Jewish Belarus

Judaism in Belarus dates back to the 9th century. The Jewish community has made hugely significant contributions to every stratum of life in these lands.

But by the end of World War II (the Soviet Union’s ‘Great Patriotic War’), the country’s Jewish community had been virtually wiped out as part of Nazi Germany’s ‘final solution’.

Yet today, small communities that refused to die are beginning to grow and re-establish connections to a heritage and identity that was all but lost. Yiddish can be heard on the streets once more. And all over the country, locals and tourists alike are at last able to visit significant sites that are being actively promoted.

Minsk: re-birth from the ghetto

Between 1941 and 1943, the Minsk Ghetto was one of the largest in occupied Europe. More than 100,000 Jews lived within its confines in the most inhumane of circumstances. Today the Zaslaŭski Memorial marks the spot where, on a single day in March 1942, the Nazis murdered 5,000.
Around 500 of the bodies were dumped in the pit that was dug here, an act of barbarity commemorated by the bleak and doleful sculpture of a line of terrified men, women and children descending into the very pit itself. It never fails to profoundly move anyone who visits.

Frieda Wulfovna witnessed life in the ghetto at first hand. An escapee who lived to eventually tell her story, I interviewed her on a grey and snowy morning at the pit of death. Here is what she told me.

At the Holocaust Museum and Research Studio nearby, on the site of the old Jewish Quarter, Frieda and the handful of other survivors have made it their life’s work to educate and never to forget.

Located in a Jewish house over a hundred years old and opposite the site of a former cemetery, each room houses exhibits that include displays on the lives of individual families, a German military map of the city marking the ghetto boundaries, photographs of the Maly Trascianiec concentration camp on the eastern edge of the city and a memorial to the 33,000 Jews transported here by the Nazis from all over Europe.

Minsk also has a Museum of Jewish History and Culture situated on the Minsk Jewish Campus, where more than 10,000 artefacts have been collected for display.

At long last, the state appears to be acknowledging the significance of its Jewish heritage, though a cynic would say this has more to do with the exploitation of an opportunity to promote tourism abroad. Either way, plans are afoot to develop the memorial complex on the site of the former concentration camp at Maly Trostenyets, with government funds apparently committed to the project. The sculpture ‘Memory Gate’ on the site is both harrowing and deeply moving.
Brest: a race against time

In 1921 a relief programme initiated by American philanthropist Felix Warburg financed the construction of a new Brest suburb to accommodate homeless Jewish war veterans, their families and orphaned children following the privations of World War I, adjoining a Jewish cemetery established in the 1830s.

By the end of the Nazi occupation in 1944 only 19 Jews remained out of a pre-war community of around 26,000. First the Nazis then the Communists desecrated the cemetery, the gravestones either destroyed or used as hardcore in construction.

During significant building works in recent times, the remaining Warburg houses have been bulldozed one by one. Less than a handful remain. Meanwhile, the digging of foundations for a new supermarket has unearthed hundreds of gravestones.

The small Jewish community here is working tirelessly to preserve all that remains, but the clock is ticking. In Israel, urgent discussions have been held in the Knesset itself. And at present, over 1,200 headstones have been recovered from the building site and are presently stored for safe-keeping under the arches of Brest hero-fortress.

The city’s tiny but informative Holocaust Museum displays a model of the original Warburg suburb. Nearby stands the bust of Menachem Begin, the sixth prime minister of Israel, who was born in Brest in 1913.

 Unexpectedly, one of the most poignant of the Jewish sites here lies within the curtilage of the Belarus cinema in the city centre, the location of the foundation stones of Brest’s original synagogue. The theatre was actually constructed around it, the shape of the original walls being clearly visible to this day. No plaque acknowledges the significance
of the stones, but row upon row of them can still be inspected in the basement of the cinema.

Viciebsk: a favourite son

This charming and elegant city, renowned for its artistic heritage, has a special claim to fame, for ‘brilliant dreamer’ and surrealist painter Marc Chagall lived here for many years. The house of his birth (an archetypical eastern European red-brick Jewish home from the late 19th century) has been turned into a delightful museum, packed with artefacts telling the story of the artist’s life and of the community into which he was born.

Nearby stands the Chagall monument in the old market square of the Jewish quarter, while elsewhere in the city, the splendid Marc Chagall Museum and Art Centre hosts an impressive collection of 300 original works of art.

Provincial Jewish Belarus: ghosts and voices from the past

All over Belarus traces of Jewish heritage stand ready to be re-claimed, many in ordinary and forgotten locations.

While visiting the outstanding fortress in Mir, do not overlook the Jewish quarter behind the modest town square.
Only part of the 19th century synagogue remains, though a new one is in the course of construction on an adjacent site. The nearby small but charming museum dedicated to the Jewish history of the town easily repays a visit.

The forests around Navagradak formed the backdrop to the heroic activities of partisans during World War II (notably the Bielski Brothers, whose exploits are well documented in film and literature). The museum in the town houses informative and moving exhibits relating to the fate of the Jewish community during the war and the engagements led by the partisans, which made a huge contribution to the Soviet war effort.

Vetka, a small and sleepy town just 22 kilometres from the country’s second city Gomel, hides dark secrets. Behind the locked gates of a farm enterprise on the edge of town stands the privately commissioned memorial to the Jewish dead of the district, 200 of whom were murdered in this very location. A mass grave was only discovered during works of excavation at the farm.

Even now, old wounds are being reopened in Vetka. Last year the local newspaper published the names of collaborators who it alleges were involved in the murders. And only recently, building works in the town uncovered the bodies of German soldiers killed in action and buried unacknowledged where they
fell.

Behind a petrol station across town stands the overgrown and unkempt site of the old Jewish cemetery. Formerly the location of over a thousand graves, only a few broken stones and some rusted railings remain. **School Number One** has a superb **museum** devoted to the town’s Jewish community and its history.

**Footnote**

To arrange tours, visits to museums or memorial sites with an English-speaking guide and to meet community members themselves, contact British charity **The Together Plan**, working with Belarusian NGO **Dialog**. Elsewhere, the objects of London-based foundation **The Belarus Holocaust Memorials Project** are dedicated to establishing memorials at each of the 400 known sites of Nazi massacres.

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