

ŻYDOWSKI KONIN

Miejsce nie tylko na mapie

קונין היהודית - לא רק נקודה על המפה

דאָס ייִדישע קאָנין - נישט נאָר אַ פּונקט אויף דער מאַפּע

Jewish Konin. A Place Beyond the Map



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1. Synagogue

Erected in the years 1825-1829 on Bóznicza Street (currently Mickiewicz Street). A Torah ark (*aron ha-Kodesh*), a fabulously ornamented altar cabinet in which Torah scrolls are stored, once stood by its eastern wall. The ark came from a prayer house built by Jews from Konin between 1763 and 1776 and demolished in 1818. The synagogue was lit by splendid lamps, its interior draped with rich textiles such as *parochet*, a curtain interwoven with golden and silver threads and covering the Torah ark.



2. House of Prayer and Talmudic Studies (Hebrew: *beth midrash*, Yiddish: *bes medresh*)

This was the heart of spiritual and intellectual life of religious Jews in Konin. The *beth midrash* was visited by maggids (itinerant preachers) and acted as the meeting place for the local Hassid community. The house of prayer stored cabbalistic books, a Talmud, rabbinical Bible exegeses called *midrash* as well as other valuable texts in Hebrew, Aramaic and Polish. There were seven Hassidic prayer halls in Konin where Jews belonging to shtiebels, centers places characteristic of Hasidim, gathered.

3. Mikvah

The *mikvah* was used for ritual cleansing. Hassids of Konin visited *mikvah* daily, while other religious Jews did so at least once per week before the Sabbath. This unpreserved mikvah building was erected in the 1890s and housed at least two *cheders*, elementary schools where primarily boys memorized prayers and learned to read and write. It was also used as the headquarters of the Zionist Party.



4. Rabbi's House

Certain sources claim that the first known rabbi in Konin was R. Zwi (Tzvi) Hersz Amsterdam, who performed his duties for 39 years (1810-1849). Others state that it was Ciwi Hirsz Auerbach and that he took on the role in 1849. He was described as a man of an incredibly penetrating gaze, a holy man of profound influence on his coreligionists. R. Zwi Hersz Bierzyński, a Hassid from Kock, was chosen to be the next rabbi by the community in 1884. Jakub Lipszyc (Jakób Liebschütz), originally from Lithuania, was the fourth and last rabbi in Konin (in years: 1906–1940). According to some reports, he was known for being very tolerant.

5. Sukkah

In Hebrew *sukkah* (pl. *sukkot*) means “booth” and is used to refer to a temporary shelter constructed to celebrate *Sukkot* (the Festival of Booths) during the fall. A *sukkah* does not necessarily look like a booth, particularly in those countries where it tends to be cold during fall. However, it does need to have at least three stable walls made from any material. Its roof has to be made from plant material such as tree branches, so that it is possible to view stars through the ceiling. The interior ought to be decorated with fruit, flowers, fruit tree branches, paintings, cut-outs, ribbons and even oriental carpets. At least three *sukkot* have been preserved in Konin, including one in the old rabbi's house.

6. Jewish Library

The library housed between 10,000 and 20,000 volumes. It was originally located in the house of Mojżesz Kloc by Duży Rynek (the Large Market Square), which is currently referred to as Plac Wolności (the Freedom Square). Later, from the time of the first World War, it could be found in the house of Lipman Bułka, a speditor living on 3 Maja Street. Lastly, the library was moved to a building on Wodna Street in 1936, which was once used as a Jewish middle school. Over 70% of the library's collection were books in Polish, but it also included volumes in Hebrew, Yiddish, German, Russian, French and Esperanto. One third of Konin's Jewish families borrowed books from the library. It was used by non-Jewish citizens and Jews from the numerous neighboring villages as well. “My father would visit the Jewish library” recalls Jan Sznajder, “because it had the most interesting books that you could get.” One of the library's staff was Michał “Mietek” Ejzen.



6a. Book Collection of a Tenant from Wojska Polskiego Street

Józef Lewandowski described it in *Cztery dni w Atlantydzie* (English: *Four Days in Atlantis*) as follows: “On the opposite bank of the river, there is a three-story tenement house, the only one with running water and plumbing, property of Dr. Kabata. On the ground floor lived old Bajrach, a local wealthy man. Bajrach invited my father and me for tea one day and showed his book collection to us. It turned out that he was a collector of Hebrew old prints. He was taking out folios from the cabinet and we read the publishing dates together. Incomprehensible characters were appearing in front of my eyes, one volume had a pre-Gutenberg date. If it wasn't an error, then it had been printed with a woodblock. I was too young to assess the library, but I knew that I was holding priceless treasures in my hands.”

7. Jewish Junior High School

The school was created due to the efforts of the Jewish community, and with the support of the City Council, which sold an empty lot near the Warta River for construction of the school at the price of a mere 10 zloty. Theo Richmond in *Upoczywe Echo* (English: *Konin. A Quest*) “An architect from Lodz plotted plans for the new building, while the administration started a funds collection for the construction. Parents donated money, and sympathizers provided loans. Lord Kapłan, a member of the administration, gave out bricks. My wealthy cousin, a sawmill owner, Aron Ryczke, provided wood and other materials”. Interestingly, there was an instance of sabotage during the school's construction, accomplished through incorrect pouring of the building's foundation so that it would not support its front walls. Thankfully, a catastrophe was averted on time and the old Jewish junior high school building on Wodna Street is still used as a school by young people in Konin until this day.



8. Grammar School on Mickiewicza Street

This school was attended by Jewish students. Józef Lewandowski (Izaak Lipszyc) was one of its graduates and Janina Ryczke was one of the teachers working there. Both survived the World War II. Janina Ryczke, the wife of the sawmill owner, emigrated to Israel, while Józef Lewandowski moved to Sweden after 1968, where he became a professor at the University of Uppsala. In a documentary *Moja Atlantyda* (English: *My Atlantis*) directed by Andrzej Moś, Józef Lewandowski says: “It was a public school. It was for Jewish children, but it wasn't a Jewish school. They didn't teach us either Jewish or Hebrew in there. We were taught exclusively in Polish. The school was no different from other schools in Konin besides the fact that we did not attend it on Saturdays.”

9. Potters' Square (Yiddish: Teper Mark; Currently: Castle Square)

This was the center of Jewish Konin, “dos jidysh winkl” (English: a Jewish corner). It was densely built-up with Jewish houses, stores and stalls. Teper Mark was busiest on Friday mornings, when both Jewish and non-Jewish customers would buy fish. Moreover, once per month a fair was organized in Konin to which merchants would travel from cities dozens of miles away. During the monthly fairs, the market was full of people, with lines of stalls and booths stretching as far as the Warta's riverbank, where horse trading was carried out. This kind of Teper Mark, bustling and emanating the scents of Jewish cuisine, is what Janina Lewandowska, the mother of our interlocutor, remembered. Another resident of Konin, Józef Lewandowski (Izaak Lipszyc) recalled it in a similar manner in *Cztery dni w Atlantydzie* (English: *Four Days in Atlantis*): “Before the war every store and grocery store had its own smell. Cinnamon stores were

not a literary invention, but really existed, with all of their big and small dramas. The busiest street in town was Kramowa Street. Short, but loaded with houses. Before the war Kramowa would only quiet down after all the stores closed. Or on Friday night, when the Saturday's calm took over."

10. Craftsmen, including:

10a. Ejzen's furrier's workshop

10b. Lipszyc's upholstery shop

11. Majer Juda Ejzen, attorney

During the 1930s over 30% of craft workshops in Konin were Jewish. At the time, the Society of Small Jewish Retailers and Traders had 150 members in Konin. Among the craftsmen were Lipszyc, an upholster and the father of Józef Lewandowski (Izaak Lipszyc), and Mojżesz Abram Ejzen, a furrier. Lipszyc's workshop was located first on Wodna Street, then inside the house of Liskiewiczowa, an apothecarian, on 5 Zielona Street (later known as 8 11 Listopada Street, or: 11 Listopada Street No. 8, currently Wiosny Ludów Street). Finally, it was moved to the rabbi's house. Ejzens' house and the furrier's workshop were located near the Potters' Square (Teper Mark, today known as the Castle Square), by 10 Bóźnicza Street (currently 7 Mickiewicza Street), in front of the *mikvah*. Despite being raised in poverty, all children from the Ejzen family grew up to be educated. One of the sons, Majer Juda, became an attorney. He married Magdalena Leszczyńska and lived at 13 11 Listopada Street (or: 11 Listopada Street No. 13, currently known as Wiosny Ludów Street), near the city hall. "My grandma, Madzia, fell in love terribly with Ejzen, who was from a poor family," Dorota Merlak recalls. "My great-grandfather, Majer "Markus" Leszczyński, got her out of Konin for one year. They traveled during this time. When they returned, my grandma married my grandpa anyway. This was 1928. During those times education was starting to matter. And the Ejzens were well-educated."

12. The Story of a Certain Mezuzah

Mezuzah is a piece parchment (*klaf*) inscribed with two excerpts from Torah, rolled up and placed in a decorative case fitted on the outer, right side of the door frame. A religious Jew, while crossing the threshold, should show their respect by touching the *mezuzah* case with their right hand, then kissing the fingers which touched the holy scripture.

In 1972, the building by 1-3 3 Maja Street (or: 3 Maja Street No. 1-3, referred to at the time as Armii Czerwonej Street) was under renovation. Mr. Jan Szatkowski, a next-door neighbor, decided to chop up a discarded door frame. The axe rebounded on a metallic object hidden inside the wood. A small container was concealing a *mezuzah* that Mr. Szatkowski's son, Grzegorz would keep for the next 50 years. In 2021 he gave it over to the Municipal Public Library.

13a. Room of a Kosher Butcher (shochet) (Yiddish: szojchet)

13b. Lodging House

A *shochet* performed ritual slaughter of animals (*shechita*), ensuring that the meat derived from them was kosher. He was employed by the Jewish community and in order to carry out his duties had to certify himself with a special document issued by rabbinical authorities. The poultry slaughterhouse and the butcher's room were located by 3 Niecała Street. In 1919, a lodging house for poor, visiting Jews operated at the same address.

14a. New Jewish Cemetery

14b. Old Jewish Cemetery

After the new cemetery on Nadrzeczna Street, next to the city park, was created at the beginning of the 19th century, the old cemetery located near the Dworcowa-Poznańska crossing soon fell out of use. A hundred years later, in 1932, the old cemetery was endangered by a nearby gravel pit and so Rabbi Jakub Lipszyc, accepting the burden of sin from violating the graves, decided to move the remains to the new cemetery. "The cemetery was surrounded by a high wall. There was a huge, wooden gate," recalls Jan Sznajder. "When I visited the park with my mom, I could see tombstones and praying Jews through the slits of that gate." *Matzevot* were often colorful, because most tombstones, especially at cemeteries in smaller towns, were polychrome.

115. Shops and Industrial Plants, such as:

15a. Lajb Zajdlc's shop, currently 20 Dąbrowskiego Street

15b. Hardware store, previously 64 3 Maja Street

15c. Mill and Vegetable Oil Factory owned by the Leszczyński family, previously 3 Dąbrowskiego Street

15d. Spirit Rectification Factory owned by the Waldman and Szpilfogel families, previously 60/68 3 Maja Street



15e. Furniture Factory, previously 14 Kaliska Street

15f. Sawmill owned by Aron Ryczke, nearby the present Dworcowa-1 Maja Ave. intersection

Starting in the 1830s, more and more Jewish merchant families began to arrive in Konin. By 1856 there were around 2,000 Jews living in the city. Among the 38 merchants and stallholders united in the Konin Area Merchants' Assembly, only five were non-Jews. Enterprising industrialists arrived in Konin as well, and by 1920, 72 of the 240 registered industrial plants had Jewish owners. Among

them was Ajzyk „Edward” Leszczyński, the founder and owner of the company Leszczyńscy Steam and Oil Mills, built by Dąbrowskiego 3/4 Street. Nearby, at 64 3 Maja Street (presently 51 3 Maja Street or 3 Maja Street No. 51) was the hardware store of his son, Henryk Leszczyński. “I walked uptown, towards the store of the Leszczyński family,” recalls Józef Lewandowski in his book. “An iron store, the pinnacle of Jewish wealth. They had a phone, even a typewriter. I hadn't seen more than five phones and only two typewriters before the war, all observed from a decent distance.” On the other side of the road was the enterprise of another son of Leszczyński, a timber yard owner. When Ajzyk “Edward” Leszczyński was shot in 1907 (which happened as he was riding a coach and was most likely because of his competitors' jealousy), his three sons and one daughter took over the management of the mills. Several houses away, Lajb Zajdlcic was still running his grocery store. We know about this thanks to a signboard with barely visible writing: “Grocery Store. Lajb Zajdlcic”, fixed to a wall of a tenement house on 20 Dąbrowskiego Street, discovered by Damian Kruczkowski. Meanwhile, on the opposite bank of the river, Aron Ryczke, Theo Richmond's cousin, managed his businesses: a saw-mill and a timber yard.



16. Brickyard owned by the Kapłan family and Arie Lejb Witkowski

Mojsze Kapłan was a wealthy man. He owned Uciecha (English: Joy), the first cinema in Konin, but also an estate in Glinka belonging to his family for generations. Moreover, the Kapłans had a brickyard, orchards, forests and fields with grazing cows. Their milk was transported from Glinka to Konin by Arie Lejb Witkowski.

Arie Lejb Witkowski was a man of many trades himself. He was a porter, a glazier and a carpenter. When the right opportunity came along, he would become a coachman driving wedding guests around, or a waiter. He lived nearby *Teper Mark* (present Castle Square) with his wife and five educated children who eventually got involved in Bund. “The house of Arie Lejb became the organization's headquarters, a room for political debate and a center for the distribution of leftist books,

manifestos and newspapers,” writes Theo Richmond.

We do not know whether Arie Lejb Witkowski was similar to the character depicted in our drawing. We know he was a man of many faces. Each of them was that of a Jew from Konin. We hope that the stories shared here reflect the world he lived in.



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Photographs: 1. female students from Mrs. Komornicka's finishing school (first on the left: Egina-Ginka Leszczyńska, daughter of Perec Leszczyński); 2. the synagogue in Konin.

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