because Tykocin (a district kehilah) was a part of the Duchy of Warsaw in 1807. Accordingly, Jews living in Brańsk were registered in the kehilah of Ciechanowiec. This situation lasted until 1815.

Jews settling in Brańsk (until 1816–1820) came mainly from surrounding villages and towns. When Jewish human resources in the villages were exhausted, the growth of Jews in Brańsk diminished. In addition, the increase was interrupted by the war of 1812–1813. A lack of available statistical data prevents a detailed analysis of this situation.

The establishment of Jewish communal autonomy (a sub-kehilah existed by 1816) as well as Brańsk’s demand for specialized crafts and trade were reasons behind the town’s growing appeal to Jews. A. Eisenbach notes, ‘in general . . . magistrates stood up for the principle of preserving the pre-partition town privileges limiting the right of Jews to settle. . . . With the economic change these regulations became less rigid . . . they became anachronistic, and hampered the development of towns.’\textsuperscript{151} Brańsk had large undeveloped lots in its center (on the site of the manor of the royal starosta). These were among the first to be leased or sold to Jews. The town was also long known for its Monday markets and large fairs, held four times a year. Available lots on the market square and the possibility of convenient exchanges of goods and money at the market were among the incentives for Jews to settle. However, before the November insurrection, the increase of Jewish population was small. I have already mentioned the impact of the 1827 law on the Jewish draft.

For various reasons, the first major Jewish settlement boom took place in the 1840s. It is possible that Russian post-insurrection repression ultimately broke the resistance of town authorities to limit the number of Jews in Brańsk. The full development of the kehilah institutions (the synagogue, the cemetery, the rabbinate, the mikvah, etc.) was also important in enabling religious Jewish life. The new statute of Jewish laws, promulgated in 1836, had a great impact and clearly delineated the zone of settlement. Brańsk was within the area in which Jews were resettled from mainland Russia and the border areas.\textsuperscript{152} The expulsion of Jews from villages continued. The

\textsuperscript{146} J. Wąsicki, \textit{op cit.} p. 121.

\textsuperscript{147} A Malek, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 49–50

\textsuperscript{148} A. Eisenbach, \textit{op cit.}, p. 284.

\textsuperscript{149} T. Wiśniewski, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 144.

\textsuperscript{150} AP Białystok, KWD 2429.

\textsuperscript{151} A. Eisenbach, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 285.

\textsuperscript{152} \textit{Najnowsze dzieje…}, p. 19.
attraction of Brańsk as a place of Jewish settlement could also have been influenced (after 1843) by administrative reforms in the Grodno province that affected communication routes.

The number of Jewish ‘tax souls’ grew from 111 recorded in 1823, to 211 in 1832, to 314 in 1842.\textsuperscript{153} The actual number of Jews living in Brańsk was certainly larger than the numbers declared for taxation. The Christian population in the same period (1823–1842) remained nearly constant, or even decreased slightly (see Graph 1). The surviving records of the Boćki kehilah for 1836 indicate that 28 Jews were born in Brańsk that year, and that 38 died.\textsuperscript{154} These numbers are unfortunately the only surviving data on population growth.

According to statistics from 1847, approximately 660 Jews lived in Brańsk. Within five years their number doubled, while the number of Christians remained unchanged. In the early 1850s, the numbers decreased. This may have been due to the stabilization of the first settlers’ wave induced by the Russians, as well as to epidemics and the famine of 1852–1854.\textsuperscript{155} Statistical data for 1857 indicate that among 1845 inhabitants of Brańsk, 39 per cent were Jews (some 720 persons in more than 170 families;\textsuperscript{156} see Graph 2). The \textit{Memorial Book} relates that about 70 Jews moved to Brańsk from neighbouring villages during the January uprising (1863–1864).\textsuperscript{157} Russian statistics record that in 1879 Brańsk had a population of 2,983, including 1,301 Jews (43.6 per cent).\textsuperscript{158} When compared with other information this data seems questionable; I therefore have omitted it in my analysis.

New interesting and important demographic developments occurred in the 1880s. A wave of anti-Jewish pogroms broke out in Russia after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, reaching Warsaw. The subsequent new anti-Jewish legislation by the tsarist government produced large migration movements. The Temporary Law (also called The May Law), issued on 3 May 1881, forced about one million Jews to relocate.\textsuperscript{159} The May Law undermined the economic foundations of Jewish livelihood in Russia. It listed

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{153} BDGA Grodno, f. 2, op. 14, d. 1909, p. 5; f. 1, op. 13, d. 512, p. 14.
\item\textsuperscript{154} AP Białystok, \textit{Wykaz żydowskich urodzeń, ślubów, zgonów w pow. bielskim z terenu kahalu orlańskiego i boćkowskiego z 1836 r.} [The list of Jewish births, marriages and deaths in Bielsko district from the Orla and Boćki kehilahs for 1836.]
\item\textsuperscript{155} A. Trus, J. Cohen, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 120–121.
\item\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Materiały dla geografii i statystyki Rosji, Gubernia Grodno}, part 2, ed. P. Bobrowski, St. Petersburg 1863, p. 991. Bobrowski also states that according to Brańsk town authorities only 230 Jews lived in the town; this does not seem possible.
\item\textsuperscript{157} A. Trus, J. Cohen, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 24.
\item\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Pamiatnaya knizhka Grodnenskoi Guberni za 1881 god}, table 80. According to the data for 1878, there were 3,733 people living in Brańsk, including 2,209 Christians and 1,524 Jews. See T. Wiśniewski, \textit{op cit.}, p. 144. \textit{Encyklopedia ogólna wiedzy ludzkiej}, vol. III, Warszawa 1872, p. 151, states that ca. 1872 approximately 1,928 people lived in Brańsk. This data is compatible with other data and precludes the reliability of the statistics for 1878 and 1879.
\item\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Najnowsze dzieje...}, p. 23.
\end{itemize}
occupations that Jews were allowed to have, and prohibited the owning or leasing of land, living in villages, and trading in alcohol, among other restrictions. In 1881, Jews were expelled from Moscow. Pogroms, new laws, and their zealous execution caused a wave of emigration of the so-called ‘Litvaks,’ or Jews from mainland Russia. Jews who had already settled in Brańsk regarded them as foreigners; indeed, local Jews felt economically threatened by the newcomers.

The 1888 data lists as many as 1,229 Jews among a total of 2,687 inhabitants (45.7 per cent). The next year, the number of Jews increased by 87. In the following years (until 1893), the growth was smaller, perhaps 25 or 26 Jews per year (versus 24 Christians.) Data from 1893 notes 3,134 inhabitants of Brańsk, including 1,418 Jews (45.2 per cent). The 1897 census showed that the actual number of Jews in Brańsk was higher than was listed in the town records.

With this number of inhabitants, the birth rate proved to be a significant factor in the increase of Brańsk's population. In this respect, Jewish families with many children and low level of child mortality was particularly important.

In 1892 a hospital was founded in Brańsk, and Jews established the society Linas Ha-Tsedek for helping the sick. These events resulted in decreased mortality, though not at first at significant levels. Among the factors that lowered population growth in 1890s were the 1892 epidemics and emigration to the United States and Palestine (as early as the 1880s). It is estimated that between 1891 and 1900, some 280,000 Jews emigrated from Russia. From The Brańsk Memorial Book, and from the memoirs of Brańsk Jews living in Israel and America, we know that this wave of emigration also included Jews from that town. The Memorial Book notes that the first emigrants left Brańsk in 1851 and 1861 for Turkey and Palestine. The first immigrants to the United States left in 1867, followed by others in 1875–1880. Over the next two decades more people left, mainly tailors. By 1894 there already were two Brańsk emigrants’ societies in New York. The principal reasons for emigration were overpopulation and lack of work.

An economic boom at the end of the nineteenth century prompted population growth. This was seen in increased development of Brańsk around 1890. Several brickyards were founded near the town. In addition, the town centre was very densely built: sometimes the roofs of houses touched each other even if the houses faced the street. In some cases, lots contained two rows of houses.

One Christian described the architecture of towns in the area:

If we remember this and consider that a great majority of the inhabitants of little towns are Jews who because of their thriftiness like to dwell as tightly as possible, and are very careless in dealing with fire, no wonder that fires happen very often; they break out several times a year in every town, and sometimes a larger fire happens that consumes dozens of buildings. There is a good side to it too, because for rebuilding the authorities do not permit erecting new wood structures, at least in the market square. Besides, the population often prefers brick over wood; firstly because now it is not any more expensive, also because it is easier to insure a brick house, thirdly

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160 Pamiatnaya knizhka Grodnenskoi Guberni za 1895 god, Grodno 894, pp. 10–11.
161 Najnowsze dzieje..., p. 29.
because it is more presentable. However, from the perspective of hygiene, such ‘brownstone’ is much worse because of dampness that is hard to avoid with their unskilled way of building. Thus after two large fires since 1885, Siemiatycze already has brick buildings on three sides of the market square, likewise Ciechanowice and Brańsk; there are even a few two-story houses.163

The first Russian census in 1897 provides many statistical details for demographic analysis. Despite many errors, its general coverage of Jews is reasonably reliable.164

According to this census, 4,087 people lived in Brańsk including 2,374 Jews (58.1 per cent) [see graph 2]). Among 132 people living from trade, 130 were Jews. They also predominated in crafts (mostly as tailors and cobbler). Relatively large numbers of Brańsk Jews, around 42 per cent, could read and write. The fact that 89.1 per cent of the total population listed their place of birth as Brańsk or Bielsk district, and only 4 per cent came from other provinces, is surprising.165

This would indicate little appeal of Brańsk to newcomers from distant areas, but on the other hand would contradict the notion of the immigration of ‘Litvaks’. The data is therefore questionable. It is also possible that some Jews who had arrived from other parts of Russia wanted to conceal this fact for various reasons.

The census also indicates that within the area of today’s Białystok voivodship [province], in terms of population Brańsk was only behind the three district capitals (Białystok, Bielsk, and Sokółka), and was the largest among secondary (nadetatowe) towns. Jews were equally numerous in other towns of the Bielsk district: Bielsk, 54.6 per cent, Boćki, 53.4 per cent, Siemiatycze, 75.4 per cent, and Ciechanowicie, 67.2 per cent.166

No army was stationed in Brańsk.

The number of Christians in Brańsk then grew by 85 people a year on average, while the number of Jews tended to decrease (statistically by 15 people a year).167 Then the number of people stabilized, to 4,345 persons in 1904).168 At that time, a group of more than 20 Hasidim from central Poland arrived in Brańsk, though this did not significantly change the population structure.169 However, Hasidim introduced new cultural elements into a Jewish community dominated by ‘Litvaks.’


167 Piscovaia knizhka Grodnenskoi Guberni za 1902 god, Grodno 1901. According to the data there, 2,328 Jews and 2,013 Christians lived in Brańsk in 1900.


The administrative records for 1910 list 4,263 people in Brańsk,\textsuperscript{170} 4,463 in 1913,\textsuperscript{171} and 4,301 in 1914.\textsuperscript{172}

These data indicate that after 1905, the Jewish population in Brańsk began to decrease. The numbers can be explained by increased emigration, mainly in 1905–1907.\textsuperscript{173} The authors of the *Memorial Book* wrote (greatly exaggerating) about the emigration: ‘Brańsk is almost empty. All the youth departed.’\textsuperscript{174} In the United States, a third emigrants’ organization was created, called The Brańsk Youth.

This was proof of a large and growing emigration community. Besides America, Jews left for Palestine, and to a lesser extent, to other countries. In 1908–1912 emigration diminished but grew again in 1913, especially in 1914.\textsuperscript{175} Not only Jews emigrated; we know that before 1914, a group of Poles left Brańsk for the United States and Canada. The percentage of Jews, however, must have been high because statistics for 1914 indicate an almost 8 per cent drop in the percentage of Jews in the general population of Brańsk, compared to 1897 (of 4,301 Brańsk inhabitants, 2,187 were Jews, representing 50.85 per cent of the general population).\textsuperscript{176}

The First World War caused significant changes in the national and religious make-up of the Brańsk population. At the beginning of the war, a wave of Jewish refugees from the area adjacent to the Prussian border arrived. There were so many newcomers that Brańsk Jews established a special committee to help the homeless.\textsuperscript{177} In August 1915, almost the entire Eastern Orthodox community, along with a small group of Catholics and Jews, was evacuated to mainland Russia. After the front had moved, a typhoid fever epidemic broke out. The results are difficult to determine because of a lack of sources. We also know that a small number of Poles and Jews were drafted into the Russian and German armies. In Brańsk the German occupation lasted until November 1918.\textsuperscript{178} Unfortunately, no statistical data from that period survived that would enable us to assess the war losses. By necessity I rely on the results of the 1921 census.\textsuperscript{179} Analyses of 1914 and 1921 indicate that the general population of Brańsk decreased by 13 per cent.

\textsuperscript{170} Adres-Kalendar i sprawochnaia knizhka na 1911 god, Grodno 1910, p. 9. It lists a total of 6,798 inhabitants.

\textsuperscript{171} Adres-Kalendar i sprawochnaia knizhka na 1914 god, Grodno 1913, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{172} BDGA Grodno, f. 14, op. 3, d. 75, pp. 40–61v.

\textsuperscript{173} Najnowsze dzieje..., p. 30.

\textsuperscript{174} A. Trus, J. Cohen, *op. cit.* pp. 120–128.

\textsuperscript{175} Najnowsze dzieje..., p. 30.

\textsuperscript{176} BDGA Grodno, f. 14, op. 3, d. 75, k. 40–61, and Pmiatnaia knizhka Grodnenskoi Guberni na 1915 god, Grodno 1914, p. 12.

\textsuperscript{177} A. Trus, J. Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 165–166.


\textsuperscript{179} *Pierwszy powszechny spis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z 1921 roku*, vol. XIX, Warszawa, 1929, table 4.
However, this decrease affected primarily the Eastern Orthodox and Catholics; the number of Jews decreased by only 1 per cent, and after the war they made up 57.9 per cent of the total population of Brańsk.

6. SOURCES OF LIVELIHOOD (OCCUPATIONS) OF THE JEWISH POPULATION

Jews who settled in Brańsk under Prussian rule (1795–1807) formed characteristic Jewish occupational groups. Among Jews in the town, 11 were innkeepers, 3 were distillers and brewers, 2 were peddlers, 4 were artisans, 2 were merchants, and 1 was a gravedigger.\textsuperscript{180} The authorities had recruited some Jews ‘in pursuit of public convenience in commerce’.\textsuperscript{181} This remark shows that Brańsk needed merchants. Then (and later) Jews held an important position in the service professions. Christians were primarily involved in agriculture and craft.

Later information on the occupations of Brańsk’s inhabitants comes from the mid-nineteenth century. Town authorities in a report from 1847 stated that Christians worked mainly in agriculture, and that there were 13 tailors, 20 cobbler, 5 blacksmiths, 3 tar makers, and 6 alcohol distillers among craftsmen.\textsuperscript{182} Unfortunately, we do not know how many of these 47 were Jews. Most likely, Jews predominated in tailoring, shoemaking, and distilling. As time passed, though, more Jews worked in the areas that Christians had dominated. The report states, however, that the main occupation of Jews then was in retail. Three Jewish stands are noted as ‘large’, and the merchant Dawid Fiszer is included in the third guild of merchants. The volume of his trade reached 600 rubles. Most of Fiszer’s income was generated from his practice of buying agricultural products in the fall, and selling them for a profit in spring.\textsuperscript{183}

A list of Jewish debtors to the church for 1852–1853 has been preserved in the records of the town’s Roman Catholic parish.\textsuperscript{184} These documents show that eight Jews leased two fields (zagony) each, and had to pay a tithe to the church. In addition, Herszko Jeleń leased four zagony from the local priest, Rev. Franciszek Piotrowski. Nochim Lejzorowicz owed the priest for a similar transaction.\textsuperscript{185} Most likely, Jews leased the land in order to sow wheat that they would later sell. The cultivation of land was not their only occupation. We do not know if those leases served as single attempts to capitalize on a boom in grain production, or if they occurred frequently. Possibly Jews took advantage of

\textsuperscript{180} A. Małeł, ‘Brańsk w czasach pruskich (1795–1807),’ \textit{Bialostocczyzna} 4 (1994), and The State Archive in Białystok, The Chamber of War and Dominions, call 2392.

\textsuperscript{181} AP Białystok, KWiD, call 2392, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{182} BDGA Grodno, f. 1, op. 22, d. 322, pp. 18v–19v.

\textsuperscript{183} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{184} The Diocese Archive in Drohiczyn (ADD), The Archive of the Brańsk Parish, call IX/Tz/1853

\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Ibid}.
the new mid-nineteenth-century legislation that encouraged Jews to work in agriculture.\textsuperscript{186}

Pawel Bobrowski’s description of Brańsk in the 1850s notes that Christians still farmed and produced decorative fabrics. Fifty people worked in crafts, but it is not known how many were Jews. Most likely Jews were already a majority among the artisans. Bobrowski noted a total of fifty stall owners of both sexes, and stated that Jews likely dealt in trade.\textsuperscript{187} To increase profits, some Jewish merchants smuggled goods. For example, in 1849 Berek Wilkański of Brańsk was arrested for possession of smuggled merchandise.\textsuperscript{188}

The establishment of a Jewish tailors guild in Brańsk in 1851 indicates growth in the Jewish population.\textsuperscript{189} In their application to establish a guild, Brańsk Jews stated that forty persons worked as tailors, including seven artisans who held masters’ diplomas issued by the directorate in Ciechanowiec. According to the \textit{Memorial Book}, in 1858 the tailors’ guild had its own prayer room in the Naie Bit Midrash synagogue. Tailors were undoubtedly the largest and most active group of artisans. In 1887 the tailors’ brotherhood (\textit{bractwo}) was established in place of the disbanded guild.\textsuperscript{190}

According to the 1889 statistics, Brańsk was home to 256 artisans including 212 Jews (82.8 per cent). Ten of 13 large artisan shops were owned by Jews, who in turn employed 17 craftsmen. The annual net worth of these shops was 12,325 rubles, of which 97.4 per cent came from Jewish shops. Sixty-nine merchants held official ‘certificates’ permitting them to trade in Brańsk; almost all of these were Jews. Some of merchants became wealthy, and eight were included in the second guild.\textsuperscript{191}

As a result of tsarist legislation (leading to expulsion from the countryside and settlement zones) the number of Jews in Brańsk grew constantly. They arrived in Brańsk from neighbouring villages and from mainland Russia. Newcomers seldom had any significant capital at their disposal. Many were craftsmen and merchants, just like the ‘local’ Jews of Brańsk. The town’s capacity to absorb their services was limited, and the disparity in wealth increased constantly and caused inter-kehilah conflict. The lack of opportunities forced many poor Jews to emigrate (mainly to the United States). The poorest Jews, who could not emigrate, made up the large class of ‘\textit{kupczyki}’ (vendors) such as coachmen, water-carriers, peddlers, and people without a definite occupation who

\textsuperscript{186} J. Jaroszewicz, ‘Materiały do statystyki i etnografii guberni grodzieńskiej: Powiat bielski,’ \textit{Athenaeum}, Wilno 1848, no. 6.

\textsuperscript{187} \textit{Materiały do geografii i statystiki Rossii. Grodzenska Gubernia, sostavil P. Bobrovskii}, part II, St. Petersburg 1863, p. 991.

\textsuperscript{188} BDGA Grodno, f. 2, op. 0, d. 2144, p. 163.

\textsuperscript{189} \textit{Ibid.}, f. 2, op. 34, d. 2047, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{190} A. Trus, J. Cohen, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 33, 99–100.

\textsuperscript{191} BDGA Grodno, f. 14, op. 1, d. 611, pp. 25–27, 70. \textit{Pamiatnaia knizhka Grodnienskoi Guberni na 1889 god}, pp. 30–31 gives a detailed list of crafts and services in Brańsk; according to it, there were 243 craftsmen.
subsisted by dealing with local farmers and through accepting charity from other Jews. At the end of the nineteenth century, 40 per cent of the town’s Jews depended on charity.\textsuperscript{192}

The extent of poverty is noted by Natan Kaplan, who described his grandmother’s life in Brańsk at the end of the nineteenth century. He writes that in order to provide food for her children, Szifra Sara ‘sold soup at the market place’.\textsuperscript{193} The poor helped the even poorer: ‘Cousin Estera told me that every Friday our grandmother shopped at the bakery. She would buy an extra \textit{hallah} and give it to a poorer woman on her way home.’\textsuperscript{194} A typical poverty-stricken makeshift tailor would wander from village to village, hand-sewing pants ‘on his way’.

The 1897 census contains a great deal of statistical data on occupations in Brańsk.\textsuperscript{195} Of 2,374 Jews, 608 had permanent jobs; they earned their living in 40 types of occupations. Most--185 people--worked as tailors; an additional 131 Jews worked in commerce, and 50 were servants and day laborers. Other sources of livelihood included food processing of both animal and vegetable products (28 people); capital and real estate (28); wood processing (24); metal processing (21); construction and contracting (19); processing animal products (18); coachmen (18); synagogue and cemetery services (9); teachers (9); yarn processing (9); hotel- and innkeeping (9); tax collection (8); cleaning and hygiene (5); printing (4); pottery (3); distilling and brewing (3); clergy (2); chemical production (2); beverage production (2); state service (1), physician (1); farmer (1); production of religious jewellery (1); fishing and hunting (1); and unspecified sources of income (8). Six people were reported as unemployed.\textsuperscript{196} The census showed that among 1,127 employed persons in Brańsk, 53.9 per cent were Jews. Compared to the total percentage of Jews in Brańsk (58.1 per cent) Jewish employment was lower by 4.2 per cent than its population.

Curiously, four people are listed as working in printing, and one in agriculture. I was not able to determine whether Jews in Brańsk actually published books. This category could have included bookbinders who repaired old books and prayer books.

For the beginning of the twentieth century, the \textit{Memorial Book} lists Jews working as capmakers (9), poultry producers, paint-makers (14) coachmen, merchants, cobbler (4), innkeepers, kasha-makers, smiths (9), tailors (60), millers, teachers (\textit{melameds}), bakers (17), harness makers (4), butchers (4), gardeners, carpenters (15), shoemakers (40), glaziers (4), and weavers and turners (6). Describing trade, the writers note that ‘in every other apartment was a grocery stall, five stalls with fabric, and four stores with ironware; countless peddlers went village to village. Every Jew who did not work [as a craftsman--Z.R.] or study--sold something.’\textsuperscript{197}

\textsuperscript{192} Najnowsze dzieje Żydów…, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{195} W. Szwed, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 80–83.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.
At the beginning of the twentieth century, after the crisis of 1899–1903, several small factories were built in Brańsk, employing up to 40 workers. Adam Szkop owned a woolen mill that employed a dozen or so workers. In 1905, the workers went on strike. In 1896 Jeruchama Goldberg built a large tile shop in Brańsk, but generally employed Christians. Around 1906, Alter Włostakowski and Mosze Brojde built a stocking-haberdashery factory and a carpentry shop. They employed a few dozen workers. In 1909 their factory burned down.

New occupations soon appeared. In 1901 a teacher named Adam Chaim Brański relinquished his pharmacy and opened a photography studio, the first in Brańsk. The first newspaper stand opened as well. In 1911, Jankiel Jelin hoped to open a bookstore but tsarist authorities refused to grant him a permit because he did not know Russian.

In order to sustain their families, many people held more than one job. For example, Abram Brański worked as a teacher and a photographer, and a tailor named Zelman Isaia worked as a mailman as well.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Jews predominated in commerce in Brańsk; town authorities brought them in order to improve the supply of goods. Later, a large group of artisans arrived and took customers over from Christian craftsmen. Limited financial resources of the Brańsk Jews, and stiff competition from the 1880s on prompted many newcomers to seek employment in neighbouring villages or to emigrate. At the end of the nineteenth century, Brańsk was overcrowded and no longer an attractive destination. It remained, however, a center of local importance. Jews living in Brańsk had important roles in service to the local population. From the mid-nineteenth century they exercised a significant impact on the town economy. They were more flexible, reacting more efficiently to the needs of the market and technical innovations which they tried to utilize as sources of income, such as the photography studio.

As a model for sources of employment, Brańsk was not an exception; its occupational structure was similar to that of other towns in the Bialystok region.

7. FORMS OF COMMUNAL AND CULTURAL ACTIVITY

Communal and cultural activity occupied an important place in Jewish life. Preserving their own identity was possible because of ‘separated’ kehilahs in which Jews particularly cared about cultivating old traditions and customs. Jews living in Brańsk belonged to the orthodox mitnaggedim, the followers of rabbinical Judaism. In little towns (shtetls) during the period of partitions, Jewish assimilation into non-Jewish culture was very rare.

198 Ibid., p. 132.
200 BDGA Grodno, f. 1, op. 9, d. 1832, p. 7.
201 Ibid., f. 1, op. 18, d. 1689.
203 A. Dobroński, ‘Brańsk i okolice…,’ p. 76.
We know little about Jewish culture in Brańsk before the 1880s. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, an anonymous Podlesie burgher (from neighbouring Bielsk Podlaski) wrote, ‘not much can be said about the Jews in our area, as they dress almost the same as elsewhere; perhaps the only difference being that most often they wear patynki, that is, boots without heels, or shoes, but never regular boots. Jewish women, like probably elsewhere in Poland, wear bindy [head pieces--Z.R.] adorned with pearls or stones, and in front of their koftans they have a kind of rabats [muff] in order to warm their hands. In their homes Jews love having many feather and down duvets; they also hang comforters above their beds, likely ones commonly used in the past. Benches with flipped arms (przekładane poręcze) now are seen only in their houses.’

Jews stood out on the streets because of their dress, a result of separate cultural development; it consisted of a khalat (overcoat) and kartuz (cap). The local Christian population knew little about Jewish customs.

Cultural life was concentrated in synagogues. There the Torah was studied and lectures by wandering maggids were heard. The fashion of enriching the service with music appeared in the mid-nineteenth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, one of Brańsk’s best-known cantors was Jehoszua Zeilig Freind from Volynhnia. At his concerts the ‘old’ synagogue was always full. The cantor also established a choir of young Jews. Freind’s greatest ‘hit’ was the song Hanerot halahu (These Candles), apparently sung for many years. The cantor’s house was the favorite meeting place for enlightened Jews: it was the place to which Jews brought letters from families in America for Freind to read to them.

The Poael Tsedek synagogue was famous for its cantorial concerts; it had excellent acoustics. Well-known cantors from out of town sang there, and sometimes Christians came to concerts.

Music played an important role in the cultural life of Jewish community. Many amateurs played instruments (mainly fiddles). Family celebrations (brit, bar mitsvah, weddings) could not go on without music.

Charity was even more visible in the life of the Brańsk congregation. Jewish education was based on the traditional system of melameds (private teachers) and heder. The first Jewish religious school, Talmud Torah, was established before 1861. Financed with communal contributions, it received funds from the kehilah and the burial society. Talmud Torah was a school for the poorer Jews who could not afford a melamed. It was located in the synagogue Alter Bet Midrash, though in 1911 a separate building was erected for this school, and it afterwards was called ‘public.’

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204 ‘¸yki’ i ‘Koluny’ Pamiętki mieszczanina podlaskiego (1790-1816), ed. K. Bartoszewicz, Kraków 1913, p. 35.
205 A. Harkavy, Istoricheskaia spravka o sinagogakh..., p. 74.
207 Z. Romaniuk, Żydowskie domy..., p. 8.
208 A. Trus, J. Cohen, op. cit., p. 84.
209 Ibid., p. 85.
Melameds taught children Hebrew scripture and the principles of Jewish religion. Study was based primarily on memorization, and lasted from early childhood until age thirteen. Few local Jews could afford further education; only the richer ones sent their children to hederes where the study lasted until age fifteen. Most Jews were able to sign their names, but not all could read.

Beginning in 1906, Brănișk was home to the well-known yeshiva that was organized by Rabbi Szymon Szkop; because of this rabbi and school, Brănișk was known to virtually all religious Jews in Poland and Russia. In 1909, the students helped to put out a large fire in the town.

Beyond education, Brănișk in the 1860s had seen very lively communal activity among its Jews. In 1865 a brotherhood studying the Gemara (commentaries and explications augmenting the Mishna) was established; four years later, a brotherhood studied the Mishna (customary regulations and norms); and then a brotherhood for studying the Psalms was established. The bachelors youth’s brotherhood for reading the Torah and the Bible was the largest of such organizations, containing some 150 members, who in 1890 copied the Torah. This brotherhood was dissolved during the First World War. In addition, the bookbinding brotherhood repaired religious books, stamping them with their insignia. All of these associations supported themselves with voluntary contributions.

In 1863 a loan society (Towarzystwo Kasy Pożyczkowej) was established under community auspices, granting no-interest loans for the sum of 5 to 10 rubles pawned on valuables. It was established to provide help to petty traders and artisans, but was not popular because many were ashamed to borrow from it. The society existed until 1916.

In 1893 the Association for Charity and Visiting the Sick (Linas ha-Tsedek, Bikkur Cholim) was established as a result of major diphtheria epidemics; its leaders were Meir Charlap, Dawid Milner, and Josel Kusowicki (a paramedic). The association’s activity consisted of visiting the sick, buying medicine, and paying doctors for the poor. It worked by issuing coupons that served as ‘receipts’ that were given to doctors once a month. Polish doctors assisted as well; a medic named Prażmo had up to fifty visits (receipts) per month, as did Dr. Jan Taraszkiewicz, who died in 1899. The Polish pharmacy owned by L. Ogiński also extended credit to Bikkur Cholim and Linas ha-Tsedek. During the First World War, the association raised money though organizing performances and concerts with artists from Bialystok.

The Association of Brotherly Love existed in Brănișk from 1896, and its goal was to aid its members in case of illness or death in a family. If one were ill, the group provided one-time support of three rubles to pay a doctor. If a member died, the association paid a half ruble per week for each child until the age of sixteen. Its budget consisted of members’ weekly contributions, and it also collected money during holidays. Performances during Purim sold 200–300 tickets (the performance of Selling Joseph

210 Ibid., pp. 122–123; 144–145.
gathered the largest audience). During the Jewish carnival the members of Brotherly Love went from house to house singing songs and collecting small donations.\(^\text{214}\)

Two guest houses were hosted by the Hospitality Brotherhood. The first served ‘more important guests’, for example wandering maggids (preachers). It was equipped with five straw mattresses, comforters, and pillows. Melamed Benjamin, who ran the hostel, only admitted well-dressed patrons after presenting he was presented with an identity document. Socialists were not welcome. Before entering the guest house, the patron had to indicate the number of days he expected to stay. The rent was one ruble per month. This guest house operated until 1914; a second one was located near the Tailors’ and Cobblers’ synagogue and served the wandering poor and beggars. A gravedigger, Anczel, operated it, and the sanitary conditions left much to be desired. The poor who slept and ate there paid with local Brańsk ‘currency’ with the imprint ‘Prut de Brańsk’ (i.e., stamped paper valued at three ‘pruts’ per kopeck). The house still existed during the First World War.\(^\text{215}\)

Charity included aid to poor girls who wanted to get married. The Association for Aiding Fiancés (Towarzystwo Pomocy Narzeczonej) was established in 1892 for this purpose; it collected a ‘wedding’ tax, and members served as matchmakers. A young bride would receive bedding, a wedding dress, and a small dowry. The wedding musicians were also paid by the association.\(^\text{216}\)

Sanitary conditions in town were poor. The Memorial Book authors remember that ‘the population lived in overcrowded conditions. Apartments were cleaned once a year, for Passover.’ The slaughterer Israel Siwowicz washed his hands with soap before killing an animal, which ‘was not a custom among Brańsk Jews’.\(^\text{217}\) However the poor sanitary conditions among Jews were nevertheless higher than the Christians, owing to the prescribed weekly ritual bath in the community bath called a mokvah, which was located near the old synagogue close to the Nurzec River.

Orthodox Jews in Brańsk defended themselves from lay influence of the Haskalah, and followers of the Enlightenment were isolated in the community. A. Trus describes Brańsk’s Jewish community at the end of the nineteenth century by noting that ‘culturally, Brańsk was backward. . . . The town isolated itself from lay influence. A journalist for the paper Moment published a story about a Jew called Chlawne Rozalkes forced to leave town [he was a supporter of the Haskalah - Z. R.] and settle in Kamieniec Podolski, where he soon became famous for his intellectual prowess.’\(^\text{218}\)

Around 1900, a small group of hasidim (consisting of about twenty families, of whom only one was actually from Brańsk) settled in Brańsk, arriving from Ciechanowiec, Drohiczyn, Kobryń, Orla, Siedlce, Siemiatycze, Sokołów, and Sokoły. Although they were the followers of six tsadikim (from Aleksandrow, Góra Kalwarja,

\(^{214}\) Ibid., pp. 101–102.


\(^{217}\) Ibid., pp. 66–67, 120.

\(^{218}\) Ibid., pp. 66, 144.
Kobryń, Kock, Radzymin, and Słonim], they prayed in a prayer house called a shtibl. The tsadik from Kobryń periodically visited them in Brańsk.\footnote{A. Leszczyński, ‘Struktura społeczna…,’ p. 72, and A. Trus, J. Cohen, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 56, 77–81. A. Leszczyński is based on the \textit{Memorial Book} and lists followers of five tsadikim while the book itself mentions six.}

Despite the negative attitude of the Orthodox, new currents such as the Haskalah, Zionism, and socialism did not escape Brańsk. In 1886, Abraham Chaim of Brańsk was a reporter for the newspaper \textit{Ha-Melits}; he described the fire in town.\footnote{Ch. G. Cohen, \textit{Shtetl-finder}, Bowie, Maryland, 1989, p. 10.}

Jews are sometimes called ‘the people of the Book’. This saying reflects not only their love for the Torah but also their great respect for the printed word. From 1871 until the interwar period, 247 Jews from Brańsk sponsored twenty books published by subscription.\footnote{B. Kagan, \textit{Sefer Harppenumeratn}, New York, 1975, p. 47.} From about 1900, the children of the town (both boys and girls) were taught Yiddish, Russian, and mathematics. This innovation was first introduced by Abram Chaim of Bransk (later a photographer). A teacher called Bleiman had a private school where he taught at the secondary level. Similarly, Judel, the son of Szlomo Hersz, taught Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, and mathematics.\footnote{A. Trus, J. Cohen, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 145–146.}

Books were available in Brańsk. Every few weeks a peddler selling books came to town, where he displayed his wares on a table near the old synagogue. At first he just exhibited religious books, and though Orthodox Jews bought calendars and prayer books, they more often just looked at and read the books without buying. Only when the Orthodox left the stand would the peddler take out novels and books from lighter literary genres, selling or lending them for a small fee. He also carried the newest books in modernized Hebrew.\footnote{A. Trus, J. Cohen, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 147–148.}

In 1905, the first library in Brańsk was established in the attic of Mosze Rose’s home. Jewish popular literature predominated (Sholem Alechem, I. L. Peretz) in the small collection, and it was mostly patronized by girls. Young workers sponsored the collection. Among the Hebrew books, the most popular were \textit{Love of Zion} and \textit{Wandering on the Path of Life} The number of books grew steadily, and the Orthodox reacted by suspecting sources of atheism in the library. In 1906, a few books on revolutionary subjects were added. Since these texts were prohibited, they were borrowed secretly by trusted persons. When the tsarist authorities learned of this, the collection was spread among readers to avoid confiscation. In 1910, the library was restored, and there was much more interest in reading. In 1917 the library was supported by the Bund and the Poalei Zion.

Jewish youth influenced by the Haskalah broke through the confines of Orthodoxy in many areas. In 1910, a repertory theatre group was established; it produced plays such as \textit{Szmandrykunie} (Jesters). Someone named Szajkes owned a phonograph, and on summer nights Jewish youth gathered at his windows to listen to music.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 147–150.}
At the end of the nineteenth century knowledge about world events had improved through access to the press. By 1888, Brańsk Jews were subscribing to monthlies and then to dailies (for example Ha-cofe [The Observer] from St. Petersburg). In 1897 the subscribers were Lajbel Wajn and Josze Lejbowicz. In 1902, the daily paper was being read in Abraham Gold’s pub. Newspapers went from hand to hand until they deteriorated. Workers from artisan shops read Der Weker (Wakeup Call).225

Socialist ideas reached Brańsk around 1905. Left-leaning Alter Trus described socialist meetings at that time: ‘Clandestine meetings took place in Kumat or by Pejsach Wołkowicz’s windmill. The teacher Judel explained world developments with a socialist spirit to the gathered workers. Chaim Beker maintained that Marx’s valuable theories should be taught more. The youth enjoyed these meetings. Rabbi Szmariahu Margolis condemned them.’226 In 1905, Brańsk’s tailors’ apprentices went on strike; soon, other artisans from larger shops joined them. Surprisingly, the factory owners did not fight these strikes, though they tried to make up for the losses at night. This so angered the strikers that they beat up several shop owners. In 1905, a cell of the Bund was established, and there was also an anarchist organization led by Dawid Jakes. The anarchists came from well-off families and were armed. Zionists, too, became active (among them Josze Liboszyc, Alter Szapiro, Mosze Chaim, and Mosze Hercke). Some of them supported the establishment of a Jewish state in Uganda.

Many propagandists appeared in the town as well. After their meetings, rallies were held. Armaments were stored in the library. The events were summarized by Alter Trus with the phrase ‘The revolution reached Brańsk.’227 To pacify the situation, the tsarist authorities brought twelve policemen to town; their visit was followed by arrests, and the anarchist group disbanded. Fearing arrest, many rebels escaped the town. The situation calmed down by the end of 1906.

That year, Brańsk Jews participated in the election to the first Duma. The first sixty electors were elected from the eligible. Six did not participate in further elections, and fifty-four went to the ballot in Bielsk Podlaski.228

During the First World War, interest in politics among Brańsk Jews grew. In 1917, a cell of the Poalei Zion was established, and Bundists and Zionists increased their activity as well. Clandestine meetings were again held in the town. Speakers often came from distant towns such as Łódź.229

A few people (mostly self-taught) from Brańsk managed to achieve significant success. In the following sketches, I describe a few of them.

Josef Chaim Heftman was born in 1812. At age twelve he published his first article in the Warsaw newspaper Ha-Tsefirah. He completed yeshiva in Brześć, and published an original volume of poetry entitled Ha-Shiloach in Odessa. From 1910 he was a regular contributor to Ha-Tsefirah, and he also wrote for Der weker. Heftman was

227 Ibid., pp. 124–128.
228 Ibid., pp. 142–143.
a Zionist. In the interwar period he emigrated to Palestine where he edited the daily Doar Ha-Yom, and later Ha-Boker. For twenty years he was the president of the Union of Journalists in Palestine. He was led the union of emigrants from Brańsk. He died in 1955.230

From his early childhood, Lejb Jakub Freind, a cantor’s son, showed talent in science, especially in astronomy. He completed yeshiva studies in Brześć, Mińsk, and Vilna, and received rabbinical ordination. Friend joined the emperor’s conservatory in Vilna in the department of music and vocal arts. As a student he wrote for the Hebrew newspaper Ha-Zeman (Time) and corresponded with Professor S. von Glazenah, the observatory’s director at the university in St. Petersburg. On Glazenah’s recommendation, Freind became a corresponding member of the tsarist astronomical society, and then at the Main Nikolaevskii Institute. Outside of school he completed studies at the Technical University in Dresden, receiving an engineer’s diploma. He continued studies in Toulouse. After the outbreak of the First World War he returned to Brańsk. In the summer of 1915 he escaped before the approaching German front and reached Shanghai. He was involved in Zionist activity. In 1923 he met Albert Einstein, with whom he spent three days in discussion. In a surviving thank-you note, Einstein calls Freind ‘a fellow in the trade’. During the Second World War Freind found himself in a Japanese prison camp. After the war he immigrated to the United States.231

For such a small center, Brańsk Jews created a well-developed structure of communal organization. We have no evidence of the influence of the Haskalah in Brańsk before the 1880s. Jews created political parties much earlier than did Christians. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Bundist, socialist, and Zionist ideas were influential among the youth.

8. INTER-KEHILAH CONFLICTS

Even today, Christians tend to subscribe to the stereotype that Jews interact exceptionally harmoniously in their social relations. This opinion does not fully reflect a congregation’s real life. In this chapter I will present some of the internal conflicts evident in the Brańsk kehilah’s records. Those that I described earlier will just be mentioned in passing.

The founding of the Brańsk community was immediately marked by a local Jewish conflict with the parent kehilah in Boćki; as a result a separate kehilah was created.

The fact that from the 1820s a rabbinical court and kehilah jail existed in Brańsk tells of the extent of internal conflict. One of the main preoccupations of the rabbi was solving disputes. The shames Abram Ber Wrona served as bailiff. ‘Candidates’ for cantonist units were held in the kehilah jail. As mentioned above, the problem of compulsory draft to the tsarist army in the second quarter of the nineteenth century caused open conflicts in the Jewish community. Kehilah elders employed a professional to catch the homeless and the poorest Jews in the town in order to draft them instead of the rich who could bail themselves out. Trus writes, ‘they caught one poor tailor and locked him in the jail in the old synagogue. . . . The tailors came to the synagogue and protested loudly, “Your children stay home but you’re taking away the only breadwinners

we poor parents have.” The protesters were led by tailor Beniamin Lejb Dawid. The head of the kehilah ordered him to be thrown out. The elders’ subordinates beat the tailor badly and broke his ribs.  

In the 1870s a gang of criminals known as the Chwites was active in Brańsk and the neighbouring area. Kehilah authorities accused its members of setting fire to several houses, resulting in a police investigation. The arsonists were arrested and deported to Siberia.  

Fires frequently plagued the population, and in 1876 the entire Jewish quarter burned down. The Jews immediately started rebuilding their houses, but as they prepared the plans required by the development board, numerous discrepancies in zoning came to light. The owners of small lots waged long feuds over boundaries. The Memorial Book remembers that ‘people nearly killed each other over an inch of land. The rabbi had to judge disputes continually. The shames Abraham Ber was practically dead on his feet from the constant running to plaintiffs with the rabbi’s summons.  

Many disputes sprang from differences in material status among Jews. Only a rich person could count on the kehilah authorities and could belong to the elite brotherhood Hevra Kadisha. Wealth was connected to being in power and having access to privileges and additional sources of income. Poor Jews could not expect that even after death they would be buried in a good spot of the cemetery; they also occupied the worst places in the synagogue. Because of this, professional groups built their own prayer houses; there were six of them in Brańsk. Internal economic stratification was one of the main causes of conflict in the kehilah until the end of the nineteenth century.  

A Pole describing the Bielsk district at the end of the nineteenth century noted that ‘there was a time when the Jews themselves avoided their proper names; the rich and enlightened would call themselves Poles ‘of Mosaic faith’ [mojżeszowego wyznania] . . .; the middle class were ‘Old religionists’ [starozakonni]. Only the poor called themselves ‘ours’ [nasz], and less frequently a ‘Jewboy’ [Żydek]. Now, after more than twenty years, the national name of Jew regained its legitimacy. . . . No Jew is ashamed of it, and the richer ones put a particular emphasis on it.’ This text confirms internal divisions among the Jews, as well as the rebirth of national feeling among them in the last decades of the nineteenth century.  

In addition to religious problems, the rabbi had to judge cases involving unpaid loans, setting prices for goods and services, divorces, compensation for damages, and other matters.  

In two last decades of the nineteenth century an economic conflict broke out between Jews. As a result of the expulsion from mainland Russia, a new wave of settlers came to the western provinces of the empire, composed of a large number of ‘Litvak’ Jews. The richer ‘Litvaks’ settled in the Kingdom of Poland, whereas those who did not have much money stopped in small towns like Brańsk. The ‘local’ Jews perceived the new settlers as taking jobs away from them. With the increasing number of Jews, prices for apartments and food went up; there was a surplus of workers and not enough

233 Ibid., p. 122.  
234 Ibid., pp. 122–123.  
235 L. Czarkowski, op. cit., p. 95.
available work. Local Jews often lost in competition with ‘Litvaks’ because the newcomers knew Russian and the eastern markets well. They often came alone, unburdened by families, and were content with smaller profits, therefore destroying established economic patterns. ‘Litvaks’ had no ties with the local population and ‘sided’ with the partitioning authorities.236

The influx of ‘Litvaks’ caused conflict within the kehilah. New settlers increased unemployment, which resulted in increased emigration. On the other hand, the clash between culturally different Jews from Russia and local Jews also brought new ideas. Among Orthodox Jews, ‘Litvaks’ had a negative reputation because they were interested in politics, dressed differently, smoked on the Sabbath, and so on.237 When they arrived, newspapers started to be read in Brańsk. Methods of teaching changed, and socialist and Zionist ideas gained popularity. These new features tended to undermine the old Orthodox system of the town, provoking local religious Jews to regard the ‘Litvaks’ as a negative element.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Brańsk’s poverty-stricken Jewish community differed not only in material status, but also in their political and religious views. The Orthodox retained great influence, but Zionists, Bundists, and Hasidim grew in number, as did the assimilationists to a lesser extent. Political groups emerged in the kehilah, lobbying for supporters and influence.

Brańsk’s kehilah came into being as a result of the conflict of local Jews with the Bocki kehilah. The Brańsk congregation was torn by various internal conflicts. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the prevailing disagreement concerned disparity in wealth; however, from the beginning of the twentieth century, politics became an additional divisive element.

9. RELATIONS BETWEEN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

Statistics indicate that during the period of partitions Brańsk had a complex national and religious structure. Until the 1880s, the Polish (Roman Catholic) population predominated; afterwards, the Jews had a great influence. The Uniates, the Eastern Orthodox, and the Protestants also lived in Brańsk.

From the beginning of the period discussed, the attitude of Christians toward Jews and vice versa was not friendly. Towns protected themselves from the influx of larger numbers of Jews, and allowed only for the settlement of merchants and artisans in specific trades to meet the gap in local commerce or services. The two sides tolerated each other because both profited from this situation.

Knowledge of each other’s culture was limited, and guesses prevailed. An anonymous memoir writer from Bielsk Podlaski (25 km from Brańsk) notes at the beginning of the nineteenth century that the Jewish ‘nation seeps through little cracks like water and has spread widely, and although Jews cannot own real estate they found a way


237 Najnowsze dzieje Żydów..., p. 53.
to bypass the law’. Then the author remembers that news circulated best through the ‘Jewish gossip circuit (poczta pantoflowa).’ This is not a flattering picture. Józef Jaroszewicz (also from Bielsk, a former law professor at Vilna University) wrote around 1848 and portrayed Jews in even worse terms. Describing the Pale of Settlement in Russia, he writes that ‘no doubt the government had urgent reasons to issue this ordinance; however, the Christian population in our towns, especially in those where there either were no Jews at all, or a small number of them, suffered irreparable damages. Before that time, the burghers busied themselves on the side of small-scale trade and handicrafts even if their existence was based on agriculture; they also had charge of all alcohol production, and leased some of the town revenues. They generated a substantial income from these sources that greatly contributed to their well being. All this has changed with the influx of the Jewish population from the area, and changed not only in material respect, but also in regard to morals. With the exception of agriculture and some crafts, Jews gradually took over all town revenues, filled the town with inns, turned the burghers into drunkards, and have such a hold on them that they easily could, with purchases and pawns . . . take over the market square and other places of trade and industry . . . pushing Christians to the suburbs.’ Furthermore, Jaroszewicz writes that Christians’ attempts at competition were thwarted by Jews who supported each other. However, he admits that the majority of Jews lived in frightening poverty, a fact that he nonetheless explains by noting their aversion toward hard work. This opinion was commonplace in the Christian community.

Thus we may discern the problems, not noticeable in other sources, that emerged together with the gradual dominance by Jewish artisans and small-scale merchants. We do not know if any open conflicts broke out at that time (the first half of the nineteenth century). Christian artisans in Brańsk often owned agricultural plots, so losing customers to Jews did not cause a complete loss of livelihood.

Remarkably, as late as 1820, the Brańsk Catholic parish priest Rev. Michał Dziewanowski leased an inn in the nearby church-owned village of Zaluskie to a Jew. The custom of leasing inns to Jews in order to increase revenue was common mostly in the eighteenth century; it was a rare occurrence in that area in the nineteenth century. It was different in the neighbouring parish. In 1891, the Eastern Orthodox parish priest in the village of Czarna (south of Brańsk) stated that the inn in the village was the greatest source of evil to religion and morals. He tried to close it down, which proved impossible because the business was not registered and, ‘the Jew sells vodka without concession, under the table. . . . Besides, the farmers are very favourable toward the inn. They saved the Jews many times with testimony concerning fines for illegal trade.’

238 ‘¸yki’ i ‘Kołtuny’..., pp. 29–30, 41.
239 J. Jaroszewicz, Materiały do statystyki..., z. 6.
240 Ibid.
241 The Archdiocese Archive in Białystok, Opisanie parafialnego kościoła... 1820 roku podane.
242 A. Wołkowski, Historyczny oraz statystyczny opis cerkwi i parafii cerkiewnej w Czarnej Cerkiewnej, Czarna Cerkiewna 1994, p. 31.
The attitude of the majority of Jews in Brańsk to the Polish national uprisings was hostile or at the most indifferent. They did not identify with Polish ‘statehood’, in accordance with the biblical principle, ‘My son, fear God and the king [i.e. the Russian tsar - note Z. R.], and don’t mingle with insurgents.’ In 1831, Alter Trus wrote that the insurgents unjustly hanged a Jew named Szelik, who was accused of spying. However, we have no evidence of any involvement of Jews from this area to regain Poland’s independence. According to Jewish historians, after the Russian authorities suppressed the Polish rebellion, they thanked Jews for their support in combating the insurrection in the areas of Vilna, Grodno, and Białystok.

At the end of 1862, during the preparation for the January insurrection, Brańsk Jews informed the Russian secret agent Szlomo Kurekta (a Jew from Grodno who was visiting Brańsk) that, in the church, in the priest’s presence, Polish revolutionary songs were sung and a proclamation about refusing service in tsarist army was distributed. Moreover, Jews sent a partisan commander who wanted to purchase 100 scythes to Kurekta. The secret agent passed this information on to the Russian authorities who initially refused to investigate, but Kurekta turned to a higher official and the conspirators were arrested.

Mosze Ćwink testified during interrogation that he saw Konstanty Szymborski in a partisan unit. Szmul Lvów, under police supervision for theft since 1847, informed on the police chief in Brańsk who was involved in the insurrection. An instance of a local Jew’s positive reaction to the insurrection was Klepicki, who at some level was involved in killing a tsarist police officer in Brańsk. The Memorial Book recalls that Jews feared the uprising, and that Jews from the villages came to Brańsk where they felt safer.

The same negative attitude toward the uprising is found in many documents. Supplying partisan units with smuggled arms can hardly be viewed as support, however, as the objective was to get a better price paid by the Poles for rifles and phosphorus, under the threat of being arrested by tsarist authorities.

Paweł Bobrowski, a Russian officer, described Brańsk in the mid-nineteenth century, and cites the interesting example of a swindle by local Jews. He says that in the area, ‘kasha made from wheat . . . is a significant branch of industry held by burghers.

243 H. Nussbaum, Przewodnik judaistyczny obejmujący kurs literatury i religii, Warszawa, 1893, pp. 314–315. H. Nussbaum writes that ‘After the restoration of the Second State, the Jews in Palestine under the dominance of Persian and Syrian kings performed a daily offering for the success and prosperity of the alien king… which is practiced continuously until this day.’


247 Ibid., p. 51.

248 Ibid., p. 53.

The color of kasha is gray-yellow-green. Jews fake the kasha, add egg yolks to the forged product, and sell it for more than the natural kasha.²⁵⁰

Of course, Christian–Jewish relations were not just formed through acts of informing and cheating. Everyday life was more banal. In Jewish shops one could buy more merchandise, or get services at a lower cost than at Christian stores; hence, people preferred to use the Jewish venues. Moreover, with Jews one could bargain or buy na borg (on credit). Poles could draw additional profits by leasing land to Jews (in the years 1852–1853 there were ten lessees) and from granting services to Jews such as lighting lamps on Shabbat, and providing contract labor and apprenticeship. One Jew, recalling his great-grandfather in Brańsk, wrote, ‘We lived in one town with Poles and Russians. But we were always a culturally separate community preserving our customs and religion. Of course as artisans and merchants we did business with goyim. But we always were a world apart, faithful to its customs and tradition.’²⁵¹ The sources do not provide any information about social interactions between Jews and Christians, and do not even mention mixed marriages. There is no evidence of assimilation of Jews. The only example of conversion (forced) from Judaism to Eastern Orthodoxy is provided by a small group of cantonists who were forced into their positions as a result of Russian policy. It seems that the Christians acquired more from Jewish tradition and language than vice versa; this can be seen even today in local cuisine and in inadvertent usage of strange-sounding words.²⁵² As I mentioned before, sometimes Christians went to cantorial concerts in the synagogue Poel Tsedek; we have no information, though, about Jews visiting Catholic or Orthodox churches. On the other hand, Jews used the services of Polish physicians and pharmacists.

The case of ten-year-old Fejga Rachela Bańkowska from the Jewish community in Brańsk stirred a great commotion among both Jews and Poles. Fejga Rachela and her parents Ben Cijon and Rachela lived temporarily near the town of Ciechanowick (20 km from Brańsk). In 1862 the child suddenly arrived at the convent of the Sisters of Mercy in Ciechanowick, asking to be admitted as a novice. The girl had already learned some Christian prayers from Polish children. The case went to the church authorities who, over Fejga’s parents’ wishes, sent the girl to the convent in Drohiczyon on the Bug River. The essence of the problem was establishing the girl’s actual age; she claimed that she was fourteen, in which case she could decide her faith by herself. The Kehilah in Brańsk testified, however, that Fejga was only ten. Without waiting for the legal decision, the girl’s parents, accompanied by friends, raided the convent in order to get the girl back. There was a skirmish in which many people participated. After a month the girl was returned to her parents because the authorities decided that she was under fourteen.²⁵³

At the end of the nineteenth century, a Polish physician and amateur ethnographer named Ludwik Czarkowski from the neighbouring town of Siemiatycze, evidently influenced by nationalistic ideology, considered Jews to be clever people. He

²⁵⁰ Matieraly dla geografii..., p. 991.

²⁵¹ N. Kaplan, ‘Mój pradziadek Herszel’ (manuscript).

²⁵² M. Brzezina, Polszczyzna Żydów, Warszawa, 1986. In Brańsk I recorded several sayings and phrases related to Jews; even now a few Jewish dishes are cooked, and several words that are borrowed from Yiddish and Hebrew are commonly used.

²⁵³ BGDA Grodno, call 1/34/105.
distinguished between the ‘trading class’ (stan kupczący) and a separate group ‘feeding on the ‘genuinely’ Polish population . . .’ He thought that ‘our peasant folk know Jews in both these forms, equally abominable to them; they also know the difference in religion but this does not influence their judgment much. . . . Because they are so large in number as well as through busying themselves in trade, Jews are in daily contact with our farmer folk. . . . Even if they . . . are not permitted to dwell on peasants’ land, they can easily bypass this prohibition by playing the strings of human nature which is weak and often greedy. In Lithuania, they lull police with bribes or servility . . .’ Explaining the reasons why gentry often employed Jews, Czarkowski wrote that they ‘often were pitying the “poor Jew”, blinded by the promise of great financial gain, or finally enslaved by the financial mogul-Jew on whom it depends, the manor granted Jews this favour to its own and society’s detriment many times. . . .’ Describing the local peasantry’s attitude toward Jews, he pointed out that ‘the Podlasie folk do not mince words towards Jews. If we were to judge their attitude just by these words and phrases we would be gravely mistaken. A limitless contempt for Jews is heard in the words, whereas the action only faintly corresponds with the words. A simple man would never say that a Jew ‘died’ (umarł); instead, he says ‘died like a dog’ (zdechł). He often calls a Jew an ‘infidel’. These are words. On the other hand, it often happens that if a Jew needs a carriage on a Christian holiday he always gets one. If a Jew in ‘his’ village requests a worker to help with the harvest or other work he can find one even at the hottest time, whereas our own brother-Christian can hardly find anyone for the same price. When not even the poorest Jew rambles from village to village in the fall begging for vegetables, he won’t be refused a few pots of potatoes, peas, carrots or beets, even from the smallest hut, especially of Jewish delicacies such as radishes, turnips, or onions. This readiness to oblige Jews doesn’t always springs from greed or hope for good profit, etc.’ Czarkowski thought that the Polish farmer ‘does not like the Jew, and even is afraid of him’. According to the author, ‘amongst the village folk, the petty nobleman is most favorable toward the Jew, admiring his cleverness and “wisdom”, and often learns many dirty and immoral tricks from him.’ Czarkowski brought up the example of common dealing in horse theft, proven in court trials. He also claimed that ‘our burghers are no less exposed to Jewish influence. Many speak the jargon which they gladly show off in conversation with Jews, and they think that this way they show their great social skill and enlightenment. They often live under one roof with Jews and are friends with them. They acquired some Jewish words--for example the frequent curse ‘cholera’ . . . A petty burgher readily enters into social relations with a Jew. Contract workers are the most servile to Jews both on a daily basis as wood cutters, servants (especially on Shabbat and Jewish holidays for putting out candles, lighting ovens, etc.), proxies in trade (especially innkeeping); and annually as farmhands, menials, nannies, and wet nurses.’

Czarkowski noted, ‘if a Jew needs a goy he is servile, flattering, humble. Otherwise he becomes cold, indifferent, condescending, arrogant, and bold. The Jewish population . . . firmly believes in their superiority. In their minds, a goy is not only an ‘impure’ man, but if he is not a frocked gentlemen, he must be an uncultured boor, whereas Jews are “delicate” people, wise and practical.’

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255 Ibid.
Czarkowski’s remarks, although negatively colored and not objective, provide many valuable details that would be difficult to find in administrative documents.

During the fire in the Jewish quarter (around 1910), Jews discovered that the town fire pump was broken. Commenting upon this, A. Trus stated, ‘they say antisemitism was already active.’ We note, however, that the same fire pump served Christians and Jews. It is unlikely that one would viciously break the equipment needed at any moment just to annoy the other. Thus the commentary by A. Trus is evidence of mutual suspicion and estrangement.

Before the First World War, the problem of competition emerged, and was intertwined with the development of nationalism. An event took place in Brańsk in 1913 when a cooperative produce store was open under the initiative of the local Christian intelligentsia. One of its founders was the Polish pharmacist L. Ogiński, who, as Gazeta Białostocka reported, was ‘attacked’ for that his actions by Jews. In addition, the Jews who wanted to force the store to close jointly lowered their prices.

More meaningful cooperation came about only after 1915, when both Poles and Jews were in the magistrate. It became customary that the mayor was a Pole and his deputy a Jew. The national composition of the city council also was mixed.

The division between Poles and Jews deepened during the war because of the attitude toward the German occupation, and later the negative attitude of the majority of local Jews towards Polish independence. Jews greeted the Germans entering Podlasie in 1915 with joy. The new occupiers initially supported the Jews but eventually did not fulfill hopes for radical improvements. Despite this, Brańsk Jews were reserved or even hostile towards independence. In November 1918, a Jew named Jamsin informed on the Poles from the local Polish Military Organization (Polska Organizacja Wojskowa) to the Germans. Other Jews hid a German named Hermann from the Polish army. Herszel Szajners had a different attitude towards the Polish cause; he was a member of an underground group POW (Polish Military Organization) and then joined the Polish army.

Epilogue

Jews lived in Brańsk (a royal town) from 1560 until the end of the eighteenth century in such small numbers that they were prevented from creating a communal body. This limited settlement was principally a result of the privilege De non tolerandis Iudaeis. Larger Jewish settlements existed in neighbouring villages and in towns owned by the nobility.

After the third partition of Poland, the policy of the authorities caused significant changes in Jewish life. Some privileges were abolished, including exclusion of Jews from settlement in royal towns. For financial reasons, Jews had to move from villages to towns. As a result, a large group of Jews (ca. eighty people) arrived in Brańsk; they were able to establish some forms of communal autonomy. The town authorities also tried to

257 Gazeta Białostocka, 1913.
258 Najnowsze dzieje Żydów..., p. 7.
bring Jewish tradesmen to Brańsk to improve the burghers’ supply of goods. Despite some evidence, I was not able to confirm the existence of a synagogue and kehilah in Brańsk.

New research indicates that Jewish communal autonomy in Brańsk is several years older than had been assumed. It is certain that the sub-kehila was already active in the town by 1816. Jews living in Brańsk at that time were subjected to the old kehila in neighbouring Boćki. The distance of the sub-kehila from the home community (approximately 20 km) caused many inconveniences (among them, the lack of a synagogue and cemetery in Brańsk; and taxes) that led to a unification of Brańsk Jews in their efforts to secede from the Boćki kehila. They actively organized institutions necessary for an independent congregation.

The community’s internal development was very efficient. By 1822 Brańsk Jews already had a cemetery, a synagogue, and their own rabbi. However, the Jews from Boćki did not want to divide the kehila, as they profited from the Brańsk sub-kehila (with greater taxes, fees, and numbers of recruits). More than twenty years of disagreement led to several court cases and settlements. The long conflict was ultimately solved by the tsarist legislation of 1852. On the basis of this law, Jews were freed from dependence on the kehila in Boćki.

A simultaneous conflict involved the Jews of Bielsk who wanted to leave the kehila in Orla. In these two cases we encounter an interesting phenomenon: new kehilahs (Brańsk and Bielsk) in former royal towns seceded from old kehilahs in private towns (Boćki and Orla). However, even then, as a result of all the Russian legislation, the kehila’s role was limited to that of tax offices with limited power in religious matters and welfare. In 1844 kehilahs were legally abolished and subjected to town authorities. There is evidence of illegal activities of the Brańsk kehila in its latter form. The limitation of the role of Jewish kehilahs caused a decline in importance of large and old communities in the neighbouring private towns (Boćki, Ciechanowiec, Orla, Siemiatycze versus the former royal towns of Brańsk and Bielsk).

The structure of the Brańsk kehila drew from traditional patterns. The most important figure in Jewish community was the rabbi. Between 1822 and 1912, Brańsk had six rabbis, of whom Szymon Szkop was particularly important as the author of religious and philosophical treatises studied by Orthodox Jews even today.

The Jews of Brańsk built five synagogues and a Hasidic shtibl (prayer house). The large number of such institutions resulted from the increasing number of Jews in Brańsk, as well as from growing differences in wealth, occupational, and religious divisions in the community. Russian construction laws had their influence as well. The old synagogue Alter Bet Midrash, established in 1821 in an adapted building, was the central structure. Traditionally most of Brańsk’s prayer houses were close to each other. For instance, the four prayer houses at small Senatorska Street created a synagogue complex. Half of the synagogues were made of bricks, and the rest were wooden. They were built in the traditional Russia classical, or similar eclectic style. The prayer houses in Brańsk were not architecturally distinguished.

Jews were sometimes compelled to stress their loyalty to the authorities. In order to obtain a permit to build the tailors’ prayer house (Schneider Bet Midrash), its founders petitioned the provincial authorities that the synagogue be named after Alexei, the tsar’s newborn son. Russian officials yielded to this argument and issued the permit.

A Jewish cemetery is a necessity in every kehila. In Brańsk, Jews established their first necropolis probably in 1820 in order to gain independence from the kehila in
Boćki (the latter made great demands on Brańsk for the privilege of burial in their cemetery). The burial society *Hevra Kadisha* already existed in Brańsk before 1820. It prepared corpses for burial and transported them to the cemetery. Archival research and surviving tombstones at the Brańsk cemetery (the oldest *matseva* comes from 1839) indicate that it might actually have been established a few years later, around 1830. The cemetery was soon filled, requiring the purchase of a much larger adjacent lot in 1852. The cemetery was still in use in 1944–1945. The surviving *matsevas* represent an inferior type of Ashkenazi tombstones. Some were made from field stones by local stoneworkers, while the sandstone *matsevas* came from masonry shops in other towns.

The establishment of communal autonomy was connected with the need to elect the congregation’s governing body. The *kehilah* was headed by a directorate elected by eligible Jews. The 1835 and 1844 tsarist laws, however, abolished the *kehilah’s* autonomy, requiring Jews to come under the rule of the town authorities. The same legislation introduced the new representation of the Jews, the so-called Synagogal Directorates (*Zarządy Bóżnicze*) elected in all synagogues. The power of new structures was limited to religious matters, welfare, and other issues relevant to the synagogue to which the Jews belonged. Terms were for three years. As new synagogues were built in Brańsk, so did new synagogal directorates appear. Elections stimulated great emotions and sometimes ballots were forged. Each time, the new directorate had to be confirmed by the tsarist authorities. In Brańsk from about 1865, the office of sub-rabbi (*podrabinek*) existed; he was appointed by Russian authorities and was subject to the rabbi in Bielsk Podlaski. The sub-rabbi was a civil servant elected by representatives of all synagogue directorates for a three-year term.

Jews had their representatives in the town authorities. Since 1892 the number of Jewish councilors was limited by law. One in ten councilors was Jewish in Brańsk by 1915. In 1916, the German occupation authorities introduced sweeping changes in the Jewish legal situation. The institution of *kehilah* was restored, and Jewish participation in the town’s activities was expanded. From that time a custom began, preserved even in the interwar period, calling for the mayor always to be a Pole and his deputy a Jew. The make-up of the town council was mixed.

In the nineteenth century, the national and religious make-up of Brańsk changed significantly. Under the Prussian partition at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jews constituted about 7 per cent of Brańsk’s population; a century later, they formed 58.1 per cent. Before the 1830s, Jews mainly came from neighbouring villages and little towns (private towns such as Ciechanowiec or Boćki). In the 1830s, a large group of Jews settled in Brańsk as a result of the introduction of the settlement zone in Russia, as well as from economic fortune and the creation of the local *kehilah*. The town’s Jewish population grew from 314 persons in 1842 to some 660 in 1847. In the same period, the Christian population decreased slightly. In 1859, Jews constituted 39 per cent of the town’s population.

The principal national and religious change in Brańsk occurred as a result of the so-called May Legislation proclaimed by Russian authorities in 1881. Along with immigrants from the area, many Jews from mainland Russia (the so-called ‘Litvaks’) came to Brańsk at that time. Also, the birth rate was greater among Jews than among Christians. The overcrowded town could not absorb all settlers; therefore, starting in 1880 many Jews (mostly tailors) started emigrating to America. In 1894 there were sufficient numbers of immigrants from Brańsk in the United States to establish two emigrant societies. In 1897, 58.1 per cent of 4078 Brańsk inhabitants were Jewish. The population
...growth, prompted also by economic prosperity, lasted until the beginning of the twentieth century. In terms of religious orientation, Brańsk at that time resembled other towns in the Bialystok region. Increased emigration of the Jews in 1905–1907 and 1913–1914 contributed to a Jewish population decline in Brańsk. At the same time, more Christians were relocating to Brańsk, causing a slow re-Polonization of the town. In 1914, a total of 50.85 per cent of the 4301 inhabitants were Jewish.

The First World War again affected the structure of the Brańsk population. As a result of the bezhenstwo (escapes) and the war in general, the town population decreased by 13 per cent. Overall, Jews suffered the lowest casualties (1 per cent), and in 1921 they constituted 57.9 per cent of the population.

In the period described, Brańsk Jews worked in crafts and trade. In this respect Brańsk was not different from other towns. Almost from the beginning, Jews monopolized commerce and a small number of crafts. As time passed, Jews won customers over from local craftsmen, gaining their business through lowering prices and purchasing the most convenient locations in town (the area of the market square and the main street). In 1897 the largest Jewish occupational groups were tailors (185) and tradesmen (131). Jews constituted the most economically active part of the town population, and were the most flexible in reacting to the demands of the market and technical innovations. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Jews with capital built a few larger enterprises (a tile factory, sewing shop, carpentry shop, and weaving mill) in Brańsk, employing from several to several dozens of workers. However, the poor dominated in town, subsisting mainly on the charity of their compatriots. Jews significantly contributed to the economic development of Brańsk.

Russian legislation did not manage to interest Jews in agriculture; only individual Jews earned their livelihood in that way. On the other hand, Polish competition in commerce, which appeared before the First World War, was treated by Jews as a threat and was resolutely opposed.

Jews living in Brańsk associated with Orthodox rabbinical Judaism. They created a highly developed structure of charitable and educational institutions. Before the 1880s, there was no recorded activity related to the Haskalah in Brańsk. This situation changed with the influx of ‘Litvaks’ and a group of Hasidim in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Lay subjects were then introduced in education, Jews started to read newspapers, and new political currents appeared with Zionism and socialism. Some talented Brańsk Jews achieved great scientific or cultural success. For example, Leib Freind studied at several universities and was friendly with Albert Einstein. Josef Haim Heftman, a journalist who wrote for Ha-Tsefirah, published his first volume of poetry in Odessa at age twenty-two. Later he served as president of the journalist union in Palestine for several decades.

The Jewish community in Brańsk was born out of the conflict of local Jews with the kehilah in Boćki. The Brańsk congregation in the described period was torn by many internal conflicts. The disagreements prompted by differences in wealth dominated before the end of the nineteenth century; and at the beginning of the twentieth century new political currents (Zionism and socialism) added controversial elements. Orthodox Judaism predominated decisively among Brańsk Jews.

In a town with such a complex national and religious structure as Brańsk, there was a striking lack of assimilation of the Jewish population to Christian culture. Jews seemed indifferent to the rest of the population. They were hostile toward national uprisings and did not identify with Polish culture. Mutual contacts occurred only with
trade or during the performance of services. There was neither socializing nor mixed marriages. Christians acquired more from Jews (in, for example, food and some vocabulary) than Jews did from Christians.

In general (without considering particular and not always uplifting cases), it is hard to blame Jews for this attitude toward Christians. Closing their own community and treating everyone else as strangers enabled Jews to preserve their distinct nationality and culture. At that time this was the best pattern of survival.

Appendix

The request of Jewish tailors from Brańsk to the governor in Grodno for permission to erect the synagogue *Schneider Bet Midrash*.

To His Illustriousness
the Governor of Grodno

The undersigned Jewish tailors from Brańsk

Memorandum

The soul rejoices with the God’s gift, the fortunate birth of His Majesty’s heir the Tsarevich Grand Duke Aleksii Nikolaevich--Hurrah! Today we have unanimously resolved with the whole of our congregation to most humbly ask Your Grace to favorably receive our steadfast feelings of love and wholehearted joy because of the birth of our Monarch the Tsar in the month of August. For the further cultivation and memory of our celebration we plead you to graciously ask His Tsarist grace [for the permission - note Z. R.] to erect by us a prayer house for tailors in Brańsk and to pledge for a permit to name the altar after the Heir Tsarevich Aleksii Nikolaevich for his health and long life. We pray for the good fulfillment of our request. We estimate the worth of the operation at one thousand rubles.

14 September 1904
sec[endure] t[own of] Brańsk
the Grodno province

[42 legible signatures]