

# *A Short History of Felshtin*

By Michael Nevins, M.D.

## **Pre-1900 Felshtin**

**A** Russian almanac written in 1865 describes Felshtin as being near the origin of the Smotrich River, 22 versts from Proskurov. During the 16th century this area belonged to Mikael Gerburt, a Galician noble who lived close to the village Dobroshani. He built a wooden castle to protect the citizens from Tartar attacks. The castle was named after the birthplace of the builder, Felshtinom. It was given to him by King Stefan Batoriy. In 1584 he was given permission to establish weekly fairs and trade markets and freed the citizens from taxes for four years.

Felshtin was often attacked by marauders, especially in 1615, when tartars established their camp in the area and plundered constantly. In the first part of the 18th century, the shtetl came under the ownership of the Grabitsko family. The Jewish population in the 1847 census was 1,369 souls, in 1897, 1,885 out of a total of 2,002 people. Before the emancipation of 1861, the borough also belonged to land owners, the last was Charnetskaia (nee Grabianko.) (Information in the Russian State Historic Archives, Fond 577, inventory 29, file 1670.)

A chapter in the Felshtin yizkor book by Shmuel Landau asked "How old is the Jewish settlement in Felshtin?" He recalled that the oldest Jewish cemetery contained worn headstones, the earliest being 1696. However, a still earlier cemetery that they believed was Jewish (because the graves were dug two or three times deeper than was customary and unlike gentile graves had stone markers) contained bones estimated to be over 500 years old. Moreover, a mound two miles from town was thought to be a still earlier mass grave of Jews perhaps from as far back as the Black Plague. Landau also recalled that three hundred years ago the area was owned by a Polish nobleman named Maslovsky who lived in Felshtin. This man established a butchery nearby in the town that he called *Naftolovka* after the son, Naftoli, of a wealthy Jew of Felshtin that the nobleman wished to honor. Another nearby town *Gershonovke* was named after

the Jew's other son Gershon. The descendants of these Felshtin Jews included the families Lopatin and Soschin. (Etta Soschin was raped and mutilated in the 1919 pogrom and later was a witness in the Shwartzbard trial in Paris after Petlura's assassination.)

## **The Pogrom**

Even while the Russian Civil War continued, investigating groups attempted to document the events. Perhaps the most objective was the Red Cross, which provided detailed accounts of the Proskurov and Felshtin pogroms (*The Slaughter of the Jews in the Ukraine* in 1919, by Elias Heifetz, New York: Thomas Seltzer Co., 1921). Among the survivors, testimony was provided by Landa (sic) - probably Landau, as well as Sviner, Kreimer and Schneider.

On Sunday, February 16, the day after the Proskurov pogrom, responsible members of the Christian community prevailed upon Ataman Semosenko not only to stop the carnage but to send a telegram to Felshtin to advise his troops who already had been dispatched there not to repeat the violence against the Jewish population. The Red Cross Report speculates about why this message was not delivered. (The Felshtin pogrom began at 7:00 AM on Tuesday, February 18.)

We can guess the answer from a much later account (see Shmuel Raber below, which described how the day after the Proskurov pogrom a cryptic message was received at the Felshtin post-office "that Petlura (!) was planning to arrive in Felshtin and his soldiers wanted to "celebrate".) This message was received by a clerk by the name of Zimmerman who was described as an anti-Semitic German. He deliberately didn't forward the message to the police, and the same day 1000 Jews (sic) were murdered.

A different version of this story appears in the yizkor book (see *The Demise of the Bandit Tsimmer* (sic) by Breyntze Keyser). According to this account Tsimmer was "Petlura's commissar in Felshtin....(and he) alone, brought the highwaymen to Felshteen, made them drunk and ordered them to make a bloody pogrom..."

Afterwards, he fled, but about eleven years later, Zimmerman was found in Leningrad (other accounts say that he was murdered in Kharkov, where he was discovered by a soldier who had previously lived in Felshtin. According to this story, Zimmerman denied everything, but was brought back to Proskurov, put on trial, convicted, and given the death penalty).

## After the Pogrom

During the 1920's and 1930's, several former residents visited the area. Mina Huberman was among the first to return with her daughter in May, 1931. She wanted to see for herself if the destruction was as bad as had been described. Her description, which appears in the yizkor book, describes the landsmen as "half-dead", emaciated, barefoot; the houses lacked furniture; and old people foraged for food and performed menial tasks.

Rita Cohen, a 15-year-old American girl, visited relatives in Proskurov in 1934 with her parents who had emigrated in 1905. They traveled to Felshtin by horse and wagon, and she recalls that although the natives were not starving, they lacked all amenities. Moreover, the town seemed tiny compared to the stories that her parents had told her -- the "river" was a stream, the "house" was a hut, etc.

Bennett Weinstock found an unpublished article by an Israeli woman named [Tova Perlshtein](#), who was from the nearby town of Kupel. Her article included some information about neighboring towns and cited a native of Felshtin, Samuel Raber, who fought in the Russian army during World War II and later returned to Proskurov. He recalled that when the Germans came to Felshtin in 1941, the Jews welcomed them as they had during World War I.

On the day of the invasion, Seyuma, a distinguished older man, came forward to greet the Germans with bread and salt, but an officer shot and killed him immediately. The officer was so irritated by the fact that a Jew dared to approach his soldiers that he ordered that 15 young Jews also be shot.

On Yom Kippur, 1941 all the surviving Jews of Felshtin were led to a forest 15 kilometers away (near the village Pavlovovich) and were forced to dig a large grave in which they were buried alive. After

the war, the surviving Jews erected a memorial tombstone above that mass grave. Raber later visited this site and photographed it, but the local residents broke the memorial stone and destroyed the Jewish houses so that the Jews would not have a place to return. Today nothing is left according to this account.

Another testimony found by Bennett Weinstock was an article titled "Genocide of the Jews in the Khmelnitzki Region" (Kholokost, "Evreiskii Vopros", I Sovromenoe Ukrainsko Obshestvo, Yuri Lyakhovitsky editor, 1996, Kharkov-Jerusalem: Bensieh Library). This article was discovered when the Proskurov Historical Archives were opened about 1995. The author, B.K.Zuckerman, noted that about 200,000 Jews in the Khmelnitzki area were killed by the German occupiers "and their collaborators" in 1941.

This article contained an unpublished letter by a former Felshtiner, Eugenia (Zjenia) Lvovna Shoichet, that was written to the head of a Russian government committee that was investigating German war crimes. It seems likely that Eugenia survived the War by escaping to the East, but in November, 1944 she returned to seek family survivors. The following is extracted from her letter:

"I want to tell you the tragedy of one little place in the Kaminetz-Podolsk area called Felshtin (now Gvardeskoye) where before the beginning of the war in 1941, the total population of Ukrainians, Poles and Jews was about 3,500. When the Germans came, only 8-10 families managed to escape. On July 7, 1941 the entire shtetl was occupied and as soon as the Germans came they started the bloody destruction of the Jewish population. By the time the town was freed by our military forces (1944), only four Jews survived out of more than 1,000 - 2 boys age 13, one girl aged 15, and a woman aged 25. All the rest, old people, women and children were shot by the Germans including my mother who was 68, her two brothers and two sisters and their children.

"Altogether, my family lost 17 people including 9 children between 6 and 15. Besides that, my sister and her family were killed in Proskurov. Of the Ukrainian civilian population almost no one suffered. In fact, a middle-school teacher named Feodor Kovalchik talked at a meeting and called for killing the Jews. My

tragedy is great and so is the suffering of the whole Jewish people...."

## Recent Visits

In 1996 David Chapin of Dallas Texas visited Podolia for several weeks and based himself in Proskurov (Khmelnitsky), which now is a large city of more than 100,000 (it was about 50,000 in 1919 with about 25,000 Jews). The city is on the South Bug River and can be reached by train on the line from Tarnopol to Zhmerinka. It contains 40 industrial enterprises, a theater and a Philharmonic Society. The Jewish community consists of about 100 people, mostly old. The head of the Jewish community was Michael Zelony and the town has a large and modern archive whose records are mainly from after the Russian Revolution. (address 280000 gorod Khmel'nitsky, ulitsa Grushevskogo 99, Ukraine. Archive manager: Slobodaniuk Petr Iakovlevich, phone 97799. Other archives of early Jewish materials can be found in Kamenets-Podolski.) A mass grave for those killed in 1919 still exists and is in excellent condition. Another Jewish cemetery, also in good condition, contains stones from before 1900. A description of Chapin's

trip to Podolia can be found on-line at [www.dvjc.org/history/ukraine.shtml](http://www.dvjc.org/history/ukraine.shtml).

An even more recent visitor to the area was a Russian scholar, Alla Sokolova, [alsyur@peterlink.ru](mailto:alsyur@peterlink.ru), who has researched the architecture of Ukrainian shtetls at Petersburg Jewish University. As part of her work, she has visited Proskurov/Felshtin on several occasions and found that Proskurov has a working synagogue, a Jewish school and Society for Jewish Culture, a complex of old synagogue buildings, and a well-preserved Jewish cemetery with tombstones from the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, nothing remained of former Jewish life in Felshtin except for a ruined Jewish cemetery with a few tombstones from the late 19th century.



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