

Ruth Leiserowitz, Tilsit and Its Jews

1.

These days, who even thinks about one of the northern most cities of the German Empire? And if by chance someone has an idea of the geographical setting of the city on the Memel, what images are conjured up? Now and then in political history, the Peace of Tilsit is mentioned; in supermarkets one of the selections is Tilsit cheese; and then there are the families whose roots are unavoidably bound up with this city and its surroundings. But with that the supply of associations seems to be exhausted. Tilsit lies behind a wall of thick fog.

In the first half of the 20th century it was primarily Germans who lived in the city, alongside Lithuanians and Jews. The city lived off of the lumber trade on the Memel. However, the golden days, when hundreds of Poles, Russians, Lithuanians, and Germans streamed to the big market days in the city, were over once the Ostbahn began functioning in the 1860s. The Polish-Lithuanian conflict over Wilna in the 20s brought the boat traffic on the Memel to a complete standstill. Many residents left the city in the 20s for economic reasons. Starting in 1933, the Tilsit Jews (as in the other cities of the Reich) were systematically driven out, with the last 300 or so being deported in the summer of 1942 to near Minsk and there shot immediately. In that moment, the Jewish perspective disappeared from the city.

Because of its location, size, and the many annual markets, in days gone by, the city was a preferred destination for sellers and buyers who came from across the border. In 1816, Tilsit counted 10,200 inhabitants and so was the second largest city of East Prussia after Königsberg. The residents of Tilsit knew Jews primarily as buyers and sellers at the many annual markets in the city. They were the ones who facilitated commerce with the east. To that end, they often spent many months in the city. These Jews, who now and then were underway with their whole families, organized their independent existence and even set up their own place to meet for prayer. Many sick people came to Prussia from the regions across the border for medical treatment, sometimes from even quite distant places, and now and then these patients died in Tilsit. So, long before the foundation of a synagogue congregation in Tilsit, a *Chewra*

Kaddischa came into being. According to a ministerial ruling, from 1797, this club was permitted to demand for its treasury a silver groschen from every foreign Jew who stopped in Tilsit. Moreover, lumber merchants, who were accompanying their wares from White Russia down the Memel, tried to spend several winter months in the city until their rafts could be sold in the early part of the year. In that sense Jews were regularly present in the city without necessarily being citizens. In 1811 there were just 13 Jewish persons counted among the residents of Tilsit. During the Napoleonic wars, there were many reforms introduced in Prussia, among them the Emancipation Edict of 1812. With this document, the Jews in the older areas of Prussia were granted citizenship. They received the rights to trade, settle, and free movement. This rule did not apply to the Jews in the West Prussian areas, as a result many of them moved to East Prussia including Tilsit. Five years later, however, the city had 101 Jews. Among the first who wanted to move into the city after the pronouncement of the edict were three brothers, Wolff Seelig Marcuse, Mendel Seelig Marcuse and Israel Seelig Marcuse from Tietz in West Prussia. They moved to Tilsit in 1812 where they had to overcome considerable opposition from the magistrate who opposed their move to the city. In the end and finally the brothers were successful. If the image of the Jew before 1812 was formed primarily by the businessmen from Poland and Lithuania, this profile changed with the arrival of the West Prussian Jews in the city.

In 1820 the community was dominated above all by Jews of West Prussian heritage, yet there were also others who came from places in East Prussia. Among those with non-German backgrounds, there was only the businessman Danziger who came from Hasenpoth in Kurland. In 1825 a Jewish cemetery was laid out. In yet the same year the congregation got a piece of property for the building of a synagogue, the purchase of which was permitted by a cabinet order. However, the petition for a building permit was denied by King Friedrich Wilhelm III in 1826. It took another two decades until finally a synagogue building could be dedicated. By 1837 an Israeli women's club had been founded. The Jewish congregation had no fixed area from which members came, nor did it require Jewish residents to be members. They had hired no rabbi. In addition to the leader of the synagogue, who filled his office without remuneration, there was a cantor or leader of song, a synagogue helper, and a kosher butcher. In Tilsit between 1820 and 1841 just three Jews (a Russian and two Litvaks) gained citizenship, whereas the number of Jewish immigrants from West Prussia was at 53.

With the beginning of the Crimean War in 1853, the situation on the Prussian-Lithuanian border changed radically. During the course of the war (1853-1856), Russia was boycotted by all sides, with the exception of Prussia. At that point the Czarist government was forced to lift its blocking of the border with Prussia. The whole delivery of goods into the expansive Russian Empire was now directed over the land border, and primarily through Tilsit. What took place was a sudden, politically undesired, and economy-driven liberalization of the border regime. Trade reached a fantastic volume. These years went down as “golden” in the history of the region. The liberalization of the border regime resulted in making the settling of Jews easier. Predominantly Litvaks moved there. Through the course of the 19th century, the number of Jewish citizens grew until it had reached a total of 650 persons in 1910.

Important companions in this development were the prudent rabbis of the district congregation. For one, there was Salomon Friedeberg, born in 1824 in Grätz located in the former Prussian province of Posen. He was active until his death in 1894 and in addition he also wrote books about the history of the city and the district. Another one was Dr. Adolf Abraham-Abel Ehrlich, born in 1837 in Mitau, who was active in the city until 1913.

2.

More and more Jews moved from Lithuania to East Prussia. In fear of further immigration after the pogroms in the 1880s in the Czarist Empire, the German authorities began to control the border more aggressively. They forced people without citizenship to leave and denied Jews the opportunity to settle there. Consequently emigration abroad increased markedly. From 1885 onward Tilsit played an important role as a stopping off point for the Jews emigrating from the Czarist Empire to America and South Africa. Thousands of Jews from Lithuania, Latvia, and White Russia spent a few days there in the city, some having medical examinations and securing food provisions. In Tilsit, they bought tickets for their voyage or they picked up the much coveted travel vouchers already paid for by relatives. Then they boarded the train which took them to the Hamburg harbor for emigration.

A new Prussian policy of deportation in the middle of the 1880s forced the Jewish citizens in Tilsit to make important life decisions: either move on or fight for their existence where they were. Those who were able, with great bureaucratic exertion, to bring it about to stay there, came to completely identify themselves with the Imperial Empire and became active in their community. However, among the young men, whoever did not want to go into the German army, they had no real perspective for jobs in Germany. So it happened that brothers such as Robert and Arthur Sladowsky took different paths. As a result, many Jewish families had numerous relatives abroad.

3.

After the Treaty of Versailles, the Memel became a river border. The little trading city, open to the world, was changed into a national border town. The political mood and contradictions intensified. Above all the Jewish youth left the city in the 30s to emigrate abroad. Their paths led to South Africa and the United States, but also to Shanghai and Lithuania. A few, such as Helga Fein, the daughter of the rabbi, successfully escaped with the so-called children's transports to England. In the luggage for her flight she had many ambivalent memories: Mr. Chassman remembers to this day that the house of his father, the lumber merchant Abraham Chassman, on the Mittelstr. 2a, was watched over by the police beginning in 1933. This was ordered by the police chief of the city who was friends with the father. But then after pressure from the authorities, the chief had to withdraw the policemen. He counseled the father to go to Lithuania "until the hubbub was over". The parents died in the Kaunas ghetto as well as the other Jewish citizens who had fled over the nearby border. For example, there was the lawyer Max Sandelowski and his wife Irene. A few children, such as Gerd Matheus, son of the dentist, have never been able to find out what happened to their parents.

On May 17, 1939, in all of East Prussia, there were still 3,169 Jews. By the end of August 1941, barely 600 still lived in the governmental district Gumbinnen. In the autumn of 1941, citizenship was taken away from German Jews. In June 1942 a deportation began in East Prussia. On June 24, 1942 the first trains from the different East Prussian cities went to Minsk. Most probably they were linked up to a transport train on the border of the Reich. There followed in August 1942 and in March 1943 transports to Theresienstadt.

4.

In June 1941, as the Germany army unleashed the war against Soviet power and German units marched through Tilsit on the way to the Lithuanian Soviet Republic, they were followed on foot by Tilsit SS-men. In the first days and weeks of the German occupation, they regularly crossed the border, went into the Lithuanian towns near the border (Garsden, Krottingen, and Polangen) and murdered the Jewish populations there. This happened in order to “cleanse” the border area. Many thousands of murders were attributed to the so-called “Tilsit Deployment Commandos” under their leader Hans-Joachim Böhme. At the same time, as the SS-men almost daily went over the Memel bridge in the direction of Lithuania, there still existed the remnants of the Jewish community in Tilsit. The texts of the sermons of the rabbi Benno Fein which remain, witness to the fact that the Jews knew about the murders. There must have been many in Tilsit who heard of these events on the other side of the border and spoke about them with a hand covering their mouths. Nevertheless, these deeds did not seem to be associated for them with the name of their city. They were apparently “extraterritorial” horrors since they were played out on the other side of the border. The name “Tilsit Deployment Commando” did not get into the press until 1957/58. The trial that took place at that time in the court at Ulm against ten members of the Deployment Commando from Stapo and SD Tilsit was the first proceeding in which German judges were to find Germans guilty of shooting Jews on the other side of the front, quite near the German border. This event placed a large black mark on the memories of the people of Tilsit, which up to that point had been unclouded. In these years the memories of their city and home became tarnished for the people of Tilsit. For a while they were at a loss for words and of memories in Tilsit.

5.

The exhibit shows many pictures of the active citizens in the city of Tilsit who contributed in an essential way to the prosperity of the city and its niveau. On the other hand, we see as well the life stories sketched out in which Tilsit offered a short, but intensive stopping off point. Tilsit's name had been burned into Jewish memory in many ways. On the one hand in the collective memory as the point of origin of an awful series of murders in the year 1941. Tilsit as a place in the memories of individuals has up until now not really left the private space. Only a few individual person have laid open their connection to the city, primarily through things they have produced. As the composer Abel Ehrlich said in

1996: "...I was born in Cranz in 1915, and lived the first 14 years of my life in Tilsit, then 4 years in Königsberg to finish high school, then emigration in 1934. For the Jews at that time there was no hope in Germany. Since 1939 I have lived in the land that 9 years later would become Israel... It was for me also the fashion of a trip with a "time machine" back 64 years to when I left Tilsit. This – this shock – is the one determinative thing that is autobiographical in this composition (the chamber quartette: "My Trip to Tilsit.") During the planning of the composition, I thought as well about two great men of East Prussia who with their spirit have changed the world: Kant ("...the starry skies above and the moral law within.") and Copernicus. And the yearly spring event of nature in Tilsit when the ice covered Memel breaks up into huge blocks of ice with thundering cracks under the Luisenbrücke. I saw and heard this with awe as a child – and now as a symbol of all the dramatic events in world history of the last 64 years that have occurred up to the point of my trip back to Tilsit and the spiritual impact—which I experienced with it.

Now for the first time, with the strong help of the descendents of the Jews who were in the District Synagogue Congregation, the place the city has had in the respective family histories can be shown and presented. This has been made possible above all by the city museum of what is today Sovetsk, allowing the presentation of this exhibit. Helping as well are the descendents of families who have shared their family memorabilia, have sent photos, and even made the journey to see with their own eyes the place of their forbearers.

All of these people deserve our thanks. Finally, after almost 60 years, the Jews have once again returned to be a part of the history of the city.