

# The History of the Jews in Bernartice, Veselíčko and Zběšičky

(Bernartice, Czech Republic – 49°37' 14°38')

Elaborated by Ladislav Kluzák, expert teacher in Bernartice

Translated from the original Czech by **Jan O. Hellmann/DK**

Edited in English by **Rob Pearman/UK**

## Bernartice

Previously called 'Bernardice', this township is situated on the east and left shore of the Borovany stream and where the Písek–Tábor national<sup>[1]</sup> road crosses roads to Bechyně, Milevsko and Týn nad Vltavou.

Although the region of South Bohemia slopes down to the north, as indicated by the presence of the Vltava river<sup>[2]</sup>, the Bernartice area slopes towards the south. As a result, the Bernartice climate is warmer and more fertile than the rest of the Tábor region. This was discovered by former prehistoric nomads who settled here very early, as is shown by the many necropolises to be found in the forests.

We know nothing about the origin and foundation of Bernartice. The township today has 216 houses and 1,093 inhabitants, most of whom work in agriculture. Previously there was a strong industry turning objects out of wood<sup>[3]</sup>, but this is currently<sup>[4]</sup> in decline because there is no longer a market for it.

Jews moved to Bernartice from the surrounding villages, mainly from Zběšičky (previously called Malé Zběšičky) and from Veselíčko, where there were large Jewish communities living in ghettos. There was no Jewish ghetto in Bernartice. The first Jews settled in Bernartice after the year 1700. These were just a few families, although there were many Jews in the surrounding villages. We know nothing about those first Jewish settlers.

That there had previously been no Jews in Bernartice is shown by the fact that there was no synagogue or Jewish cemetery. Until a synagogue was built in Veselíčko, the Bernartice Jews attended the synagogue in Zběšičky. Similarly, the Jewish children from Bernartice also frequented the Jewish school there. Approximately 80 years<sup>[5]</sup> ago the Bernartice and Veselíčko Jews built a synagogue in Veselíčko, close to the regional road to Milevsko. A Jewish school was also opened at this temple, and was attended by Jewish children from Bernartice until 1885, in which year a Jewish school was established in Bernartice. By building the Veselíčko synagogue, Veselíčko and Bernartice Jews formed a Jewish community that was independent from Zběšičky; only the burial brotherhood continued to be shared between the two. The only Jewish cemetery was in Zběšičky and it was used by the Jews from Bernartice and the surrounding area. Most Jews settled in Bernartice after the year 1850, and they came primarily from Zběšičky. In 1885, the Bernartice Jews founded a Jewish school, which functioned until 1900 when it was closed down and the Jewish children then attended the Czech primary school<sup>[6]</sup>.

In the Jewish school, students were taught German, Hebrew and religion. The language used in the school was German; the teacher could not even speak Czech and pupils leaving the school were better at speaking German than Czech. This remained the case even when they attended the Czech school daily and the Jewish German school only in the afternoon until late evening. However, they attended the Jewish school more regularly and the classes were small – some 20 pupils – while in the Czech school there were up to 100 pupils in each class. The

linguistic results were therefore much better at the Jewish school<sup>[7]</sup>. The school teacher was also the synagogue servant, cantor and ritual butcher.

The Jews played no role in the town's public life, and only in later years were some occasionally to be found on the municipality council. In this period, some of them grew in reputation and esteem, and people from a wide area came to them for advice. We do not know much about their spiritual life, as there was little reverence for intellectual matters at that time. The fight for daily bread in this poor South Bohemian region required each family to work hard.

The Jews lived in peace with their gentile neighbors, and this friendly relationship continues today.

There is no evidence of any oppression from the manorial side.

The main Jewish activity in the period from 1708 until 1848 was peddling. Even peddling was forbidden to Jews until 1708, and agriculture and handicraft remained forbidden until 1848. Only after 1848 did Jews in Bernartice begin to work as slaughterers, bakers, innkeepers and tailors. They were also tobacconists and some were farmers. Also the merchants and craftsmen often had small fields, which were not sufficient for their large families. Some others had shops selling dry goods or textiles.

The oldest Jewish families in Bernartice were the Kohn, Fink and Mautner families. They lived there for many years, but today have all moved out.

Currently there are just three Jewish families in Bernartice. Both Rudolf Weigl, a merchant, and Bohumír Rubín, also a merchant, live in their own houses and farms. Regina Hofmannová, the widow of a butcher who fell in the (*First*) World War, also lives in her own house.

These are the last Jews in Bernartice, and it will not be long before they also move out, although it is possible that Mr. Bohumír Rubín may remain in the town.

## **Veselíčko**

Located in the Milevsko political district in the Tábor region, on the regional road from Milevsko to Bernartice and Týn nad Vltavou, the village is some 20 minutes from the Veselíčko–Bránice railway station. In Veselíčko there is also a large farm employing the poorest families; the inhabitants of the village are mainly peasants.

We have no documents about the origin and foundation of Veselíčko. Currently the village has 386 inhabitants and 78 house numbers (five are not registered). At the previous census, 450 people lived here; as in other South Bohemian locations, the population is decreasing.

In the past, many Jews lived here, as evidenced by the fact that there was a ghetto here – part of the manor of the knight Nádherný – while there was no ghetto in the much larger nearby town of Bernartice. The ghetto in Veselíčko already existed in 1726. That year a law was issued forbidding the manorial authorities from permitting Jews to settle, under a penalty of 1,000 ducats. It is clear that, despite this law, the Jews continued to be tolerated by the authorities as they brought significant reliable income into the ever– empty manorial cash box.

We can assume that the first Jews settled in Veselíčko in the beginning of the 1700s. This is evidenced by the purchase contract for a plot for a Jewish cemetery in Zběšičky, which was concluded in 1750 between the distiller Filip Glaser from Srlín and the knight Nádherný from Veselíčko.

The Jews were personal vassals of the manor and had to pay fees and taxes. The opposite was true for the peasants, who had to deliver work without receiving any pay.

The trustee of the manor was often the judge in disputes among the Jews, although it was only rarely that the Jews asked gentiles for a judgment. Normally their judge was the oldest and most experienced person in the community – later it was the rabbi. The Jews preferred it that way because the manorial judgments were not always just and often an innocent person was punished.

At this time around 1700, the Veselíčko Jews did not have their own synagogue or cemetery. Burials probably took place in Běchyně and later on in Milevsko. There is no information about whether or not there was a burial brotherhood. They attended the synagogue in nearby Zběšičky, which was also attended by Jews from Bernartice and Srlín. As the one hour journey to Zběšičky was difficult for older people, especially in the wintertime, they built their own synagogue 80 years ago – meaning around 1850 – in Veselíčko on the road to Milevsko. The synagogue was damaged some 30–35 years ago by a lightning strike and the damage on the walls could be still seen a few years ago. The synagogue also contained a room for the school and an apartment for the teacher. One of the first teachers at the school was Mr. Stein, father of today's magistrate counselor (retired), Dr. Stein. After him, the teacher was Mr. Samec, father of today's director of the Union Bank. Students at the school were taught German, Hebrew and religion, and lessons were taught in German. It should be noted that tradition describes the teachers in Veselíčko as excellent and very popular pedagogues. Their pupils were pleased to remember them because they prepared them well for life.

When the synagogue in Veselíčko was built, this community and the community of Bernartice became independent from Zběšičky. However the Chevra Kadisha remained common between the three communities.

The Jews asserted themselves in public life, and the manorial authority called them in to lead its production of potassium, alcoholic liquor<sup>[8]</sup> etc.

The Jews lived in good accord with their gentile neighbors. The manorial authority did not suppress them and they were free to develop culturally.

Worse was the economic situation. Poverty, especially at the end of the 17th century, was significant. The situation was not much better in later years and families found it difficult to earn their daily bread.

The main and only Jewish profession was peddling, which was first permitted after 1708; until then it had been forbidden. After 1848, Jewish tradesmen also settled in Veselíčko, mainly butchers, but also innkeepers and merchants who opened shops for dry goods. Some of the Jews were tobacconists and most of the Jewish merchants and tradesmen also ran small farms. Each of them had some fields and meadows where he kept a few cows and pigs<sup>[9]</sup>.

The largest Jewish families in Veselíčko were the Vodička families; two families by this name still live in the village. The members of one family are merchants and the members of the other are butchers.

In 1930, the synagogue building was sold to Leopold Vodička – a merchant in Veselíčko – who repaired it and converted it into apartments. The money from the synagogue sale was used to repair the cemetery in Zběšičky.

The Jewish communities in Bernartice and Veselíčko were disbanded, and the remaining members associated with the Jewish community in Milevsko.

## **Zběšičky**

The village was previously called Malé Zběšičky and is located in the Milevsko political district in the Tábor region, in a nice peaceful position on the regional road from Veselíčko. The inhabitants work exclusively in agriculture. The nearby village of Popovec has only 13 houses and is a part of Zběšičky. Both communities together have a total of 316 inhabitants. There are 47 houses in Zběšičky, as well as a large farm which, like the one in Veselíčko, was owned by the knight Nádherný. Today it provides work for the poorest families from the village.

This small village hidden from the eyes of curious tourists within a deep forest was a strong Jewish bastion from which Jews moved to Bernartice and Veselíčko. These two communities, although much larger, never had a ghetto and never had as many Jewish inhabitants. A ghetto already existed in Zběšičky before the year 1700, though we do not have many documents about the life of the people at that time. Jewish records first started in 1793. These records contain an addendum made by Christian priests back to 1778. By the first half of the 18th century, there were already many Jews in Zběšičky, as evidenced by the contract for the purchase of a plot in Zběšičky for use as a Jewish cemetery, which was concluded in 1750 between the distiller Filip Glaser and the knight Nádherný who owned Zběšičky. This was later increased from the small house to the forest. Before the foundation of the Jewish cemetery, the Jews were probably buried in Bechyně.

This Jewish community had its own synagogue. Initially this was in rented house no. 9, which served as a “communal house”. One half was the prayer room and the other half was a school. It was one of the first Jewish schools in the wider area, but the names of the teachers are not known. The Jewish community later bought the house, which was one of the most beautiful buildings of its kind. It was a wooden building; inside was a wooden wall dividing the prayer room into male and female sections. Regrettably, this small but beautiful synagogue burned down in 1866. In its place, a house was prepared for a new temple, but the temple was not built as many Jews left the village in this period. The original temple was also attended by Jews from surrounding villages, where approximately 10 Jewish families were living. It was also used by Jews from Bernartice and Veselíčko until 1850, when they built their own synagogue.

At that time more than 20 Jewish families lived in Zběšičky. Their children were allocated to the school in Srlín, but because of the distance they did not attend the school and their knowledge of written Czech was therefore poor.

The Jewish houses were marked with Roman numbers, while gentile houses were marked with Arab numbers.

The Jews in Zběšičky were in the majority, but they lived in peace with their gentile neighbors and were also active in the development of the village. They could freely develop culturally, and the manorial authority did not put any obstacles in their way.

As in other places, the Zběšičky Jews lived from peddling. With a bundle on their back, they wandered through the surrounding villages and offered their goods. They each had their own territory, which they defended against possible competitors. Some were tradesmen – mainly butchers. Later each family leased or bought a field and was active in agriculture as well as being merchants.

Until 1787, the Jews had no family names, they had only patrimonial names. By the decree of Emperor Josef II<sup>[10]</sup> they were forced to take family names and to establish records. The family names had to be different from gentile names.

In 1820 the following Jewish families were present in Zběšičky:

Kafka  
Khon<sup>[11]</sup>  
Fink  
Rubín  
Penížek  
Stránský

In 1860 the list was:

Fink  
Löwy  
Hofmann  
Fantl  
Rosenzweig

Hartmann  
Kafka  
Ferda  
Rubín

In the surrounding area, the following names were present:

Hecht  
Glaser  
Klingenberg  
Budlovský

Today nothing remains of these settlers and their ghetto. There was a house where the teacher lived and the Jewish youth gained its education, built on the ruins of the former synagogue. The owner of the house today is a bricklayer named Jan Dub.

It is already several decades since all Jews moved out of this and surrounding villages. Not one family is left. A small number moved to Bernartice, which they later left, but the majority moved to larger towns.

Traveling today through the well-ordered village, you still find many eyewitnesses who remember the time when the majority of inhabitants were Jewish. They will take you to the nearby old and almost forlorn cemetery hidden in an idyllic corner where a few old tombstones bear testament to the former Jewish settlement.

## Footnotes

1. Whereas a national road was built and maintained by the state, a regional road was the responsibility of local communities. [Return](#)
2. The Vltava is usually described as the Czech national river. It is the longest in the country and runs southeast along the Bohemian Forest, through Český Krumlov, České Budějovice and Prague until it finally merges with the river Elbe at Mělník. (The earlier reference to Týn nad Vltavou refers to 'Týn under/below the Vltava'.) [Return](#)
3. The Czech word also covers turning out of metal, but given the period and the proximity of woodlands, we have translated as 'out of wood'. [Return](#)
4. The reader needs to recall here and elsewhere that terms such as 'now', 'today' or 'currently' refer to the mid-1930s or even earlier where the source predated that time. [Return](#)
5. (See note 4 above). This means in approximately 1850. [Return](#)
6. In this Czech school, German language would not have been taught. [Return](#)
7. The tendency of Jews in this area to speak German rather than Czech led to some difficulties for them after the end of WW2 when German-speakers were presumed to have been allies of the former Nazi occupiers. [Return](#)
8. The original word is close to "fire water". [Return](#)
9. The raising of pigs by Jews seems unlikely but is as the text states. [Return](#)
10. Josef II, Holy Roman Emperor 1765–1790, was the son of Maria Theresa and sister of Marie Antoinette. An 'enlightened despot' at a time of European revolution, his religious reforms included the 1789 charter of religious toleration for the Jews of Galicia. This abolished the right of Jews to control their own affairs, and promoted the spread of the German language and culture and the wearing of non-Jewish clothing. [Return](#)
11. 'Khon' is as given in the original though it probably means 'Kohn'. [Return](#)

<a href="#">« Previous Page</a>	<a href="#">Table of Contents</a>	<a href="#">Next Page »</a>
---------------------------------	-----------------------------------	-----------------------------

---

*This material is made available by JewishGen, Inc. and the Yizkor Book Project for the purpose of fulfilling our mission of disseminating information about the Holocaust and destroyed Jewish communities. This material may not be copied, sold or bartered without JewishGen, Inc.'s permission. Rights may be reserved by the copyright holder.*

---

*JewishGen, Inc. makes no representations regarding the accuracy of the translation. The reader may wish to refer to the original material for verification.*  
*JewishGen is not responsible for inaccuracies or omissions in the original work and cannot rewrite or edit the text to correct inaccuracies and/or omissions.*  
*Our mission is to produce a translation of the original work and we cannot verify the accuracy of statements or alter facts cited.*



[Jews and Jewish Communities of Bohemia in the past & present](#)



[Yizkor Book Project](#)



[JewishGen Home Page](#)

---

*Yizkor Book Project Manager, [Lance Ackerfeld](#)*  
*This web page created by Jason Hallgarten*

*Copyright © 1999-2019 by JewishGen, Inc.*  
*Updated 10 Jun 2017 by LA*