

JewishGen CHANUKAH COMPANION



Chanukah Celebration at Bergen-Belsen DP Camp, 1945-1948. Gift of Judith Naomi Fish. 1999.P.169

תשפ"ב | 5782

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Award winning resources such as the Family Finder, Discussion Groups, and ViewMate, are relied upon by thousands each day. In addition, JewishGen's extensive informational, educational and historical offerings, such as the Jewish Communities Database, Yizkor Book translations, InfoFiles, Family Tree of the Jewish People, and KehilaLinks, provide critical insights, first-hand accounts, and context about Jewish communal and familial life throughout the world.

Offered as a free resource, JewishGen.org has facilitated thousands of family connections and success stories, and is currently engaged in an intensive expansion effort that will bring many more records, tools, and resources to its collections.

For more information, and to get started with your research, please visit www.JewishGen.org.



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INTRODUCTION

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Dear Friends,

During these challenging times marked by a global pandemic and rising anti-semitism, Chanukah is a holiday which reminds us to be proud of who we are, to recommit to preserving our Jewish identity, to appreciate our families, and to stand strong against those would seek to do us harm.

JewishGen and the Museum do this every day.

Visitors from throughout the NY/NJ/CT area – including school children – walk through the Museum's doors to learn, often for the very first time, about the hatred that has caused so much pain and suffering to our people throughout the generations - and what they can do to ensure it never happens again. At the same time, researchers turn to JewishGen with deep yearning to discover who they are, to connect with relatives, and to appreciate the value of family history, customs, and heritage.

Through it all, the Museum and JewishGen educate thousands of people each month, helping them understand the lessons and values espoused by those who came before us, and giving them the tools to transmit a sense of collective memory to future generations.

With this in mind, we are pleased to share this JewishGen Chanukah Companion, which is a small collection of historical and inspirational vignettes about Chanukah that are contained in Yizkor Books that JewishGen has translated. We hope that anyone reading this material will gain a better, deeper and more personal understanding of the lives our ancestors lived – which were very similar to that of our own. No matter where they lived, from large cities to small Shtetls, in the lands of Ashkenaz or Sephard, Jews have been dedicated to the holiday, and inspired by its eternal message that the Jewish people will prevail and live on.

The Menorah symbolizes the enduring survival of the Jewish people, and the Museum and JewishGen take great pride in keeping the flame strong and bright. As we celebrate this holiday, we hope you will join us by visiting our Museum in NY, and utilizing the tremendous resources on the JewishGen website.

Wishing all a Happy Chanukah.

Jack Kliger
President & CEO
Museum of Jewish Heritage –
A Living Memorial to the Holocaust

Avraham Groll
Executive Director
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CHANUKAH AND ITS CELEBRATION

Lezhensk, Poland

One of the most famous residents of Lezhensk (Leżajsk) was Rabbi Elimelech Weisblum (1717-1787), otherwise known alternatively as the Noam Elimelech (the name of his main work) or simply “Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk.”

From the introduction of the Yizkor Book: “Our Lizhensk was a fortress for the sublimity of the human spirit and its citizens were dedicated to that spirit. Jewish Lizhensk knew many turmoils and bitter twists of faith throughout its existence and its citizens bore that fate patiently. Its uniqueness as the treasurer of the legacy of Rabbi Elimelech, ZTZ”L, charged it with unrivalled duties and strict obligations which it withstood successfully. It became a spiritual symbol and a valuable landmark in the path of Jewish destiny.”

This excerpt on the preparation for Chanukah and its celebration comes from a longer chapter on “Holidays and Festivals” from the Yizkor book of Leżajsk, Poland. The author describes the joy of the holiday, and how “Outside it was frozen and icy, and inside the house there was warmth of the soul.”

MANY Chanukah Menoras of various types were displayed in the windows. Children accompanied their parents to purchase candles, and they chose the type that they prefer. There was no house that did not have a Chanukah Menorah burning. The Menoras were all different and of various forms; they were heirlooms passed on from father to son to grandchild.

The gentiles knew the time of the festival, and they came to town in the days prior to the festival with flax wicks and flasks of oil for sale.

Fathers would stand and unwind the wicks from the flax bundles. At the time of candle lighting they would recite the benediction with enthusiasm, as well as chapters of Psalms, and

particularly they would sing the “Maoz Tzur” hymn which was the height of the celebration.

This was a very joyous holiday for the children. The lessons stopped at the eve of the festival. They were free from Cheder, and they went together with their parents to the synagogues, frolicked about and enjoyed the miracle of the Maccabees in their own way. The first candle in the great synagogue glowed from the burnished brass candelabra and spread the light of joy to the children who were gathered around its base. Reb Yosef the shammas sung the benedictions with his sweet voice. It was pleasant to hear, and if the day was snowy, the festivities would be doubled. The children would throw snowballs at each other during the time of candle lighting.

In the house, everyone was patient until the end of the ceremony, at which time they would receive their Chanukah money (Gelt), spread out on the floor and to spin their homemade tops (Dreidels) made of wood or lead. The older children would wander around the women’s gallery and they would play cards. On Chanukah it was permissible to play cards. Outside it was frozen and icy, and inside the house there was warmth of the soul. The home was pleasant on Chanukah nights, which left impressions of light and pleasantness for many days.



Grave of Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk

Photo By Emmanuel Dyan, own work: CC BY-SA 2.5. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3765551>

On the next day, they slaughtered geese, and prepared fat for the whole year. The smell of the fat was strong. Granite bells were displayed from every Jewish window and door. On the long nights of Kislev, women sat around with their heads covered with large kerchiefs, and softened feathers to make down for the pillows of the girls about to be married, so that they should remember their mothers as they put their heads down on their warm, soft pillow. The house was white from the flying feathers, and the street from the snow and ice; this was a white world in the darkness of the exile.

To learn more about **Lezhensk**, please visit:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Lezajsk/Lezajsk.html>



MEMORIES OF CHANUKAH

Horodetz, Belarus

The author of this excerpt from the Yizkor book of Horodetz, describes his longing for his home, and the Chanukah experience as a child in this small Belarus shtetl.

In 1921, just 241 Jews lived in Horodetz (Haradzets), then in the Polesie province of Poland. Between the Wars, Horodetz Jews were fated to “drink a very large portion from the bitter cup.” Much of the town was destroyed by the Germans during WWI, who then ruled the town before it was taken over by gangs, and then the new Polish state, which introduced racial purity laws, compulsory public education, and military service. The remaining Jews in the town wished to escape “...but already there was no place to go. There was no longer the possibility of leaving and the Jews no longer had the strength to leave. The few Jews who still remained in Horodetz were the old and the children. The younger Jews had immediately gone to peaceful Brisk and began to escape to America.”

After briefly being controlled by the Soviet Red Army in 1939, the town was occupied by the Germans, who “enslaved, tortured, killed and confined to [the Jews to] a ghetto. The Horodetz Jews did not surrender but rather rebelled, sabotaged and escaped to the partisans in the forests, who were giving the Germans plenty of trouble... But Hitler was stronger ... Horodetz became empty of her Jews. No more was there Jewish charm in the old Jewish village, no longer is heard the voices of children, Jewish hearts no longer beat there. A quiet cemetery atmosphere is felt in the air, which is soaked with blood. No traveller can stay there because of the sadness which hangs in the air....it was a Jewish village and now it is no more.”

The following account was written by Tzivia Greenglass, and is contained with the Horodets, Belarus Yizkor Book.

It is Chanukah. I look at the Chanukah-Menorah with the burning candles and I long for Horodets. I long for my childhood, for my home, and for Horodets.

It is cold outside. The frost “stings.” The “Street”, the “Market”, the river and the fields around – up to the horizon – are covered with a shawl of white snow. Trees are white, roofs are white, everything is white, except for the grey smoke that winds over the whiteness.

I am sitting in Khana’s Kheder. He tells us the story of Chanukah and the revolt of the great

and in honor of this bright Holiday, he sends us home earlier than at other times.

Wrapped in coats, shawls and kerchiefs, the children run home. I don’t go home, I run to my grandfather, where my good mother, my sister and brother are waiting for me. I run and the snow squeaks under my feet and the frost nips my nose and ears.

I run on, out of breath, and reach my grandfather’s house. Grandfather, grandmother, mother and the whole household are there. My grandfather is waiting for me to say the blessing over the Chanukah candles.



The “Cold Shul” in Horodetz, reputed to have dated back to the early 1600’s

leaders, the Maccabees [father and five sons led the revolt against the Greeks in the 2nd century B.C.]. He tells the story of Hannah and her seven sons – moving us, kids, to tears. The Rabbi finishes telling the stories of Chanukah

march before my eyes. They paid with their life because they were not tempted to betray their belief and their people. Then I see Matityahu the Cohen and Yehuda Maccabee with his soldiers and it seems to me that the Chanukah

The Chanukah lamp is on the window sill. My grandfather lights the Shamash [the serving candle], sings the blessings with a hearty sweet voice, and the first candle is lit.

The lit wicks of the Chanukah-Menorah, on the window sills of houses, light up the street around them and warm the hearts of children. I stand and watch the burning candle and Hannah and her seven sons

candles are in fact a yortzeit [memorial candle lit once a year] candle for the soldiers killed in the revolt. I keep on watching, unable to tear myself away from the Chanukah candle. Then, a warm, loving hand wakes me up to reality. My grandfather says: "My child, here, this is your Chanukah money." I quickly forget Hannah and her sons and the Maccabees. I grab the Chanukah money, hug my grandfather and kiss him with all my childish strength, I take out from my pocket the tin dreidl [spinning top] molded for me by my brother Moshe, and we start playing the dreidl game.

We actually play the game using buttons that we have torn out of our own dresses, pants, coats and shirts. Suddenly – wow, the smell of fried potato latkes [pancakes] reaches our nose. We quickly count our winnings, in buttons, and sit down ready for the latkes. It does not take long

before grandmother comes to the table with a bowl full of latkes. The house becomes full of merriment; eating latkes, playing cards and Chinese checkers, and the children renew their dreidl game.

And, the Chanukah candle flickers and flickers until it is no more.

Now, whenever I watch the lit Chanukah candles, I visualize the revolt of our brothers and sisters in the ghettos, visualize our martyrs enveloped in flames of fire in the crematoriums and I seem to hear their cry: "Shma Israel" [Here o, Israel]. Yes, I watch the candles and I see memory-candles for our martyrs and dear ones.

To learn more about **Horodetz**, please visit:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/gorodets/Gorodets.html>



CHANUKAH IN THE SHTETL

Kaluszyn, Poland

“As soon as the autumn rains ended, the soaked ground was covered with frost, and the first snow dressed up the shtetl for Chanukah.”

So begins this chapter from the Yizkor book of Kaluszyn, Poland. The joys and rituals of the holiday that are lovingly described in this chapter are little different than they are today. A break from school for the children! (“The most important part of that Chanukah festivity was that I did not have to return to cheder after supper.”) The dinners! (“The smell of latkes wafted from all windows until late into the night.”). The menorah! (“As father lit the first candle, we children put our hands on his hand so that we could take part in the commandment of lighting the Chanukah candle.”) Chanukah gelt and games! (“After dinner, Father gave us children Chanukah gelt and we sat on the floor with the neighboring children to play lotteries, dominoes and dreidel.”)

These memories of the holiday include one ominous reflection by the writer of what was to come as he remembered day’s end: “The Chanukah candles flickered slowly; one by one the shutters closed, and the night enfolded the little wooden houses of the town. From a distance one could hear only the creaking of the train wheels at the station at Mrozy. Or was it already the sound of the Angel of Death flapping his wings on his way to the shtetl...”

Chanukah in Shtetl from *The Memorial Book of Kaluszyn, Poland*
www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/kaluszyn/kal255.html

AS soon as the autumn rains ended, the soaked ground was covered with frost, and the first snow dressed up the shtetl for Chanukah.

Towards the evening our streets came alive. People began to converge to the old beis-hamedresh to take part in lighting the first Chanukah candle. In spite of the everyday cloth-ing worn by the congregants, their faces reflected the glow of the festival. The small candles conveyed the message of hope...

The children were the ones to enjoy Chanukah the most. Those dear bright kids of Kałuszyn

On Chanukah night there were no cheder classes, so straight after the day lessons the children went into the beis-hamedresh, each class separately. First to arrive were the youngest children who learned the alephbeys with Reb Nachman. They were followed by the Chumash and Rashi boys who learned under the strict melamed Yisroel Dovid. The last to arrive were the Gemara and Tosafos students, those that studied under the scholars Reb Moyshe Layzer and Reb Shmul Kalman - firmly girded by gartelech, wearing flat cloth caps under which could be seen curly little payes[.



The old market of Kałuszyn

that used to walk the cold autumn night from cheder\ in torn shoes and often hungry - in the night of Chanukah they beamed with happiness, as they helped their fathers to light the candles and place them in the chanukiya that here was made from hollowed out potatoes filled with cottonwool dipped in oil. The eyes of the children sparkled with joy as they played with dreidles which used to be made of cotton bobbins.

The old beis-hamedresh looked festive with bright lamps placed in the lecterns of the reading desk. The two tiled ovens gave out a lot of heat. Even the ever-grumpy beadle, who always scolded the children for the trouble they used the cause him, now looked smiling on the little ones who took

all the seats near the bright brass Chanukah lamp.

Everybody fell silent when the chazzan, Yechiel Shmerl started to move with the shamas[light towards the big chanukiya. Hundreds of children's throats thundered: "He is coming! He is coming!" The shouting became louder as the flame got nearer. The ecstasy reached crescendo when the chazzan recited the blessings. In response came a mighty amen that resounded

like hundreds of silver bells followed by shouts of: “he kindles, he kindles! He did it, he did it!” The fired up children stamped their little feet shrieking.

The children’s joy also infected the grown-ups. You could see how the embittered toilers with faces crumpled from worry suddenly brightened up with smiles, some breaking out in laughter. Hershl Tomak and Moyshe Bedner like little pranksters have stealthily extinguished the shamas so that the entire spectacle would have to be repeated. Efroim, the melamed, the one with the bushy eyebrows and a membrane on one of his eyes kept waving his hands as if conducting thereby encouraging the children to scream stronger and louder. Even the most re-spectable members of the community, headed by the rabbi himself allowed themselves a smile, hidden by their gray whiskers - not trying to stop the kids from having some fun on Chanukah, as was once enjoined in his testament by a Kałuszyn wonder-working rebbe...

Soon after candle-lighting, the students of the Kałuszyn yeshiva under the direction of the principal Reb Tzvi Dantziger gave a performance of songs and Chassidic dances. The face of the great noble sage was pale and full of sadness. He wasn’t very keen on the latest innovations. In his splendid sermons, attended also by the youths from all movements he used to analyse sarcastically the secular cybelesation. But even he so strict and refined, used to relax and enjoy himself on the night of Chanukah.

The Chanukah nights were studded with stars. The snow glistened as if to light up God’s little acre. The trees in Royzman’s court were covered as with white blossom and the nearby brook flowed rapidly as if to escape being frozen over.

On Layzer Farber’s hill squeaked little sleighs and on the sidewalks of the main street unhurriedly promenaded young couples dreaming of their future happiness. From the party meeting halls emerged youngsters carrying books, their faces etched with hardship and meditation on the problems of the world. Life doled them out joy in very small portions, and full of yearnings they made use of such nights to let their hair down - throwing snow balls with such fervour and spirit that their pale cheeks turned red.

The Chanukah nights were bright and joyful. The smell of latkes wafted from all windows until late into the night. The Chanukah candles flickered slowly; one by one the shutters closed, and the night enfolded the little wooden houses of the town. From a distance one could hear only the creaking of the train wheels at the station at Mrozy. Or was it already the sound of the Angel of Death flapping his wings on his way to the shtetl...

To learn more about **Kaluszyn**, please visit:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/kaluszyn/kal255.html>



CHANUKAH IN MY TOWN

Dobromil, Ukraine

Following is an account of Chanukah in a Galician shtetl, excerpted from the Holiday Times section of the Yizkor Book, Dobromil: Life in a Galician Shtetl, 1890-1907, edited by Saul Miller. In 1900, there were approximately 2,000 Jews in the town, which is 57 miles away from Lviv (Lvov), and 15 miles from Przemyśl. Between the wars, the town was in Poland.

AND so had slipped away both the pleasant summer, and so the autumn holidays, and then began the gray, damp, rainy, muddy and snowy days and weeks. And then we began to count the weeks to “Chanukah”.

As I have mentioned previously, winter weather was severe, and therefore from time to time we had starving times. Going hungry was easy in Dobromil. Going a day without food was quite an ordinary matter, not counting the religious fast days, such as the Fast of Gedaliah, “Yom Kippur”, the “Tenth of Tevess”, the Fast of Esther, the “Seventeenth of Tammuz”, “Tisha B’Ov”, and also half-day fasts like the eve of each New Moon, called the “Little Yom Kippur”. Every Monday and Thursday when the Torah was read in the synagogue was another half-day fast, and so also on

certain anniversaries in the year, *yahrzeit* for a notable “Tzaddik” (saintly sage), or simply if a devout Jew felt that he had done something sinfully wrong, the first thing was to fast. [36] Even little children learned to fast early, and to brag to each other that they too were fasting. Each had to stick out his tongue to the other: if the tongue was coated white, it was a sign of not having eaten. Yes, the wintry days, weeks, months were difficult, bitter. The one compensating feature was that the days were short and we might sleep longer hours.

And so now we come to “Chanukah”.

“Chanukah” was one of the jolly holidays, with the festive blessing of the “Chanukah” candles every night. We were “davening” in the “Beis Hamidrash”. When it came time to light

and bless the “Chanukah” candles it was the fashion for the little kids to cough, to sneeze, to make a racket, to toss something at the man making the blessings, so as sometimes to silence him in confusion. But nothing was done to the kids, because the idea was that it was supposed to be jolly.

When we came home, first Father lit and blessed the candles, but don’t think it was all that simple. First of all I had worked all day, hard, polishing the brass “Chanukah” menorah and all its oil cups. My father used to make his own little wicks out of white cotton wool, and poured illuminating-oil into each of the cups, with a candle lit each night one more light, and with great sincere earnestness repeated the “brochos”, climaxing with a burst into song in his highest octave, the “Haneros Halalu, Los These Candles”. In the stove were flaming the burning logs, inside the cottage it was cozy warm. Mama had prepared mouth-watering “latkes” (pancakes) from grated potatoes. At “Chanukah” everyone played games, card games (those who could), others spun the “draydel” with the initial letters “Nun, Gimel, Heh, Shin” for “Great Miracle Occurred There.” Throughout the week the children would receive small change, “Chanukah gelt” as presents. Even the poverty-stricken Hebrew



Dobromil cemetery.

teachers used to suck the marrow of a bone, and get the gift of “Chanukah gelt” from the parents of their pupils. So slipped by the eight days of “Chanukah.”

To learn more about **Dobromil**, please visit:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Dobromil/Dobromil.html>

About the JewishGen Yizkor Book Project



Yizkor Books (Memorial Books) were traditionally written to memorialize the names of departed family and martyrs during holiday services in the synagogue (a practice that still exists in many synagogues today).

Over the centuries, as a result of countless persecutions and horrific atrocities committed against the Jews, Yizkor Books (*Sefer Zikaron* in Hebrew) were expanded to

include more historical information, such as biographical sketches of famous personalities and descriptions of daily town life.

Following the Holocaust, the idea of remembrance and learning took on an urgent and crucial importance. Survivors of the Holocaust sought out other surviving residents of their former towns to memorialize and document the names and way of life of those who were ruthlessly murdered by the Nazis.

These remembrances were documented in Yizkor Books, hundreds of which were published in the first decades after the Holocaust. Most of these books were published privately, or through *landsmanshaftn* (social organizations comprised of members originating from the same European town or region) that still existed, and were often distributed free of charge.

Sadly, the languages used to document these crucial histories and links to our past, Yiddish and Hebrew, are no longer commonly understood by a significant percentage of Jews today. It is our hope that the translation of these books into English (and other languages) will assist the countless Jewish family researchers who are so desperately seeking to forge a connection with their heritage.

To learn more, and to access the translations at no cost, please visit:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/>



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