

Jews in Sabile. Olga Aleksejeva.

Sabile – a Latvian town in the region of Kurzeme (Yiddish - *Schabeln*, in German - *Zabeln*). After the German crusaders invaded Kurland and divided the conquered lands of Kurshi, the order of Livonia obtained Sabile. The first time Sabile is mentioned in the historical sources is during the year of 1253. During the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century, a castle of order was built in Sabile, around which a small village started developing and was given in the chronicles in the year 1462. During the 15th century German craftsmen and bargainers settled down to live here. In the time of Kurzeme duchy (1561-1795) Sabile was the property of the duke. During the time of duke Jacob (17th century) Sabile developed to be the centre of craft and trade. There was a mill, flax weaving-mill, limekiln and tar-kiln in Sabile. Grapes were grown as well. After the Swedish-Polish wars, plague in Kurzeme (1710) and the Great Northern War (1700-1721) Sabile was heavily destroyed and life there started to waste away. After Kurzeme was annexed by the Russian Empire (in 1795), Sabile was administratively incorporated into the district of Talsi. In the middle of the 19th century Sabile become the centre of trade and craft, known for its skilful tanners. Only Tukums and Jelgava outworked Sabile in the leather industry. In the beginning of the 20th century a dairy, wool spinning-mill, dye-works, sawmill and brewery worked in Sabile. In december of 1905 a group of warriors from Kuldīga attacked the post office in Sabile and disarmed the police force. Luckily, Sabile did not suffer in the World War One. The city status was granted to Sabile in 1917. During the Latvian War of Independence Sabile was, first, freed from the rule of Bolsheviks (March 13, 1919) and then in the 24th of November it was liberated from Bermont's troops. The frontier of Sabile was enlarged in 1927. During the 20th century Sabile did not conspicuous for industrial importance. Well-known was the factory „Start” (in Latvian - „Starts”) that worked in the times of the independent Latvia and produced safety-matches. In 1937 the construction of an open-air vineyard was started. After the World War Two two large companies were opened – „Latvia's tinned food” (in Latvian - „Latvijas konservi”) in 1945 and a branch office of the factory „Bagmaker” (in Latvian - „Somdaris”) in 1966. In the beginning of 1990s the grape plantations were restored. The number of inhabitants in 2008 was 1475.

The number of inhabitants in Sabile sharply increased during the 19th century, but later (in the 20th century) the number of inhabitants in Sabile fluctuated. There was a sizable proportion of Jews and Germans in Sabile until the World War Two. The restrictions on Jews had small effect in the province of Kurzeme, so many Jews from Lithuania and Poland moved to live there. The first information about Jews settlers is from the beginning of the 19th century. In 1809 there were about 200 Jews in Sabile, but the community, mostly mitnaggedim, was established around 1840. In 1881, despite different restrictions on Jewish settlement in Kurland, two thirds of the town's inhabitants were Jews (in 1881 the number of inhabitants in Sabile was about 1.400, about 900 from them were Jews). A feature of this local Jewish community was that from 1840 to 1864, it served as a training ground for rabbis, who began their service in Sabile and within several years moved to larger cities. So the first rabbi of the town, Menachem Izraelson, moved to Kudīga, and rabbis Mordechay Samunov and Duber Wolf Lipshitz moved to Ventspils. Rabbi Tsvi Rolbe worked in Sabile from 1864 until 1900. Rabbi Meir worked in Sabile from 1901 until 1915. After World War One rabbi Sholom Tsvi Tobias worked in Sabile until his death in 1924. Later rabbi Elhonon Hakoen Kan become the rabbi of Sabile. Rabbi Binyamin Yonathan Cohen worked in Sabile from 1931, but rabbi Yitzkhak Segal worked there from the 24th of March 1940 (he was also the last rabbi of Sabile).

The synagogue of Sabile was built in 1890. It is a stone building and its foundation was built in 1875. The synagogue building was built in typical orthodox and ascetic style, and it was used until World War Two. During the time of USSR a gym-hall was established in the synagogue, later for a long time it was empty. In the beginning of 90s the synagogue was bought out from the Fruit and Vegetable Complex of Sabile. From 2001 until 2004 the synagogue was reconstructed. Nowadays the Centre of Contemporary Art and Culture is located there. Near the synagogue there was the House of Prayer *Beit HaMidrash*. The Jews' cemetery was established in 1809. It existed until World War Two. The cemetery was left, when Jews of Sabile were shot. After the war livestock was pastured there, in the 70s many monuments were stolen and remade into other gravestones. Until today only several gravestones have remained.

A Yeshiva, which was opened in 1897, was closed shortly thereafter because of financial difficulties. In 1910 the community was about 48% of the population. Until World War I the Jewish children attended the general school. The boys studied Jewish subjects at Heder and the girls attended private classes. After the expulsion by tsarist authorities of 1915, not all Jews returned to Sabile. In 1920 the Jewish population of the town was only 224. The community council which was elected in that year with the help of the „Joint” (a relief agency of American Jewry) began to organize communal life afresh. A loan fund was established and people who had suffered injuries were given free medical care and medication. There was also doctor A. Davidovich, who was a Jew. A Jewish school, teaching in Yiddish and Hebrew, supported by the municipality, functioned in the afternoons in the premises of the Latvian school. The Jewish elementary school in Sabile was established in 1922. Teachers of this school were: N. Tobiass (from 1924), Glazere (from 1927), N. Etingen (from 1934). The rabbi of the community – rabbi Binyamin Yonathan Cohen – conducted Talmud classes for adults twice weekly and on Shabbath he taught Torah to his congregants. There were no organized Zionist activities, except for the revisionist „Betar” youth movement which had a branch in the town. In 1935, there were 281 Jews in Sabile (15,5% of the population; total population of Sabile in 1935 was 1817). Before World War Two there were many Jews in Sabile. The majority of the members of the community were storekeepers in the grocery and cloth trades, or merchants dealing in lumber and cattle. Other made a living as tradesmen: tailors, shoemakers and tinsmiths. Town rented a slaughterhouse from the Jewish community. In 1940, when a Soviet government was set up, the Jewish elementary school in Sabile was abolished. A 7th class was opened in the Latvian elementary school (originally there were only 6 classes). In 1940/1941 school year there were 59 pupils – 8 of them were Jews. Many Jews left Sabile, when in the summer of 1940 many of private enterprises were expropriated. Jewish public life in the town ceased gradually. In the of spring 1941 a number of rich Jews were banished to Siberia. After the outbreak of war between Germany and the USSR (June 22, 1941), a small number of Jews managed to escape from the town. When in the 2nd of July in 1941 the first units of German troops entered Sabile, the authority institutions of Soviet occupation had already left Sabile (in the 27th of Juny). In the 4th of August in 1941 all Jew families in Sabile were captured (240 persons along with children) and imprisoned in a house near river Abava. In the 5th of August they were drove by cars to a place near Svente. There two holes were dug up in the forest near the roadside (not far from that place, where river Kāroņu flows into river Abava). In the 6th of August in 1941 Jews of Sabile were shot. The last rabbi of Jewish community in Sabile – rabbi Yitzkhak Segal – also perished in the holocaust. This memorial site is located about 900 m from the bridge of Svente in the direction of Kuldīga. Even now there is an extant one

hole that was planned as a place of burial for Gispuyies (Romas) from Sabile, who were rescued by a miracle. There is a monument in the place where Jews of Sabile were shot. Today there are no Jews living in Sabile.

Literature: Avotiņš, V. *Lejup pa Abavu: kultūrvēsturisks tūrisma ceļvedis pa Abavu un tās baseina upēm.* – Rīga, 2004; Dribins, L. *Ebreji Latvijā.* – Rīga, 2002; *Latvija: sinagogas un rabīni, 1918-1940.* – Rīga, 2004; Melers, M. *Ebreju kapsētas Latvijā.* – Rīga, 2006; Ovčinskis, L. *Ebreju vēsture Latvijā 1561.-1923.* – Rīga, 1928; *Sabile // Latvijas pilsētas: enciklopēdija.* – Rīga, 1999; *Talsu novads: Enciklopēdisks rakstu krājums.* – Rīga, 1935.-1937; Vanags, K. *Atceries Latviju.* – Rīga, 1994; newspaper „Diena” (28.06.2000.); Museum of the Jewish Diaspora (Israel) – headword „Sabile” [MEL B-661]; source references in the internet: www.sabile.lv.



Sabile in 1797.



Sabile in the 19th century. The gravure by drawing of N. S. Sfavenhagen.



Talsu Street in Sabile. The beginning of the 21st century.



The Synagogue in Sabile. Juny of 2005.



Jewish cemetery in Sabile. Location of the cemetery – Sabile, Meža Street, 300 m to the left from the television tower. The beginning of the 21st century.



The neighbourhood of town Sabile. The place where Jews of Sabile were shot. There is a monument in memory of the victims. This memorial site is located about 900 m from bridge of Svente. There is also a hole that was planned as place of burial for Gispies (Romas) from Sabile. April of 2009.