

# **They have paved your streets with your gravestones**

Zamość – The Town of L. Peretz

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**Bentzion Tzanin**

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The ancient fortress town of Zamość had a wealthy Jewish community. Before the outbreak of the Second World War it numbered 16,500 members and they were the heart and soul of this pleasant town. The town's synagogue was one of the oldest embodiments of Jewish architecture in Poland. The bones of scholars, rabbis, pioneers and fighters for new socialist ideas in Israel were buried in its old cemetery.

My Christian guide tells me how the local population looted the synagogue. When the Zamość Jews were expelled to the ghetto, a suspicious commotion spread throughout the town. Within a few hours the synagogues were stripped to bare walls. Even the Holy Arks and the 'bimot' were broken up. And yet the legend about the Jewish gold left the inhabitants no respite. It was difficult to search for it in the walls, because the Germans had turned the ancient synagogue into a store for grain. However, when the Soviet forces approached the town and the Germans abandoned the synagogue, the inhabitants went out with forks to dig for Jewish gold. They labored until dawn and came upon underground passages. It turned out that in ancient times the passages led from the palace of the Zamoiski princes to the town Krasnistaw, dozens of kilometers away from Zamość. While searching for the legendary gold, the robbers came upon these passages and found synagogue silver ware, menoras, Torah crowns, lampshades, Hanukkah candlesticks, Bibles

and various ritual objects. The Jews had apparently hidden there the property of the town's synagogues and houses of study. He told me that a great many objects were found and the robbers fought for them, even though each one got plenty of loot. The fight for the Jewish property went on even after the Red Army had penetrated into the town. The Red Army continued to dig inside the passages but found nothing more; all the property had been plundered. In the synagogue's attic there are still heaps of books without their leather covers; the robbers had torn them off. The people living in the vicinity use the paper for their needs...

On the outer walls of the synagogue one can still see a few posters in Yiddish: "Merchants and craftsmen, vote for list no.8!" It is indeed shocking to see this last election proclamation in a town where two survivors of the 16,000 Jews are hiding... And if one can still find in alien and glittering Zamość one little spark of all that it contained, it will also be wiped out in the near future; the Zamość town council has decided to turn the synagogue into a municipal museum, and of course not a Jewish one...

Zamość is a lovely town and it looks like the ancient home of knights. The city councilors with their aesthetic sense have decided to turn the old Jewish cemetery into a park for children. The gravestones were shattered by the Germans and the "democratic" Mayor has ordered that the bones be dug out and burnt. The bones of our ancestors in Zamość are sharing the fate of those who perished in the crematoria of Majdanek and Treblinka. As a matter of fact we must admit that when the authorities heard about this villainy, they dismissed the smart Mayor. However, the fact remains – the inhabitants of Zamość were given the opportunity to watch Jewish bones being burnt in public...

The new Zamość cemetery has also suffered. The graves have been desecrated, the gravestones taken to pieces and a large section of the cemetery has become a potato field. During my visit they were gathering the first potatoes sown in the cemetery of the ancient Jewish community – Zamość.

The streets of the town were paved with the gravestones. The Hebrew letters cry out from these pavestones, and I read the names of those in whose memory the gravestones were erected: Sarah Turbiner, Moziwicki, Luksenberg, Zisman and many others. Disgusting haggling over Jewish gravestones is flourishing. A Jewish marble gravestone was sold for 6,000 zloty. They are using gravestones from Jewish graves in the building of gravestones in Christian cemeteries and also in the making of whetting stones for axes and knives.

These are the bare facts about one Jewish community, about Peretz's town. And I have seen a hundred such Jewish towns!