

Belarus 110 Years Later

In 1905 his grandmother Ida left the village of Novy Svierzhan, about 60 km (46 miles) to the southwest of Minsk. At the age of 13 she set out to travel with her family to the United States of America. She never returned.

In her perfect English with no trace of an accent she rarely reminisced about her past. One hundred and ten years later at the age of 65 he travelled back to her birthplace to discover his roots and another country.

He found the places, but they carry no memories. He found a country which preserves [few traces of his ancestors](#). And yet Professor Krohn thought it was a trip worth making. But without a local, this would have been nearly impossible.

Belarus remains a country with little infrastructure for English-speaking visitors. The newly appointed Head of the National Tourism Agency, Veranika Darozhka, recognises the potential of 'nostalgic' tourism and seemingly has the proper experience to make it work.

Getting to Belarus

According to Belstat, 140,000 tourists visited Belarus in 2015. Roughly 70 to 80 per cent of these were from Russia. By contrast, neighbouring Lithuania accepts around 2m visitors each year. Sweden, comparable to Belarus in terms of population with 9.8m inhabitants, attracts around 5m tourists, and the UK, comparable to Belarus in size, attracts a staggering 31m each year.

Professor Krohn had to start planning the trip in advance. A journey to Belarus cannot be made on a whim. US citizens need to obtain a visa from the Belarusian Embassy in Washington or

Consulate in New York. The process requires extensive preparation and financial investment. Preparations in his case included obtaining an invitation from a former student residing in Belarus, confirming that he could stay with them. The cost of a visa was \$130.

His teaching obligations brought him to neighbouring Latvia from which he managed to take inexpensive trains to Lithuania and then to Minsk. He got lucky, as no low cost carriers will bring you to Belarus. He found ground transportation services swift and reliable. The only downside was that trains had no designated space for suitcases in them. Upon arriving in Belarus, he realised that English would not suffice. He taught himself to read Russian, but understanding the spoken language was harder.

Discovering Jewish Heritage

Novy Svierzhan remained where it used to be, 46 miles south-west of Minsk. However, for Professor Krohn there was little to discover. The population of Novy Svierzhan currently totals 2,086 people according to the 2009 census. Interestingly, in 1900 according to the International Jewish Cemetery Project, the Jewish population was 732.

Even according to current figures, it accounts for one third. That number of people must have left some heritage behind. However, there remained only two traces, neither of which well preserved. The locals easily directed Professor Krohn and his two guides to the remnants of a synagogue and the Jewish cemetery. Interestingly, everybody, even the youth, knew exactly where to look for them. Both looked dilapidated and abandoned.

The next stop was Mir and Niasvizh. Both cities boast well-preserved major tourist attractions listed by UNESCO as World Heritage sites, [including the sixteenth century Mir Castle and](#)

[a palace](#). Few people know, however, that the 1921 census of Mir showed that 55 per cent of the population was Jewish. Mir or Mirrer Yeshiva was established in 1815 by prominent local Jews and gained a reputation far beyond the little town, attracting students from many parts of the world.

Except for a small private museum run by a local enthusiast by the name of Viktor Sakiel, no other places in Mir contain information about the once vibrant community. One of the four rooms in his private museum features Jewish culture and exhibits collected in the cellars and



attics of his neighbours. He works as a collector, fund-raiser and a tour guide for his little enterprise. Some of the exhibits are for sale, many can be touched, and all can be photographed.

Reworking the Past, Looking at the Future

A few Hollywood celebrities trace their ancestry to Belarus, including actors [Kirk Douglas](#) and [Lisa Kudrow](#). Many other less famous descendants of Jews from the former Russian Empire have re-discovered their heritage. However, 110 years seems too long ago for Belarusian history. Except for a few private or foreign sponsored initiatives, there seems to be little effort by the state to either preserve or feature the Jewish past of the country.

Yet maybe the government has recognised the historic, cultural and financial potential of Jewish heritage in Belarus. In early March the National Tourism Agency selected Veranika Darozhka from among eight candidates to become its director. Darozhka's profile features work for the Jewish NGO network and a fellowship at the University of Jerusalem.

In her interview with the traveling.by portal she states the following: "I take deep interest in promoting Belarus in the international arena. I understand the challenges of the current situation and have a vision of how to deal with them and move forward". Most importantly she notes among her priorities: "This is so called 'nostalgia' tourism because so many people had left Belarus in the past and have now become interested in it. Our country has a diverse, rich heritage to offer to various nations".

This rings true for many Jews in the United States, including Professor Krohn, who trace their ancestry to former shtetl or miastechka in Belarus. And while he certainly admired the nature, hospitality and culture of modern Belarus, he just wished he could see more of his own once vibrant culture preserved and featured. Professor Krohn says:

Except for the incredibly moving memorial to the Jews descending to the killing pit, there is a notable paucity of Jewish sites in Belarus. But then I expected little in this regard and I cannot say I was disappointed. The other point I can make with total honesty is that my first trip to a country in the current Russian orbit was fascinating and enjoyable in its own right. The food was good, the transport well organised, the parks absolutely glorious and the broad thoroughfares remarkably clean and well tended for such a large city.

Belarus continues to be expensive to get to and hard to get around without knowledge of Russian or Belarusian. The new leadership at the National Tourism Agency should generate much-needed initiatives reflecting historic cultural diversity and do away with the unnecessary entry restrictions.

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.

Nigel Roberts

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Belarus of Jews and Muslims

Each year on Holocaust memorial day, Belarus has its own tragedy to recall. In the early 20th century, Jews made up 43 per cent of the population in Minsk and equally high rates were found in provincial centers. Yiddish was one of four official languages – de facto and de jure – between the First and the Second World Wars. The other three languages were Belarusian, Russian and Polish. Modern Belarusian literature is unimaginable without Jewish Zmitrok Biadulia, and the

renowned artist Marc Chagall, who never forgot his native Vitebsk while living in France.

Today's Belarusian authorities like to present the country as an Orthodox Christian and Slavic nation. But historically, Belarusians of other religions and ethnic backgrounds significantly enriched the country. Jews and Muslims, in particular, have made lasting contributions to the country's history and culture. They represent tolerance and multicultural character for which Belarus is seldom credited today.

Every Tenth Belarusian Was Jewish

Today, about 30,000 Jews live in Belarus which has a population of 10 million. Although that is much more than in the neighboring countries, it is significantly less than in the past. At least a third of the population of nearly all Belarusian cities used to be Jewish. Numerous yeshivas and synagogues were found all over Belarus. Chabad Hasidism was founded in the 19th century by Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk and Shneur Zalman of Lyady. Labor Zionism was also founded in Belarus and Minsk held the second convention of Russian Zionists in 1902.

Jews constituted an integral part of Belarus since at least the 14th century. Their own cultural significance has been complemented by their role of mediators of contacts with Western Europe. They say that Baruch Spinoza, the Jewish Renaissance philosopher, temporarily hid in Belarusian Jewish communities following his conflict with his native community in Holland. There were only very limited religious persecutions in Belarus until the 19th century and the country was famous for its tolerance.

Belarusians have never displayed any religious fanaticism. For example, some decades after Spinoza, a member of the Belarusian noble family

of Radziwills, Marcin Mikalaj Radziwill – after experimenting with Christian denominations – adopted Judaism. The Belarusian national movement also generally avoided anti-Semitism; even the nationalist musician Andrei Melnikau sings a [song](#) with Chagall's text about his love for Belarus.

In the 19th century, anti-Semitism in the Russian Empire began to force Jews out of the country. Many migrated to Europe and the United States. Under the Soviets, some Jews chose to assimilate and seek new prospects in other regions of the Soviet Union. In Western Belarus governed by Poland the dire economic situation, combined with Zionist sympathies, again compelled many to migrate overseas.

The Nazis dealt the final blow to Belarus's Jewish population. By destroying Belarusian Jews and their culture, the Holocaust also destroyed a valuable part of Belarus itself. Jews constituted more than a tenth of the population, and an even higher percentage in smaller cities and towns. They played a significant role in culture and science. Remnants of old synagogues and religious schools in urban areas are a testament to this thriving period. Even today, older Belarusians remember their Jewish neighbors and some Yiddish words.

While the devastation caused by World War II wiped out large swathes of Belarusian Jewish culture, postwar Russification played a role as well. Both Belarusians and Jews began to renounce their languages – Belarusian and Yiddish – in favor of Russian. Today, Belarusian Jews are studying Hebrew, as there is no place for Yiddish in modern Belarus. Its last traces are found in the klezmer music performed by groups such as the Minsker Kapelye of Dmitri Slepovitch.

Dozens of prominent Israeli politicians were born in Belarus – Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, Shimon Perez, Chaim Weizmann – to name just a few. Today's famous Jews of Belarusian origin include the expressionist Chaim Soutine, chess grandmaster

Boris Gelfand, sociologist and political scientist Moisey Ostrogorsky, and Hebrew language reviver Eliezer Ben-Yehuda.

Qur'an in Old Belarusian

The Muslim community never reached the strength of that the Jewish population did, but it managed to make a remarkable contribution to Belarusian statehood and culture. Belarus is the only European country where numerous Muslim communities settled peacefully in the Middle Ages without conquest.

Since the 14th century, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Litva) – the first united Belarusian state – invited to serve soldiers and military experts from various Oriental lands and peoples, and sometimes settled Muslim prisoners in the land. Today they are frequently referred to as Lithuanian or Belarusian Tatars, but the generic name 'Tatars' was used quite arbitrarily until a century ago to denote many Muslim ethnic groups of predominantly Turkic origin.

They very soon integrated into Belarusian society and the only distinction that they retained was their Islamic faith and script. There would be no discussion in Minsk about whether or not a European city should have a mosque in the center – the Belarusian capital has had once since the 16th century in the district of Nemiga. It was only in the 1940's that Communist authorities tore down the building.

Almost immediately, successive generations of Muslims began to write in Belarusian with modified the Arabic script. The Belarusian Arabic script that resulted from this syncretism invented, for instance, original letters for specifically Belarusian sounds like [dz] and [dž] not found in either the Cyrillic or Latin versions of the [Belarusian alphabet](#). Due to its more precise phonetic system, Belarusian Arabic script in fact enables us to understand how Belarusians spoke their



language in earlier centuries.

Sometime in the 16th century, Belarusian became the first living European language into which the Qur'an was translated from the Arabic. There are thousands of Belarusian Muslim manuscripts – both religious and secular. Until 1980s, Muslims were the denomination with the largest volume of religious literature in the national language.

The Muslim community was famous also for its contribution to the army of the Grand Duchy of Litva. Its men were disproportionately represented in the military, until they were decimated by a series of large-scale wars with Moscow in the 17th century. Now there are only about 10,000 Belarusian Tatars. Nevertheless, when the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic fighting against Communist Russia formed the national army in 1918, it appointed a Muslim, Colonel Hasan Kanapacki, as its commander.

The Jews and Muslims serve as two examples of how different cultures shaped the Belarusian nation and were wedded to it by land, language, culture, and also fate. Remarkably, their decline coincided with that of the entire nation. Both connect Belarus to other cultures and regions of the world. Unfortunately, people too often portray the country as "Europe's last dictatorship", an isolated and hopeless place. But there is much more that Lukashenka regime in the rich historical fabric of Belarus.