

Lyakhovichi, Home to our Busel Ancestors

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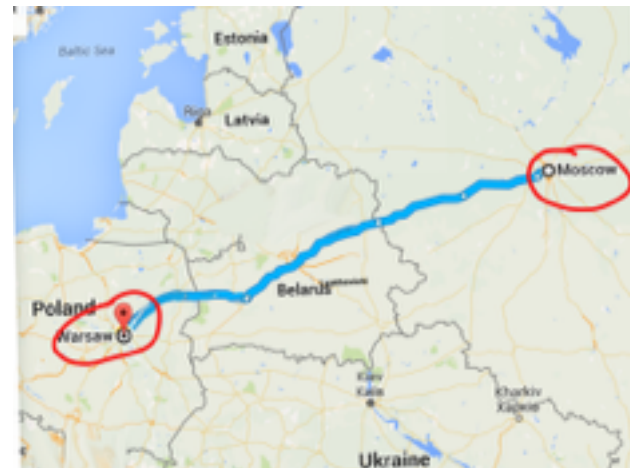
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Lyakhovichi was a small Jewish shtetl in Eastern Europe ruled by four different nations over the years. The town still exists, but it is no longer a Jewish shtetl. In its earliest days it was part of the Lithuania. Later, in 1772, because of various agreements and partitions among Eastern and Central European countries it was part of Poland. Then in 1795, when Poland was partitioned once again, it became part of Russia. During the Second World War the Jews of the town either left or were killed.

The very latest geographic change for Lyakhovichi took place in 1991 when Belarussians declared themselves a free country, separate from the Soviet Union. Lyakhovichi then became part of Belarus, as it is today.

These historic changes of Lyakhovichi's are apparent when googling Lyakhovichi. The town shows up under various names and spellings: Lyakhovichi (Russian and Bellorussian), Lachowicze (Lithuanian and Polish), or Lechowitz (Yiddish).

As it was in the day of our grandmother, Lyakhovichi is located on the route between the larger cities of Minsk and Pinsk, and even larger cities Warsaw and Moscow.



Because of its strategic location it has played an outsized role throughout its history. Napoleon went through Lyachovichi on his way to Moscow in 1812, and during World War I it was the scene of heavy fighting between Russia and Germany. Here is an account its World War I role:

1915. The Germans are invading Russia. Every day there continues through Lechowitz a stream of covered wagons. Without a beginning, without an end. Refugees fleeing from deep in Poland. They flee from the war. They flow through our village to the Slutsk highway. Whenever an axle breaks or a horse collapses, the entire stream halts. Goyim quickly jump down from the wagons to drag aside the broken wagon or the dead horse and the stream starts up again. Lechowitz is already used to this. On nobody does it now make any impression. (Source: <http://www.familytreeexpert.com/fte/countries/belarus/lachowicze/lachowicze.htm>)

Our known ancestors, descendants of Yankel Busel, lived in Lyakhovichi during three of its partitions. Yankel and his son Yosel Busel lived in the town when it was part of Lithuania. Yosel's children lived there in its heyday, when it was part of Poland. Our great grandfather Benis and his wife Hannah Sarah and their children lived there during its more repressive Russian years. Grandma Esther grew up in Russian Lyakhovichi, left at age nineteen, and returned there with daughter Sophie in 1901. She went back to Lyakhovichi and her family's home to wait for her new husband Solomon to find work and living arrangements in America and to send for her. Irv was born in Lyakhovichi. For specifics on these Busel relatives and their life and residences in Lychakvichi, go [here](#) for the relatives and [here](#) for an essay on Lyakhovichi.

During the Russian period, Lykhovichi was in the Pale of Settlement, an area to which Jews were assigned to live and work. The "Pale" was established by Catherine the Great in the late 18th century and the restrictive practice continued until after the Russian Revolution of 1917.



In Lyakhovichi, as in other shtetl villages of the Pale, Jews made up half or more of the residents. In Esther's time there were roughly 4000 Jews in the town, comprising roughly half of Lyakhovichi's population. The Jews ran the main businesses and many of the town's activities revolved around Jewish education, Jewish cultural rituals, and Jewish religious observations.

There were seven synagogues in the town, most located in a courtyard in the middle of the village. The Synagogue Courtyard contained two Hasidic synagogues, three artisan Orthodox synagogues (one for tailors, one for cobblers, and one for shoemakers) and the Groyser Beis Midrash a large (non Hasidic) Orthodox Synagogue. Here is an 1805 map of the Synagogue Courtyard and pictures of a few of the synagogues located in and around Synagogue Courtyard.

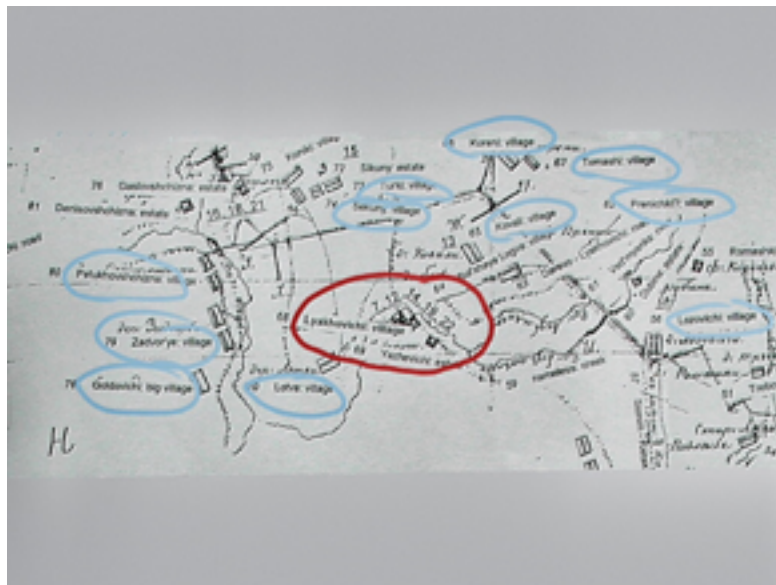


Avrom Lev, a former resident of Lyachovichi, has written vividly about the town and its synagogues in the period when Esther and her sister Eva were growing up:

Crossing a small bridge, we come out where the "Shul Hoyt" (the Synagogue Courtyard) is located, with its two chassidic shtiblech (prayer houses), the big community's Bes Medresh (synagogue; literally "house of study") and the Cobblers and Tailors's shuls (smaller synagogues). From here, Jewish prayers, chassidic melodies, Shofar blowing and ecstatic dancing and hand-clapping have been heard on Shabbes and Yomtef over long generations.

The Lyakhovichi that Esther and Eva Busel's knew was subject to the rule of a particularly repressive czarist regime, that of Alexander III. This czar who took office in 1881, around when the two Busel sisters were born, treated the Jews as dangerous enemies.

Prior to the reign of Alexander III, Jews lived not only in the town of Lyakhovichi, but also in the smaller villages surrounding it. In May of 1882, Alexander III decreed these surrounding villages as off limits for the Jews. The impact of Alexander's "May Laws" was that village Jews moved to the larger town, causing overcrowding in Lyakhovichi. Here is a sketch of some of the 50 little villages surrounding Lyakhovichi (villages, blue circles; Lyakhovichi, red circle). Although almost illegible, it gives a sense of the larger geographic community of the shtetl town and its surrounding villages.



The villages and the town were all owned by noblemen and noblewomen. In the time of Esther, the town of Lyakhovichi and 14 of its surrounding villages were owned by a benevolent Count and Countess Rejtan (also spelled Reytan). By all accounts, these members of Russia's nobility had a good relationship with the Jews of the town. They offered to help the Jews rebuild a major synagogue after its 1879 burning and they regularly attended services in the synagogue (even though they were Catholic). Did they speak Yiddish or understand Hebrew? We do know that many Jews in the town did not speak Polish or Russian, so unless the Rejtans spoke Yiddish, communication would have been difficult.

The Rejtans lived in a manor house, located on the outskirts of the town. Here is a picture of Lyakhovichi's very own Countess with a wonderful hat that shows up as

spectacular even in this unclear photo from the Lyakhovichi shtetl website (published by [Jewishgen](#)). Maybe she was dressed up to go to synagogue. Maybe she was always dressed up. After all, she was a Countess!



And what would that hat have looked like in color? Here are some possibilities.



While the local non-Jewish ruling powers were friendly to the Jews of Lyakhovichi during Esther's time, Russia's central ruling powers were not. Czar Alexander III died in 1894, when the two Busel sisters were in their mid teens. His son, Czar Nicholas II, took the reign. Nicholas was even worse to the Jews in the Pale than his father. In addition to the restrictive policies of the government there were occasional pogroms. Many Jews were attacked, their properties desecrated, and some Jews were killed. As a result of this and the enticements offered by the West, there was a large exodus of Jews from Lyakhovichi at the turn of the 20th century, our grandmother Esther and her sister Eva among them.

A walk around Lyakhovichi.

The town of Lyakhovichi was shaped somewhat like a pinwheel, with three main streets curving around the centrally located Synagogue Court and extending out to nearby towns and villages. At the outer edges of the town were a forest called Kominke Forest (also spelled Kaminker), a river then called Wiedma and now Vedma, and a train station, called Widzma. A short walk up a hill outside the town ends in an area containing the remains of a former castle. The castle served as a fort. In addition there was a separate building that was used as residential palace by many generations of noblemen spanning the 11th to 17th centuries. The last owners were the Sapieha family who owned and lived in the castle in the 17th century. (Click [here](#) for a history of Lyakhovichi castle and its owners.

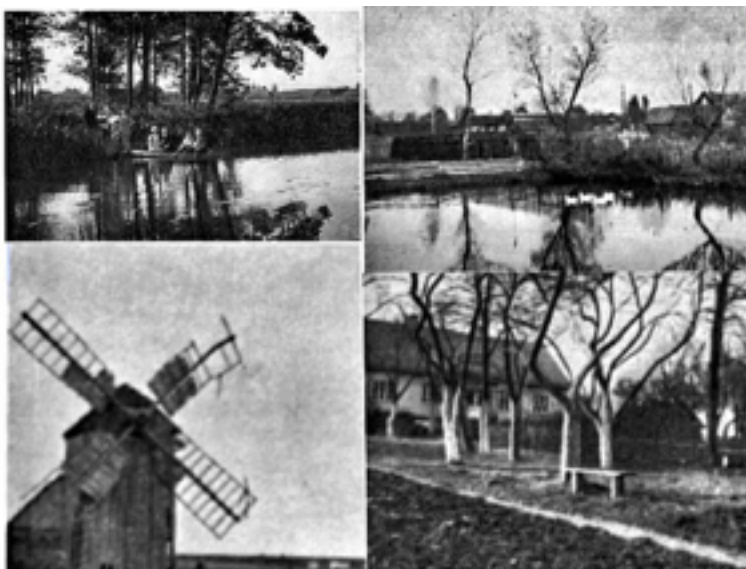


By Esther's time, the castle was all but gone, but the idea of it remained in the folklore of the community. Here is Avrom Lev, again:

Now...there rises before us our famous “mountain” which, in our childhood years, appeared so high and full of secrets. As related from generation to generation, that mountain was supposed to be the remnant of a large fortress of some Polish king.

The “mountain” felt so terribly high to all of us youngsters. When we had successfully scrambled to the very top, the view took in the whole shtetl - far and away to the distant meadows and forests. Then, the whole world opened up before us.

Here are a few other sights Esther may have encountered as she walked around her shtetl.



Esther lived with her family on Kletskaya Road. This may have been the same street that the noble Rejtan family lived. I say “may” because Kletskaya Road has its language root as Kletsk and Kletsk Road is the one that is vividly described in the memorial story of Avrom Lev. It is the road that leads to the nearby town of Kletsk. (It still exists.)

At one time Kletsk Road led directly to Kletsk town on the same side of the river as Lyakhovichi. But the town of Kletsk picked itself up and moved across the river, when rebuilding was needed some centuries earlier. The road's name still was kept and the street was inhabited by Jewish community leaders, and wealthy merchants. It had long been a home for established merchants and leaders of the Polish (Roman Catholic) community and the majority of the street in this time period, was still non-Jewish. The estate of the Rejtan family was one of the beautiful landmarks of this block.

Would Esther have known or seen or felt the presence of the benevolent Rejtan family? Avrom Lev certainly did, and he lived around the same time as Esther. One can imagine our grandma Esther bumping into the Countess as the noblewoman made her way to Synagogue. Maybe Esther got to see that hat of Countess Rejtan’s in real life and was able to appreciate it in technicolor.

Here is a picture of a road named Kletsker in today's Lyakhovichi. Is it the same road that Esther traversed when growing up? The same road where the manor home of the noble Rejtan family was located? Maybe. Maybe not. Hope so.



Another significant place that residents of Lyakhovichi wrote about and remembered was the Market Square on Bazarnayaskaya Street. The square was surrounded by two-story stone buildings housing many businesses, mostly leased and operated by Jews. These included guest houses, taverns, a horse and buggy stand, a bank, tailor shops, a flour merchant, a soda shop, a cobbler, a furrier, a bookbinder, a pastry shop, a brewery, a jeweler, a bookkeeper, a dry goods store, a cheese shop, a candlemaker, a photographer, and a tinsmith. These businesses were interspersed with family residences. For an animated version of those who ran these stores and lived on Market Square see [Avrom Lev's reminiscence](#).

The photo below shows two pictures of the town's market place, one empty and the second full of people. The peopled version is on the occasion of a 1910 funeral of a young man who was killed in a political brawl between two Jewish factions in the town.



Avrom Lev describes the macabre incident and names the major players. The young man who died was named Busel. There is no indication that he is a relative, though. (See [here](#) for an argument that the Busels of Lyachovichi were not necessarily related.) Here is Avrom Lev's description of Shmuel-Shaiye Busel's murder.

In the course of a violent brawl with his rival, Shmuel-Shaiye Busel, from the Socialist Zionists' Party, Yankele the "trouble-maker" came to the aid of his comrade, Gedalyo the Melamed's son. (The fight broke out when someone had wanted to eject Rochel Kapel, a party comrade of Shmuel-Shaiye Busel, who sold pastry.) Then (Gedalyo the Melamed's son) drove a dagger into Shmuel-Shaiye's side, causing the death of his stabbed "enemy". The incident had a depressing effect on the entire shtetl. In great grief, the whole shtetl accompanied the victim on his last journey and the murderer [Gedalyo the Melamed's son] swiftly left town in great trepidation.

Esther Busel Felson is not in the picture, since she had left for America in 1904, never to return. But she may have heard about the funeral and the murder of Shmuel-Shaiye Busel, since it was the talk of the town. And she probably knew the person Shmuel, as well as many who are in the picture. It was her community after all, and even though she left six years earlier, it still must have felt to her like her home town. Unfortunately, we have no letters between her and those in her home town that would reflect these continuing ties.

Lyakhovichi and the Holocaust

Esther and her sister left Lykhovichi in the first decade of the 20th century, before the World Wars, before the Holocaust. Had she stayed, she would have met the fate of the descendants of her first cousin, the daughter of Meier, brother to Esther's father who stayed in Lyakhovichi. This cousin, Pessia Chaya Busel married Valvel Brimberg, a Crown Rabbi of the town. Their family stayed in the shtetl and twenty-five or more of them were killed in the massacres that took place in the very same places that Esther walked through as a child and young adult. (See [here](#) for a listing of those in the Busel family tree who died.—thanks to the genealogy work of Caroline Busel and Niv Schwarz, our newfound Busel cousins.)

Below is a description of what happened to the Jews of Lyakhovichi in 1941 and 1942. They are the heartbreaking and heartfelt words spoken at a memorial ceremony in 1993 Lyakhovichi after the war was over and all of the Jews of Lyachovichi had been killed, escaped or emigrated. The words are from Moshe Inditzky, who witnessed the massacres and was one of the very few Jews who escaped.

We are standing here, on this sacred place, in which every handful of the ground is absorbed with the blood of the killed and slaughtered, men, women and children of Lachovitz Jewish Congregation. Who were commanded to take off their clothes until completely naked. Around them stood the Nazis and their Litvik collaborators and fired

on them by machine guns non-stop and afterwards threw their bodies inside a grave that was prepared in advance.

This is the history of the 20th century. It is the first time that a whole nation became victim to planned extermination. Such a horror did not happen in recorded history.

Never was an industry made for the purpose of creating a product called death. Only in the forties Hitler prepared a plan for the extermination of the Jewish people and also other nations.

52 years passed since this cruel and tragic period.

On the 29th of October, 1941, in the early morning, the City of Lachovitz was surrounded by the Nazi soldiers and their Litvik (Lithuanian) collaborators, as well as local military, and cruelly expelled all the Jews to the market center and commanded them to sit down with their hands up.

*At 8 o'clock in the morning came the command that all persons with a profession get up and stand aside. About 1,000 persons gathered and they were concentrated in the house and courtyard of Bracha Tuksinsky which was near the market. The remaining, about 4,000 person were taken in groups of about 150 persons to Klein Latwa, a distance of about 500 meters from the train station of Widzma, where there were graves which the Jews dug before their slaughter. Around these graves stood Nazi **divisions** with machine guns. Those who ran away were shot and cruelly laid in blood pools all the way to Klein Latva.*

Near the graves, the remaining were commanded to take off their clothes until completely naked. They were inspected to see if they had valuable articles and those who had gold teeth, they broke their teeth and took out the gold teeth. After each group, they poured chlore and the firing continued until 9 o'clock in the evening. The voices and screaming were heard for a long distance. They were buried still alive and the land raised up for a long time. In this way, were killed and buried alive about 4,000 of Lachovitz Jews.

We, the remnants of the Holocaust, point out with great sorrow, the fact that on the day when this horrible tragedy happened, all the world around did not raise any voice.

The next morning, on the 30th of October, 1941, the Germans came and proclaimed that all professionals who were in the house and courtyard of Tuksinsky, no harm will come to them and they should come back. Also, those who fled and hidden should enter the ghetto which was established in the areas of Shulhoiffe and Havingen, and all of them will get work. About 1,500 persons gathered in the ghetto, men, women and children. The Jews lived in the ghetto in poverty, very crowded and the hunger was unbearable. Most of them were taken to hard labor to build roads, but salary and food they did not get.

On the 20th of July, 1942, the ghetto was surrounded by the Nazi Germans and their collaborators and started to move group after group to Klein Latva, not far from the place of the first slaughter. There, they were commanded to take off their clothes and shot mercilessly and even buried them while still alive.

After this terrifying slaughter, after some days, gathered some more hundreds of Jews who were hiding or fled. After about a week, early morning came the Nazis and their collaborators to take out the remaining Jews. But this time, the Jews fought back and killed one of the officers and the remaining burnt the ghetto.

A few decades ran away to the forest and after a few months joined the Partizans and with the liberation of the Red Army, joined the Army and continued to fight against the Nazi beast and to revenge the blood of Holocaust victims. A large number of them were killed during the fighting.

I, Moshe Inditzky, on the 25th of June, 1942, in the morning, together with friend, Yulik Rafas, fled on bicycles through Kalzek to Russia, fought with the Red Army against the Nazis and was severely wounded near Danzig. Thanks to the U.S.S.R., I and also hundreds of thousands of our people remained alive.

We don't forget and we don't forgive. The fearful torned (sic) eyes of our brothers who died and did not know why and what for. Their screaming and tears and cry are heard until now.

We did not break down in front of the helplessness which was here. We got up from the ashes of the victims and established the State of Israel, a democratic country of moral value, culture and military power.

(Source: <http://www.familytreeexpert.com/fte/countries/belarus/lachowicze/lachowicze.htm>)