

Gombin's History from Early Times Until The First World War

Jewish Artisans in Gombin

Written in Yiddish by Jacob M. Rothbart; published in Gombin Yizkor Book, 1969

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Tailors (*Shneiders*)

There were all kinds of artisans in Gombin who lived from their labor. The tailors occupied the most important position, consisting of many families who had tailoring establishments: fathers and sons and often sons-in-law worked together. There were also apprentices of various kinds.

There were all kinds of tailors: second-rate tailors who made complete garments from cheap materials, as well as those who made finer garments of better quality. There were tailors who specialized in children's clothing, for children of all ages. The second-rate tailors used to carry around their ready-to-wear garments with them to the frequent fairs where they sold them.

There were also second-rate tailors who made garments for the various Polish sects who lived in the area. There were sects who wore long coats with vents in the back (like those worn by *Hasidim*), and the garments worn by the *Mazumim*, knee-length coats with loose pants, which were draped over their boots. Over these they wore vests. They also wore long-sleeved blouses whose cuffs covered their knuckles. The women wore short full skirts and short blouses with loose sleeves. Both men and women's garments were made from a rosy yellow material decorated with shiny gold buttons and ribbons. Polish patriots considered these garments their national costume, and even *Shlakhtshitses* would dress up in these costumes for their revels, in order to demonstrate their Polish patriotism.

There were also custom tailors whose clientele were mostly German colonists of the FolksDeutsche as well as the Swabian Germans. Among the best tailors in town were Avremele Melekhs, Yitshak Mayleks and others. They got the best prices for sewing garments to order. Their customers were the Polish nobility and wealthy *Shlakhtshitses* who lived in the area.

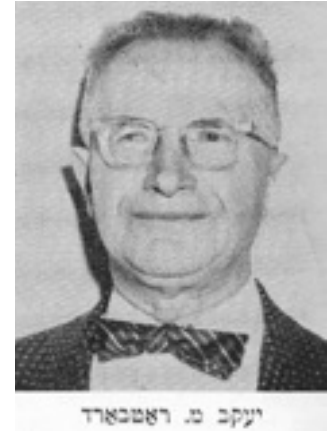
There were tailors who specialized in women's clothing. They were called 'damske shnayders' (i.e. ladies' tailors). Among them there were seamstresses who had workshops. These tailors sewed for the general public, Christians and Jews, old and young women, as well as brides.

Another class of tailors were those who sewed exclusively for Jews. They made long coats and long pants and knickers and even silk *kapotes* (overcoats) for *Hasidim*, and short-jacketed suits for the general male population.

One should also mention another kind of tailor, the village tailors. They worked almost exclusively for the residents of the "Niderung." They did their sewing in the homes of the Germans, making cheap clothing for the workers and maids, for children, and sometimes recycled used clothing.

These tailors were of the lowest class. They worked very hard all week long, slept in the barns or in attics on a pile of hay, cooked a pot of "kloytskes" in milk for their meals. Some who were very pious would take along a kosher pot from home. There were also others who allowed themselves some leniency and used glazed pots in the German homes.

On Monday morning at sunrise, they had already packed their *talis* and *tefilin*, shears and iron, thread and needles and other necessities, and set out on foot for the villages. Sometimes they would take a son along, to help out. All week long they worked very hard in strange homes, often in anti-Semitic atmospheres; often



they would hear mocking remarks from ignorant, coarse Germans but would not respond. This is how they lived, week in week out, and thanked God when there was enough work and they could earn enough to bring home a few rubles for household expenses and to pay off debts and to prepare for the Sabbath.

With the coming of Friday noon they would become restless, hurrying to get home so they would not profane the Sabbath. If God had given them a good week, and the weather was good, they could come home in time. Meanwhile the wives prepared clean underclothes and stockings. Off they would go to the bathhouse, to wash off the uncleanness of the week and they would feel elated. Coming home they would dress in their Sabbath garments and go to the synagogue to receive the Sabbath Queen.

The *khazn* chanted the evening prayers, sang the "*Lekha Dodi*", the congregation responded and they received the Sabbath Queen.

At home they would find their wives and children dressed up for the Sabbath; they greeted the angels with the chanting of "*Shalom Aleykhem Malachey Ha-Shalom. Malakhey Elyon*" (Peace to you angels of peace, angels of the Exalted One) then they would chant "*Eyshet Hayil*" (Woman of Valor), make *kiddush*, wash their hands for *hamotsi* [blessing over bread] and sit down at the table to celebrate at the Sabbath feast. The downtrodden Jews of the weekly toil were completely transformed, possessors of an additional soul.

After the delicious fish which their wives had cooked, they would sing the Sabbath hymns: *Menuhah vesimhah*, or *la-Yehudim, Yom Shabaton, Yom Mahmadiim*, Rest and joy illuminate the Jews, a day of rest, a day of pleasure. This is how the village tailors started their Sabbath.

Jewish Cobblers (*Yiddishe Shusters*)

There were quite a few Jewish cobblers in Gombin. Most of them made cheap ready-to-wear boots and shoes, They would go to fairs and the frequent "targn" which were held in town and there set out their merchandise in booths and on stands.

There were all kinds of cobblers among them: those who did cheap work and others who were more expensive. In this area there was competition from the Polish cobblers. There were a number of Polish cobblers in town. Their products were of a very cheap quality, and the peasants who came to buy shoes preferred to buy from Jews, whose shoes pleased them more because they were better made than the ones sold by the Poles. This aroused jealousy among the Polish cobblers and some of them showed their anti-Semitic poison. Some of them were close neighbors of the Jews on the street of the cobblers, for example *Khoynotski, Vroblevski, and Kovalski*. Some of them could read and write Yiddish as well as the Jews, but this did not diminish their dislike of Jews, even of those who were not cobblers

There were also custom shoemakers in Gombin. They measured their customers' feet, the customers chose the leather uppers and the soles, and agreed on a price. Here we can mention something, which is looked at as laughable at present. A new style came out which required men's shoes to squeak. God forbid that a shoemaker should forget to include the squeaky material. The young dandies would never have forgiven him.

There were shoemakers in Gombin who were artists of their craft. I should like to mention one of them. When he made a pair of boots they practically danced off the shelf. His customers used to say that his boots made their feet enjoy themselves. Finally he left and went to Chicago. What he did there I do not know.

Hat Makers (*Kirzshners un hitel machers*)

There were a number of hat-makers in Gombin. It was a completely Jewish trade. They made ready-to-wear hats of all kinds: for Poles, with shiny visors, cloth visors, hats with warm lining, which the peasants wore in winter time, as well as hats for Jewish customers, and custom-made hats for those with their own particular tastes.

Most of the ready-to-wear hats were sold on “targn”(stands) at the fairs, just as other artisans sold their wares.

4. Jewish Tanners (*Yiddishe Gorbbers*)

Some Jews in Gombin worked as tanners. To mention only a few who were well known: *Barukh Garber* and his brothers had a yard filled with large vats sunken in the ground, where the skins lay soaking. From these they made all kinds of leather. Every vat had a different kind of chemical. They said in town that they (i.e. Barukh and his brothers) were experts in their field.

Another tanner was *Mordekhai Garber*. There were others as well. There was a German family named Schneider, a father and his sons, who had a big tannery on Plotzk Street. They had a large enterprise and employed many workers, among them also Jews, who worked there for many years. They related sympathetically to the Jewish workers; there were never any signs of anti-Semitism on the part of the owners toward their Jewish workers.

There were gentile workers there as well who worked together with the Jews without any conflicts, as far as we know. Harmony reigned among them, a rare occurrence in Gombin.



5. Furriers (*Peltzen machers*)

The craft of furriers was completely in Jewish hands. Entire families were occupied in this field. To mention a few: *Zishe Peltsmakher* and his sons, *Neta Peltsmakher* and his children, *Pinhas Shakher* and others, who worked at this trade. Most furriers made complete garments to sell on stands and at fairs. Others did custom work. This was a group of goodhearted and fine people. They were always ready to do a favor whenever asked.

It is worth telling about *Neta Peltsmakher* that he was very hospitable. So too were his wife and children. It is difficult to transmit what this family went through with the many guests who always crowded their home. They did not do this for money, but only for a *mitzvah*. They never refused a poor man who came to beg for a night's lodging. All kinds of poor people used to come to Neta. They would often come on an annual basis, and go right to Neta's house, as if to their own homes.

Every summer a Jew came who was called by the Gombiners, “The Recluse.” He was always dressed the same way: a very long caftan reaching to his feet, over this a shorter one and another shorter one until he was wearing five or six. The final kaftan was the shortest of all. Older people used to look at him with a gentle smile on their faces in order not to embarrass him, but younger fellows would make fun of how he dressed. The man seemed indifferent to their mockery. He came every year, each time to the home of *Neta Peltsmakher*.

6. Bakers in Gombin (*Bekers in Gombin*)

There were very many bakeries in Gombin, much too many to serve the Jewish population alone, but they also served many Christian customers.

There were frequent “targn”(market days) when the Polish peasants and the German householders would come to town and bring all kinds of agricultural products, some a few sacks of potatoes, chickens, eggs, ducks, geese, sometimes a cow tied with a rope to the back of a wagon, or a calf bedded down with straw in

their necessities. Many were also customers of Jewish bakeries.

The Jewish bakers of Gombin also had a side occupation. In Gombin at the beginning of this century there were no proper ovens for baking bread at home. When a Jewish housewife wanted to bake bread or *challah* she had to go to a bakery. After she kneaded her dough she would bring it to the baker, who would bake it for her.

Some Gombiners still remember the hullabaloo at the bakeries on Thursday nights. Women would crowd into the bakeries and it was lively on Thursday nights or before the holidays. Some women even prepared a "roshtshine" and waited until it was baked. They spent almost all night in the bakery. At dawn they would bring home the freshly baked goods.



Most women who had grown daughters would give over the baking chores of baking *challah*, honey cake, *stunikes* and other baked goods for the Sabbath to their daughters. This leads me to tell of something that happened when the Bundist movement began in Gombin. It was not easy in such a small *shtetl* as Gombin to meet Jewish girls and carry on propaganda to influence them to join a new movement. Jewish girls were guarded by their parents, siblings and relatives. It was not customary for a Jewish girl to just meet young men. It was not considered proper. There might be gossip about her that she was a loose woman and that could harm her chances for a match. The shutters to the new times were already half open and the young people were drawn to them as if by a magnet. They wanted to know, what do the "*ahdusniks*" Bundists want? What do they have that makes people want to join them? They longed for something unexpected and looked for opportunities to meet with a Bundist and hear what he had to say. The Thursday night baking was the easiest and best time and place to meet. During these evenings the Bundist movement got many new members. A few of them became active members and were even on the executive committee.

Another side income for the bakers was putting the cholent pots in the oven on Fridays and Saturday after prayers the women came to take them out.

There were some exceptional bakers in Gombin: *Mendl Baker* and afterwards his son Adam. *Avraham Baker* and *Fishele Baker's* breads had the taste of Paradise. Many people said it was better than honey cake. *Yitshak Baker* used to specialize in baking rye bread, which was finger-licking good. Each baker had his own specialty and his regular customers. The Jewish baker families lived no worse than other artisan families. They brought up fine families and were respected in town and occupied an important place in Gombin's economy.

7. **Jewish Butchers in Gombin (*Yiddishe Katzavim in Gombin*)**

There was a considerable number of butchers in Gombin who served the Jewish public, as well as some of the Gentiles. Which Gombiner does not remember the butchers' shops with their wooden stands, which stood in front of the butcher shops most of the year? The shops were long, sturdy buildings, on the extreme Eastern side of the market place, left of the council building.

There were thirteen or more businesses in this long building, all of them Jewish butchers. Most of them were assisted by their sons and even by their wives before the Sabbath or holidays, when there were many customers.

Most of the butchers were well-built, tall, and healthy men. Their sons and daughters took after them. Most of them were pious Jews. It was rare that one heard them insult or embarrass their customers. But if a

Polish anti-Semite ever felt like starting up with one of them, he put himself in an unenviable position. He soon swore off starting up with Jewish butchers.

Their merchandise, the cattle, calves and sheep were purchased from the peasants who brought them to town twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays, the famous Polish '*targn*' (market days), as well as during the occasional fairs.

Some of the butchers used to travel out to the villages to buy a cow or a calf, bring it to town, to the town slaughterhouse, and let the *shochet* [ritual slaughterer] slaughter it. The *shochet* was usually there in the mornings.

If a lesion was found on an animal's lungs, and it was certified *treif* (not kosher). If its owner was a poor butcher who had borrowed money to buy it, it was a pity to look at the poor man. He had to sell it as *treif* meat and take a big loss. It took him a long time to cover his losses and pay back the money he had borrowed.

However, in general, Jews were able to make a living as butchers. They raised their families and after the fathers' departure the sons continued as butchers in Gombin.

8. Jewish Fruit Traders (*Yiddishe Sadovnikes*)

Quite a large number of the Jews of Gombin worked in the marketing of fruit and with orchard keeping in the summer months. As far as I know, there has been no research into the major role of the Jews of that region in the development and spread of fruit commerce (this is a separate profession, which is not part of my experiences). I only wish to mention briefly how Gombin Jews occupied themselves in this.

With the beginning of spring, and the blossoming of the fruit trees, a large number of Gombin Jews set out for the nearby villages, especially those in the "*niderung*" (lowlands) almost completely settled by Germans. They would negotiate with the owners of the orchards and make agreements to buy the fruit when it ripened and was picked from the trees. It was understood that the owner of the orchard would build a straw hut into which the *sadovnik* and his family would move as soon as the fruit began to appear on the branches. They would live there until all the fruit had been picked from the trees. A portion of the fruit would be dried and packed in sacks to be sold in the winter months when no fresh fruit was available.

Around the end of the month of May there began the exodus to the villages. The families which leased the rights to the fruit had to watch to see that no fruit was stolen, and make sure that as soon as the summer apples or pears were ripe they would be picked and sent to be sold. They also had to prepare special trays for the drying of the fruit. In short, there was no lack of work. They had to work very hard, often to exhaustion. Everything had to be done at the right time. The fruit could not be too ripe. It had to be picked, properly packed in cartons or vats, so that it was not crushed or spoiled before it was taken to the big city, mainly to Warsaw and Lodz. It took almost 24 hours before the fruit arrived there. They had to know how to pack the cartons of fruit onto the big wagons, which took them to the big city. Afterwards the *sadovnik* and the waggoner would set out on their way.

If there were not much fruit in the market of the big city, the *sadovnik* would sell his merchandise at a good price and would be pleased. Sometimes he would even bring home presents for his children. However, if there was a glut of fruit on the market, he had to sell his fruit for almost nothing. One must also keep in mind that most of the *sadovnikes* leased the orchards with money borrowed from their families or from others. Even if the price of fruit was low, they still had to sell it, because if held too long the fruit would spoil and anyway there was no place to store it. In such cases, after the hard work of the whole family and the difficult two days and two nights of travel on the wagons, which shook up their bodies, the *sadovnikes* would come home to their wives and children bitter and disappointed. It could happen that the money earned did not even cover their expenses and they had to cover the losses from their own pockets.

9. Drying Fruits (*Dos trukenen di fruchten*)

Gombin Jews were great experts in drying fruit. For those who do not know how it was done, I shall give a brief explanation and overview. A *lasye*, as it was called, was in the form of a wide bed, like the one used for sleeping. All around it was nailed a border of two-foot smooth boards. Over this was attached a thick wire

net. Then a hole was dug in the earth, five or six foot deep, over which this *lasye* was set, so that it would not fall into the hole. Near it another hole was dug, with steps going down. Between these two excavations another hole was dug to connect the two large holes. This hole also served as an oven, which was heated with wood. The heat went into the hole under the *lasye*. The oven had to be heated so that it gave off an exact amount of heat. The *lasye* was filled with plums or apples, covered with smooth boards of the same size, and the crevices covered with cloths, so that the heat should not escape. And in this way the produce was dried. The *sadovnikes* knew when it was time to uncover the *lasye* and take out the fruit that was ready and then to leave it in the baskets until it had cooled off. Afterwards they would put the fruit in sacks and it would be ready to store for winter. All the Gombin Jews who ever ate the dried plums or pears prepared by the *sadovnikes* will testify that it had a heavenly taste, which they cannot forget until this day.

It is difficult to categorize this occupation—were they merchants or artisans. However they are classified, their work was very important. They provided a necessary addition to nutrition and they also stimulated the owners of the orchards and provided an important part of their income. And our “good-hearted” neighbors looked down their noses on these hard-working and useful Jews and called them “*shakher-makher*.” As I have mentioned earlier, I am not doing a scientific research on Jewish *sadovnikes*. I am only reporting what I saw with my own eyes in my youth.

Before I conclude, I wish to add one fact: the night fears from which these *sadovnikes* often suffered. The “dear” *FolksDeutsche* in the lowland, who leased their orchards to the Jews for good sums of money, also wanted to have some fun on the Jews’ account. In the middle of the night they would cover themselves with sheets, take along their big dogs and go into the orchards where the Jewish *sadovnikes* were spending the night. They would incite their dogs to howl, run past the straw huts, making terrible noises. The Jewish children would wake up and see the white “jokers” with their dogs dancing around in front of them. The children would be terribly frightened and cry to the high heavens. After they had thoroughly frightened the Jews and had worn themselves out, the Germans would leave with much laughter and satisfaction. They called this adventure a “*wachnacht*”.

This “experience” was in addition to the hard work of the *sadovnikes* to support their families. If they would have a good season, and make a profit, they would forget all the difficulties and the fears and would wait for the next year, God willing, when they would again lease a “sod” (orchard) perhaps even from the same German owner. But if they had a bad season and were left with a loss and had to find a way to pay off their debts, it was pitiful to see. The next spring they might not even have the possibility of trying their luck (because they could not afford it). So went the life of the Gombin *sadovnikes*.

10. Jewish Boot Uppers Makers (*Yiddische Volklers*)

Quite a few Jews in Gombin worked as makers of boot uppers. Most of them were young people of middle-class families. At that time (between 1900 and 1906) there was a movement to free oneself from the old concepts that an artisan was not as important as someone who studied Torah. The young men did not desire to sit on the yeshiva benches and study until someone would find a suitable match with a large dowry with some years of free board from a father-in-law, and afterwards one would look for some way to make a living in business. Young men felt that they should look for a way of life, and many had to learn a trade. There were not too many choices in Gombin so some young men began to learn how to make boot uppers which was quite a respectable trade and widespread Gombin.

For those who do not know what this trade is, I will try to explain: A piece of wood was cut into the shape of a human foot. One took a piece of soft leather, used for boot uppers, soaked the leather in a thick oil, and then put the leather on the form of the foot. It was then worked with a blunt knife until the leather took on the form of a human foot. Then it was attached with small nails and put in a suitable place to dry out. Afterwards it was given to a shoemaker who sewed up the bottoms and put on the soles and heels and it became a finished boot. Mostly these boots were bought by the cobblers to be sold to the peasants who came to the fairs to buy boots for themselves and their children. All sizes of boots were available from the cobblers. The peasants would try them on and if they fit, they would come to some arrangement as to price. The peasants were happy to buy ready -to-wear boots like these, because they were as strong as iron.

There were a number of workshops where such boot uppers were made. The largest was Mordekhai Garber's workshop where only Jews were employed. At the time when I left Gombin, my closest friends worked there - Eliyahu Leyzer and his brother Yankele Tiber, Yosele Berishes, Yitshak Moshe Geyer, and it seems to me, also Shmuel Leyb Volman. These young men who worked for Mordekhai Garber were the most important members of the illegal Bund workers' movement. Later others joined them who also studied this trade, among them Henekh Goldshmidt, and Yerahmiel, the son of the teacher of Talmud, who had become famous as the genius of the town when he studied by himself in the Bet Hamidrash. Later he was also the elected representative of the Jews of Gombin in the Town Council.

I want to tell an episode about Henekh Goldshmidt. When he still sat in the Bet Hamidrash and studied, when the Bund organization in Gombin was still new, the Jews gave the leader of the movement the nickname "Czar". They argued with their children and made fun of the "Czar". Look at this young snout nose, the son of such and such, wants to take over the Russian Empire and become the new Czar. In this way they wanted to frighten their children, so they would not be led astray by the Bundists. But their words had exactly the opposite effect. The children were eager to become acquainted with the Czar. One time Henekh decided he would go to the woods where the Bundists used to meet, since he knew the Czar very well, since he had studied Talmud with his father. He laid out all the proofs from the Torah that the new ways were no good and would lead nowhere. Well, let me make it brief. Henekh met the "Czar" and from that day on they became the closest comrades and friends until Henekh's death in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. They corresponded with each other throughout their lifetimes.

Not only were the makers of boot uppers excellent craftsmen who lived from the honest toil of their hands, but they were also considered very important people in town.

Now that I have finished writing about the main artisans, I want to mention that there were people in Gombin who worked at other trades. For example there were some stitchers of low laced boots who worked for shoemakers, locksmiths, carpenters, turners and belt makers and saddle makers and tinsmiths (Yitshak Blekher and his father), carriers, makers of Kashe, soda water makers, those who made oil from flax-seeds, soap makers, glaziers, wig makers, egg chandlers, fishermen (quite a few), bagel bakers (quite a few), waggoners, water carriers, feldshers [paramedics], barbers, teachers, and some other trades which I cannot remember just now. They all earned their bread from their toil. Here I end my writing about the artisans of Gombin.

