

## Rzeszów

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## Rzeszów

**Name in Polish:** Rzeszów

**Name in German:** Resche

**Name in Hebrew:** רישא ז'שוב

**Name in Yiddish:** ריישע

Population Data:	Year	General Population	Jewish Po
	1757	(?)	1429
	1800	(?)	3374
	1880	11166	5820
	1890	11953	5492
	1900	15010	6374
	1910	23688	8785
	1921	24942	11361
	1931	26902	11228

**External links:** [Rzeszow in GewishGen site](#)  
[Rzeszow community book](#)

### Remarks:

Rzeszów is situated on the main road between Krakow and Lvov, about 55 kilometers north-west of Przemyśl, on both banks of the Wisłok river. The city's location on the trade route between eastern Galicia and the western regions of Poland was the main force behind its development. Rzeszów was known already in 1262 as the border town between the Red Ruthenia principality and the 'Lesser Poland' region. After the annexation of the Ruthenian region to Poland, Rzeszów was granted to the Polish nobleman Jan Pakosław, who was close to King Kazimierz the First, and in a bill of rights from the year 1354, the rulers of the city were granted various rights and Magdeburg Laws were implemented.

The main expansion of the city began in the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the expansion of trade with

Hungary. The most prominent figure amongst the city's rulers was the nobleman Mikołaj Spytek Ligza, at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ligza is remembered as a ruler who cared for his subjects. The alleviations he instituted on trade tariffs led to the strengthening of the city's trade and the foundation of several markets. He also invested in the fortification of the city, and in the organization of the city's citizens, both Jews and Christians, to participate in the defense of the city and its army. Ligza also invested in improvements to the agricultural manors surrounding the city, and in public infrastructure – an almshouse and a hospital. In spite of all this, however, the city knew ups and downs during the entire period until it was conquered by the Austrians, due to many fires that broke out in the city, the wars with the Ottomans and the Tatars in the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the wars with the Swedes at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which primarily affected trade, and internal fighting over inheritance within the noble ruling families, which at times led to true destruction in the city.

Following the Austrian conquest, the offices of the region were moved to the city in 1782. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rzeszów was already an economically developed city. The existing public institutions in the city were expanded, and several schools and a teachers' seminar were founded, as well as various factories and credit banks. No physical damage was inflicted on the city during the First World War, and it was not captured by the Russian army, but the fear of capture led to the flight of some of its Jewish inhabitants, and the city's trade was paralyzed.

### The Jews of Rzeszów

At the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there were about 90 Jews in Rzeszów. These Jews resided in homes owned by the Church, which certainly hindered their livelihood. Toward the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Jews of Rzeszów began playing a more central role in the city. Various documents indicate that the richer Jewish inhabitants of the city offered to cover the costs of upkeep for roads and bridges in the city. At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Jewish community of the city became more established: a baroque-style, brick synagogue was constructed for the community's use, and an entire street called 'the Jews' street' in the old part of the city reflected their presence.

The noble ruler of the city at the time, Jiří Ligenza, who was a devout Catholic, believed that the Jews and other ethnic minorities should be responsible for making up the deficits in the country's budget, and enacted this belief in Rzeszów. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Jews were responsible for all of the city's debts, and special taxes were also levied on them. By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Jews formed a majority of the inhabitants of the new city of Rzeszów. Jews were expected to participate in the defense of the city, and every Jewish man was required to own a rifle and to participate in military training. The synagogue itself was transformed into a type of fortress for the defense of the city. The Jews were required to share equally in the costs of upkeep of the roads, the bridges and the city fortifications with the Christian citizens of the city.

During the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries there was a significant change to the living conditions of the Jews of Rzeszów. Jews were first permitted to purchase homes in Rzeszów's old city, and due to the unstable relationship between the Christian citizens of the city and the city castle, inhabitants began

leaving the city. Many houses in the old city were not maintained, and some even collapsed, which presented an opportunity for the Jews to purchase houses in this part of the city. By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Jews had bought about 26 homes in the old city and were in control of most of the trade therein. In addition, from the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish merchants began establishing wide-ranging trade relationships with other countries: They were involved in import from the east – from Hungary, Wallachia and the Ottoman Empire, and from the west – from Krakow and the big European markets. From the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Rzeszów had close trade relations with the large trading fairs of Danzig and Breslow, and the Jews played a central role in this branch of trade. 412 out of Rzeszów's 473 tradesmen were Jews. Jews also began to play a larger role in the various artisanal unions, and some even received the title of 'artisan,' which enabled them to operate independent businesses in the city. The majority of retail in the city was also handled by Jews. During this time, the Jewish population of Rzeszów began to grow significantly, which led to a need for the purchase of more land, including for the erection of a new cemetery and its expansion in 1700 and 1705, steps which were not to the liking of members of the city council and its rulers.

In the early days of the Rzeszów Jewish community, one of the city's merchants, who also had sufficient religious education, apparently served as the community's rabbi, and received a certain salary for this work. Names of rabbis appear in documents from the years 1628, 1648 and 1653, when the work '*Petach Teshuva*' was printed in Amsterdam and described as being written by Rabbi Gabriel b. 'Yehoshua Heschel Schosberg, who currently resides in the holy community of Rzeszów.' This is apparently a reference to a refugee from the Khmelnytsky Uprising, who ended up in Rzeszów and there published a book of *mussar* arranged as a commentary on the book of Psalms. Among the city's famous rabbis were: Rabbi Jacob Reischer, author of the famous book of responsa '*Shevut Ya'acov*,' Rabbi Aryeh Lieb b. Saul, who was the head of the Krakow Jewish court and played an active role in the Eibeschutz-Emden controversy, and who issued a ban on the famous kabbalist, Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto – the Ramchal. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Orenstein of Brest and Rabbi Nathan Levine of Brody, who had previously been the rabbi in Rohatyn, were the best known of the city's rabbis. Rabbi Nathan Levine was also an important activist on the national Polish political stage and was even elected as a representative to the Polish Sejm.

Beginning in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the economic situation of the community was extremely weak, and beginning in the 1760s a phenomenon of community leaders running away from the city and not paying off debts began. After the Austrian conquest the Jews attempted to have their debts from the period of Polish rule dismissed, but their efforts were not met with success. The Jews of Rzeszów were also victims of the various edicts, taxes and employment limitations instituted by the Austrian rulers, but in many cases the community managed to circumvent various restrictions. With the outbreak of the 'Spring of the Nations' in 1848, a Polish-Jewish alliance took shape in Rzeszów, in which the Jews cooperated with liberal Polish activists. But alongside such instances of cooperation, there was also a growth in anti-Semitic episodes and anti-Jewish polemic, extending even to various blood libels. In the first free elections for the city council, 13 Jewish council members were elected, out of 36 total members, but there were cases in which the number of Jews was actually smaller due to internal disputes. In the elections of 1913, 18 Jewish representatives were chosen. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, similarly to other Galician cities, many of the city's inhabitants were affiliated with various Hassidic sects. The multiplicity of sects also led to internal power struggles over the control of institutions such as 'the Great Kloyz,' which was so violent that the city police became involved.

Beginning in the 1890s, extensive Zionist activity began in Rzeszów. A branch of '*Hovevei Zion*' (Lovers of Zion) was formed in the city already in 1891, and this event led to a series of antagonistic articles in

local Polish newspapers in 1894. In 1897 a *yeshiva* headed by a Jikov hassid, Rabbi Yekutiel Aryeh Kamelhar, who was also an historian and a modern Hassidic thinker, and in 1898 a secondary school for the study of Hebrew, '*Safa Berurah*,' were founded. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, branches of many Zionist organizations were established in the city, such as the '*Shahar*' (Daybreak) association, whose purpose was the introduction of the Zionist idea into *batei midrash*, the women's association '*Shulamith*,' '*Mizrahi*' and the '*Po'alei Zion*' (Workers of Zion) parties. In 1910, 'Maccabiah' was formed, and worked toward the construction of a general public library and reading room, and additional book-lending clubs were founded under the direction of other Zionist organizations.

## First World War

As mentioned above, the city was not bombed or conquered by foreign armies during the war. The fear of many Jews of the Russian army, however, led to the migration of many of these Jews to other cities deeper within the Austrian empire, and particularly to Vienna. With the end of the war and Polish independence, anti-Semitic episodes and acts of terror directed at Jews, on the part of locals and General Haller's troops, began. Veteran soldiers and commanders of the Austrian army formed a Jewish militia, whose purpose was to protect the Jews from the Polish militias. Jews were accused of various things, from theft and profiteering to the ritual murder of a Christian girl. In 1919 a two-day pogrom took place in the city, in which about 200 Jews were injured, the great synagogue and its Torah scrolls were defiled, and dozens of Jewish homes and businesses were robbed. Peace was restored to the city only after military backup was brought from Jarosław. The financial damage was estimated at three million crowns, and a number of perpetrators were apprehended. Some of them were sentenced to life in jail, and some to only a number of years of incarceration. Following the pogrom, the Jewish community of Rzeszów appealed to the Polish government in Warsaw, demanding an investigation, and to representatives of the United States. The American ambassador visited the city, as well as a committee of inquiry headed by the leader of the Polish Farmer's Party, later the Prime Minister of Poland.

The economic situation of Rzeszów's Jews between the two World Wars was poor. The economic standstill and limited trade was detrimental to the merchants of the city, who formed the majority of the wage-earning citizens of the city, as did the competition with Polish trade unions. The Joint Distribution Committee opened a charity fund which offered interest-free loans for those in need. After the war ended, an orphanage, almshouse, old age home and soup kitchens were opened. During this time, Zionist activity in the city grew, and training groups for *aliya* to Israel and for agricultural work to be undertaken there were organized. A branch of '*Agudath Israel*' and a '*Beis Ya'acov*,' an ultra-Orthodox girls' school, were also founded in the city. Alongside this, cultural activity in the city continued: a new community center, a public university and a sports club, '*Bar Kohba*,' were built.

## The Second World War

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Rzeszów, its factories and the railroad tracks leading to and

from it were bombed. Refugees who attempted to flee eastward were captured by the German-Nazi army, which advanced rapidly, and returned to the city after being tortured and threatened with death. Already in September 1939, the Germans destroyed the large synagogues in the city, and began abducting Jews for forced labor, abusing and humiliating them and stealing and robbing them of property. Jewishly-owned factories were transferred to 'Arian' control, and Jews from the age of 12 upward were required to wear a blue-and-white band with a Star of David on their forearms. A Judenrat and a Jewish police force were established in October 1939, but the chairman of the Judenrat and several committee members were publicly executed about three months later, on various fabricated claims, and they were not replaced.

As early as December 1939, Jews from Western Poland – Upper Silesia and the environs of Łódź, were brought to Rzeszów and placed in buildings belonging to the city's Jewish institutions. In the Summer and Autumn of 1941, Jews were uprooted from mixed neighborhoods, and began being concentrated in the ghetto, which was sealed at the beginning of Winter 1942. During this time, members of the Judenrat managed to establish various workshops and a laundromat and obtained permission to cultivate lands adjacent to the ghetto for potato crops. A school was founded, and professional courses were organized to train young people for work in the various workshops. In June of 1942, Jews from surrounding cities and towns were brought to the Rzeszów ghetto, whose population rose from 12,500 to 24,000 people. On 7.7.1942, the first roundup took place, with the murder of all the patients in the Jewish hospital in the ghetto. On the following day, the ghetto's Jews were rounded up. The old and infirm were boarded on trucks and sent to nearby Rudná, where they were shot to death, and the remaining men and women were sent to the train stations, and from there to the Bełżec extermination camp. Only those who were designated 'fit to work' by the Germans were returned to the Rzeszów ghetto. About a month later, all the women with small children were rounded up and sent to their deaths. An additional roundup took place on 15.11.1942, in which children, the elderly and the sick were executed in the Rudná forest, and the rest were sent to Bełżec. The remaining Jews in the ghetto were divided into two: The eastern part of the ghetto was turned into a labor camp, divided into a men's and a women's wing, and its western half was designated for women, elderly persons, children and anyone who was designated 'unfit to work.' At the end of August or beginning of September 1943, both ghettos were destroyed and the majority of its inhabitants were sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Only around 169 people were left in the ghetto, and they were charged with clearing out the Jews' possessions and preparing it for shipment to Germany. Some of this group managed to escape and hide. During the war, groups of Jewish partisans organized in the forests to fight the Nazis, and some of these groups even undertook successful actions against the German army. Most of the Polish population in the area was antagonistic to the Jews, but there were some 'righteous gentiles' who helped many Jews survive, including even a German factory manager, who hid some Jews in his home. At the beginning of August 1944, Rzeszów was liberated by the Soviet army, and around 600 Jews slowly gathered there, the majority of whom were not original inhabitants of the city. However, the city's Polish inhabitants were very hostile toward them, and a pogrom almost took place on June 1945, leading to the desertion of the city by many of the Jews. By 1957 there were no remaining Jews in Rzeszów.

(Roe Goldshmidt)

Sources:

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**Historical-cultural region:** Western Galicia

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