1000 Years of the Jews in Poland

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Jews in Poland dates back over a millennium. For centuries Poland was home to the largest and most significant Jewish community in the world. Poland was the centre of Jewish culture due to a long period of statutory religious tolerance and social autonomy. This ended with the 'Partitions of Poland' that began in 1772, in particular, with the discrimination and persecution of Jews in the Russian Empire.

A Jewish couple, Poland, c. 1765

During World War II (1939-1945) and the occupation of Poland by Nazi Germany there was a near complete genocidal destruction of the Polish Jewish community.

Since the fall of communism there has been a Jewish revival in Poland. It is characterised by the annual Jewish Culture Festival, new study programmes at Polish high schools and universities, the work of synagogues such as the Nozyk, and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

From the founding of the Kingdom of Poland in 1025 through to the early years of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth created in 1569, Poland was the most tolerant country in Europe. Known as *Paradisus Iudaeorum* (Latin for "Paradise for the Jews"), it became a shelter for persecuted and expelled European Jewish communities and home to the world's largest Jewish community of the time.

Almost three-quarters of all Jews lived in Poland by the middle of the 16th century. With the weakening of the Commonwealth and growing religious strife (due to the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation), Poland's traditional tolerance began to wane from the 17th century onward and particularly after the Partitions of Poland.

The Partitions of Poland were three partitions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth that took place towards the end of the 18th century and ended the existence of the state, resulting in the elimination of the sovereign Poland for 123 years. The partitions were conducted by the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They divided up the Commonwealth

lands over a period of time. Polish Jews were subject to the laws of the partitioning powers, especially the increasingly anti-Semitic Russian Empire.

When Poland regained independence in the aftermath of World War I, it was the centre of the European Jewish world with one of the largest Jewish communities of over 3 million. antisemitism, emanating from both the political establishment and the general population, common throughout Europe at the time, became an increasing problem.

At the start of World War II, Poland was partitioned between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union (Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact). The war resulted in the death of one-fifth of the Polish population, with 90% or about 3 million of Polish Jewry killed along with approximately 3 million Polish non-Jews. Although the Holocaust occurred largely in German occupied Poland, there was less collaboration with the Nazis by its citizens than in many other European countries.

EARLY YEARS

The first Jews arrived in the territory of modern Poland in the 10th century. Travelling along the trade routes leading eastwards to Kiev and Bukhara, Jewish merchants crossed the areas of Silesia. A diplomat and merchant from the Moorish town of Tortosa in Spanish Al-Andalus, known under his Arabic name of **Ibrahim ibn Jakub**, was the first chronicler to mention the Polish state under the rule of Prince Mieszko I. The first mention of Jews in Polish chronicles occurs in the 11th century. It appears that Jews were then living in Gniezno, the capital of the Polish kingdom of the Piast dynasty. The first permanent Jewish community is mentioned in 1085 by a Jewish scholar Jehuda ha-Kohen in the city of Przemysl. The first extensive Jewish emigration from across Europe to Poland occurred at the time of the First Crusade in 1098.

Under Bolesław III (1102–1139), the Jews, encouraged by the tolerant regime of this ruler, settled throughout Poland, including Lithuanian territory as far as Kiev. He recognised the value of the Jews in the development of the commercial interests of his country. The Jews came to form the backbone of the Polish economy and **coins minted by Mieszko III even bear Hebraic markings**. Jews enjoyed undisturbed peace and prosperity in the many principalities into which the country was then divided. They formed the middle class in a country where the general population consisted

of landlords (developing into szlachta, the unique Polish nobility) and peasants, and they were instrumental in promoting the commercial interests of the land.

The Magdeburg Law was a contributing factor in the emigration of Jews to Poland. It was a charter given to the Jews, among others, that specifically outlined the rights and privileges that Jews had in Poland. For example, they could define their neighbourhoods and economic competitors and set up monopolies.

The Roman Catholic Church became less tolerant, but there were still those amongst the reigning princes who sought to protect the Jewish community. Rulers such as Boleslaw the Pious of Kalisz recognised the Jews as desirable for the economic growth of the country.

Drawn by Polish painter Walery Eljasz 1841-1905

In 1332, **King Casimir III the Great** (1303-1370) expanded the old charter with the Wislicki Statute. His reign was known for its close ties to the Jews. He prohibited the kidnapping of Jewish children for enforced baptism and inflicted heavy punishment for the desecration of Jewish sites. However, with the advent of the Black Death in 1348, the first *blood libel* was recorded and in 1367 the first *pogrom* took place in Poznan. Under Casimir's successor, Louis I of Hungary (1370–1384), the complaint became general that "justice had disappeared from the land". An attempt was made to deprive the Jews of the protection of the laws. Guided mainly by religious motives, Louis I persecuted them, and threatened to expel those who refused to accept Christianity. His short reign did not suffice, however, to undo the beneficent work of his predecessor.

CENTRE OF THE JEWISH WORLD

Alexander the Jagiellonian (1461-1506) originally expelled the Jews from Lithuania became more tolerant after the Jews were expelled from Spain, Austria, Germany and Hungary. Poland became a haven for Jewish exiles from Western Europe.

The most prosperous period for Polish Jews began following this new influx of Jews with the reign of Zygmunt I (1506–1548), who protected them in his realm. His son, Zygmunt II (1548–1572), in the main, followed the tolerant policy of his father and also granted autonomy to the Jews in the matter of communal administration and laid the foundation for the power of the *Kahal*, or autonomous Jewish community.

Remuh Synagogue late 1920s

Jewish religious life thrived in many Polish communities. In 1503, the Polish monarchy appointed Rabbi Jacob Polak, the official Rabbi of Poland, marking the emergence of the Chief Rabbinate and by 1551, Jews were given permission to choose their own Chief Rabbi. The Chief Rabbinate held power over law and finance, appointing judges and other officials. During this period, Poland-Lithuania became the main center for *Ashkenazi* Jewry and its *yeshivot* achieved fame from the early 16th century. It is thought that about three-quarters of all Jews lived in Poland by the middle of the 16th century. Around the mid-16th century, Poland also welcomed Jewish newcomers from Italy and Turkey, mostly of Sephardi origin.

Moses Isserles (1520–1572), an eminent Talmudist of the 16th century, established his *yeshiva* in Kraków. In addition to being a renowned Talmudic and legal scholar, Isserles was also learned in Kabbalah and studied history, astronomy and philosophy. The **Remuh Synagogue** was built for him in 1557. *ReMa* is the Hebrew acronym for his name, Rabbi Moses Isserles.

UPRISING AND DECLINE

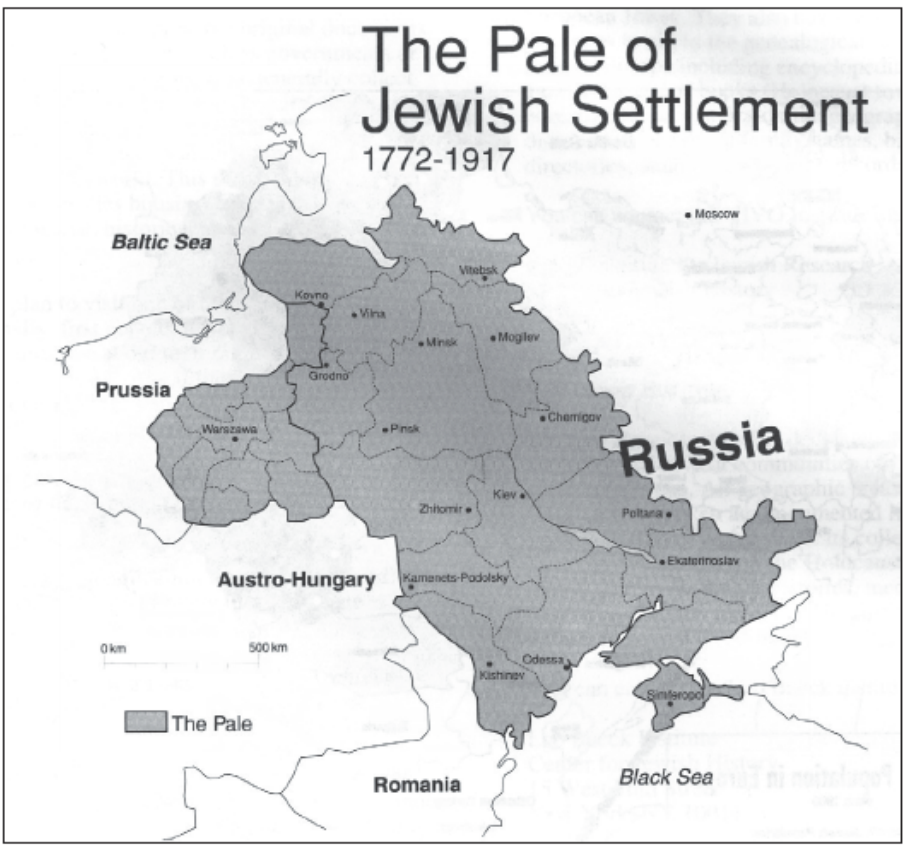
From 1648 onwards several conflicts devastated the Polish Commonwealth and during this period at least 200,000 Jews were either murdered or emigrated. During the *Chmielnicki Uprisings* (1648-1657), a Cossack rebellion within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Bohdan Khmelnytsky's Cossacks murdered thousands of Jews and Poles in the eastern area he controlled (today's Ukraine). Here the Jews were perceived as allies of the Polish nobles who had stolen the peasants' homes and land. The Chmielnicki Uprising was followed by an invasion by the Swedish Empire in what became known as "The Deluge". Thousands of Jews emigrated during the Uprisings to central Poland and western Europe.

During this period an estimated 3 million Polish citizens died, approximately one third of the population. By the time the Saxon dynasty came to the throne, the Jews had lost the support they once had and attacks on Jews increased, becoming almost daily events in the larger cities.

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE AND THE JEWS OF POLAND (1795-1918)

Official Russian policy would eventually prove to be substantially harsher towards the Jews than that under independent Polish rule. The lands that had once been Poland were to remain the home of many Jews. In 1772, Catherine II, the Empress of Russia, instituted the **Pale of Settlement** restricting Jews to the western parts of the empire. This would eventually include much of Poland although it excluded some areas in which Jews had previously lived. By the late 19th century, over four million Jews would live in 'The Pale'.

Initially, Russian policy towards the Jews of Poland was confusing, alternating between harsh rules and somewhat more enlightened policies. In 1802, the Tsar established the 'Committee on the Improvement of the Jews' in an attempt to develop a coherent approach to the Empire's new Jewish population. In 1804 it suggested several steps that were designed to encourage Jews to assimilate, although it did not force them to do so. It proposed that Jews be allowed to attend school and even to own land, but it restricted them from entering Russia. The more enlightened parts of this policy were never fully implemented, and the conditions of the Jews in the Pale gradually worsened.



The Cantonist Laws passed by Tsar Nicolas in the 1820s kept the traditional double taxation of Jews in lieu of army service, while actually requiring all Jewish communities to produce boys between the ages of 12 and 18 to serve in the military, where they were often forced to convert. Though the Jews were accorded slightly more rights with the emancipation reform of 1861, they were still restricted to the Pale of Settlement and subject to restrictions on ownership and profession. In 1881, however, the status-quo was shattered with the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, which was falsely blamed on the Jews.

The assassination prompted a large-scale wave of anti-Jewish riots throughout 1881–1884. In the 1881 outbreak, pogroms were primarily limited to Russia, although in a riot in Warsaw two Jews were killed, 24 others were wounded, women were raped and over two million rubles worth of property was destroyed.

The new Tsar, Alexander III, blamed the Jews for the riots and issued a series of harsh restrictions on Jewish movements. Pogroms continued until 1884, with at least tacit government approval. They proved a turning point in the history of the Jews in partitioned Poland and throughout the world. As a result of the pogroms and the waves of antisemitism, 36 Jewish Zionist delegates met in Katowice in 1884, forming the *Chovevei Zion* movement. The pogroms prompted a great flood of Jewish emigration mainly to the United States. Nearly two million Jews left the Pale by the late 1920s, setting the stage for the Zionist movement.

An even bloodier wave of pogroms broke out from 1903 to 1906, and at least some of the pogroms are believed to have been organised or supported by the Tsarist Russian secret police, the Okhrana.

THE INTERWAR YEAR 1918-1939

During World War I, while many other non-Polish minorities were ambivalent or neutral to the idea of a sovereign Polish state, Jews actively participated in the fight for Poland's independence between 1914 and 1918. Representatives of the local Jewish merchant associations adopted a resolution declaring their participation in the struggle for Poland's independence and issued an appeal to the Jewish masses. Similar proclamations came from the Jewish youth organisations.

During the military conflicts that engulfed Eastern Europe at the time – the Russian Civil War, Polish-Ukrainian War and Polish-Soviet War – many pogroms were launched against the Jews by all sides. A substantial number of Jews were perceived to have supported the Bolsheviks in Russia and they came under frequent attack by all those opposed to the Bolshevik regime.

At the end of World War I, the West became alarmed by reports of alleged pogroms in Poland against Jews. American pressure for government action reached the point where President Woodrow Wilson sent an official commission to investigate the issue. Among the incidents, a Polish officer in Pinsk, accused a group of Jewish communists of plotting against the Poles, shooting 35 of them.

In 1918 the Polish army captured the city of Lvov (then Lemberg) and hundreds of people were killed in the chaos, among them about 72 Jews. In Warsaw, soldiers of the Blue Army assaulted Jews on the streets but were punished by military authorities. When the Polish troops entered Vilnius in 1919, the first Lithuanian pogrom in a modern city on Lithuanian Jews took place. Abuse of the Jews, including pogroms, continued elsewhere, especially in the Ukraine. The result of the concern over the fate of the Jews of western Poland was a series of explicit clauses in the Treaty of Versailles protecting the rights of Jews and minorities in Poland.

The number of Jews immigrating to Poland from the Ukraine and Soviet Russia during the interwar period grew rapidly. According to the Polish national census of 1921, there were 2,845,364 Jews living in the Second Polish Republic; but, by late 1938 that number had grown by over 16 per cent to approximately 3,310,000. The average rate of permanent settlement was about 30,000 per annum. At the same time, every year around 100,000 Jews were passing through Poland in unofficial emigration overseas. Between the end of the Polish–Soviet War and late 1938, the Jewish population of the Republic had grown by over 464,000. Jews preferred to live in relatively tolerant Poland rather than in the USSR, and continued to integrate, to marry into Polish Gentile families, to bring Polish Gentiles into their community through marriage, to feel Polish and to form an important part of Polish society. Between 1933 and 1938, around 25,000 German Jews fled Nazi Germany for sanctuary in Poland.