

Development of Judaism, Jewish thought and culture in Poland

The culture and intellectual output of the Jewish community in Poland had a profound impact on Judaism as a whole. Some Jewish historians have recounted that the word Poland is pronounced as *Polania* or *Polin* in Hebrew, and as transliterated into Hebrew, these names for Poland were interpreted as “good omens” because *Polania* can be broken down into three Hebrew words: *po* (“here”), *lan* (“dwells”), *ya* (“God”), and *Polin* into two words of: *po* (“here”) *lin* (“[you should] dwell”). The “message” was that Poland was meant to be a good place for the Jews.

THE SHTETL

The word shtetl in Yiddish means small town. The Jews in Eastern Europe often made up a majority of the populations of the towns. The shtetl pattern first took shape within Poland-Lithuania before the partitions of the kingdom. Jews had been invited to settle in the private towns owned by the Polish nobility from the 16th century, with relatively favorable conditions. In many such private towns Jews soon formed the preponderant majority of the population.



Their occupation in *arenda* led many Jews to settle in the villages around these towns, while many who settled in them were also engaged in *arenda* as well as having other business in the villages. Hence both the economy as well as the style of living in such towns had close links with the villages, in addition to assuming the all-pervading character of a ‘Jewish town’. Originally dependent on the highly structured and powerful communities in the larger cities from which the settlers first came, these small communities increasingly acquired importance. Their development was unhampered by the established rights and inimical anti-Jewish traditions of the Christian towns-people, as the communities in the old “royal towns” had been. Thus the movement of Jews to smaller towns where they were needed and therefore protected, by the greater and lesser Polish

nobility, continued. The community of the 'private town' often constituted the town itself for all intents and purposes, and therefore could strengthen and consolidate a homogeneous pattern of values, attitudes and mores.

With the partitions of Poland-Lithuania the final crystallisation saw the process of geopolitical differentiation of the communities in the territories divided between Poland's neighbours. In Russia, the shtetl developed in the Pale of Settlement. In 1815, Congress Poland was incorporated into the Pale, and it continued to exist until the October Revolution of 1917. The liberal revolution of 1917 liquidated the Pale of Settlement, while the Communist revolution that followed liquidated the traditional shtetl life. Between the two world wars, independent Poland became the greatest Jewish centre in Eastern Europe.

Yidishkeyt ("Jewishness") and *menshlikhkeyt* ("humanness") were the two major values of the community around which life centred. Both the sacred and the profane were integrated in this way of life. The traditional ideals of piety, learning and scholarship, communal justice and charity, were fused in the warm and intimate lifestyle of the shtetl. The *Yidishkeyt* and the *menshlikhkeyt* of the shtetl were expressed in innumerable activities, all of which were geared toward the goal of living the life of a "good Jew" and were manifested in the synagogue and at home, in the holiness of Sabbath and the humdrum existence of the market, in the structure of the community and in the organisation of the family.

The life of the Jew oscillated between synagogue, home and market. In the synagogue he served God, studied His Law and participated in social activities created in response to the needs of the community and its individual members. The synagogue was the house of prayer, the house of study and the house of assembly combined. The Rabbi was the head of the community, teacher, leader and trusted council. The seating arrangement in the synagogue reflected the social structure of the community: along the eastern wall, where the Ark was located, were the most honoured members of the community, the rabbi and the council, the men of learning, of substance and of status. The seats facing the eastern wall were occupied by the burghers and behind them were the remaining Jews, poor or uneducated.

The home of the individual was the basic unit in the culture and life style of the shtetl; it was founded on a patriarchal and closely knit structure on traditional lines. His home was the place where the shtetl Jew enjoyed his *Yidishkeyt* in the serenity and peace of Sabbath, in the rituals of the Passover Seder, or in the dignity and holiness of the High Holidays. It was where he derived the proud pleasure from the achievements of his family. He fed the stranger on Friday and provided meals for the poor student from the *yeshivah* (academy for the advanced study of Jewish texts). The home was also part of the community, and hardly any important activity at home was separable from the synagogue or the total community. Birth and death, bar mitzvahs and weddings, illness and recovery, were family events which tied

the home to the synagogue, and by extension to the community. No family event was ever private, for life in the shtetl was life with people, and therefore part of the total community life.

JEWISH LEARNING

Yeshivot were established under the direction of the rabbis in the more prominent communities. Such schools were officially known as gymnasiums, and their rabbi principals as rectors. Important yeshivot existed in Krakow, Poznan and other cities. Jewish printing establishments came into existence in the first quarter of the 16th century and in 1530 a Hebrew Pentateuch (Torah) was printed in Krakow. By the end of the century the Jewish printing houses of that city and Lublin issued large numbers of Jewish books, mainly of a religious nature.

The growth of Talmudic scholarship in Poland was coincident with the greater prosperity of the Polish Jews. Because of their communal autonomy, educational development was wholly one-sided and along Talmudic lines. Exceptions are recorded, however, where Jewish youth sought secular instruction in the European universities. The learned rabbis became not merely expounders of the Law, but also spiritual advisers, teachers, judges and legislators. Their authority compelled the communal leaders to make themselves familiar with the abstruse questions of Jewish law. Polish Jewry found its views of life shaped by the spirit of Talmudic and rabbinical literature, whose influence was felt in the home, in school and in the synagogue.

In the first half of the 16th century the seeds of Talmudic learning had been transplanted to Poland from Bohemia, particularly from the school of Jacob Pollak, the creator of *Pilpul* (sharp reasoning). Shalom Shachna (c. 1500-1558), a pupil of Pollak, is counted among the pioneers of Talmudic learning in Poland. He lived and died in Lublin, where he was the head of the yeshiva that produced the rabbinical celebrities of the following century. Shachna's son Israel became Rabbi of Lublin on the death of his father. His pupil Moses Isserles (known as the *ReMA*) (1520-1572) achieved an international reputation among the Jews as the co-author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, ("Code of Jewish Law"). His contemporary and correspondent Solomon Luria (1510-1573) of Lublin also enjoyed a wide reputation among his co-religionists; and the Jews throughout Europe recognised the authority of both. Heated religious disputations were common, and Jewish scholars participated in them.

Simultaneously, the *Kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism) had become entrenched under the protection of Rabbinism; and such scholars as Mordecai Jaffe and Yoel Sirkis devoted themselves to its study. This period of great rabbinical scholarship was interrupted by the Chmielnicki Uprising and The Deluge (Ukrainian war of liberation from Poland).

CHASSIDISM

The Hebrew word Chassid, means “pious” and describes a spiritual devotion that extends beyond the requirements of Jewish religious law. The development of Chassidism arose from several movements that took place in Ukraine and Poland. In 1648 Cossack massacres led to the murder of thousands of Jews. In addition to the pogroms, Jewish communities had to worry about taxation, support for widows, orphans and the disabled, creating a class divide in the Polish Jewish community. Times were also troubled with foreign invasions, peasant uprisings, a declining central government and conflict between Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians.

The wealthy Jews and the Talmudic scholars who led the communities often did not distribute the tax burdens fairly. The Rabbinic leadership, led by Shabbtai Zvi, did not protest about this situation and became discredited amongst much of the Jewish community. Meanwhile new forms of devoutness appeared within certain segments of the community.



In this time of mysticism and overly formal Rabbinism came the teachings of Israel ben Eliezer, known as the **Ba'al Shem Tov**, or *BeShT* (1698-1760), that had a profound effect on the Jews of Eastern Europe and Poland in particular. His disciples taught and encouraged the new fervent brand of Judaism based on *Kabbalah* known as Chassidism. The new movement spread rapidly among Eastern European Jewry when leading disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov won followers of their own and formed separate communities apart from other Orthodox

Jews. The rise of Chassidic Judaism within Poland's borders and beyond had a great influence on the rise of Orthodox Judaism all over the world, with a continuous influence through its many Chassidic dynasties including those of Chabad-Lubavitch, Aleksander, Bobov, Ger and Nadvorna among others.

HASKALAH

The 18th century was in many European countries an era of Renaissance, rationalism and pragmatism. This trend also surfaced within the Jewish community, shaping a new approach towards religion, tradition, as well as their place in society. **The resurgence of Jewish cultural enlightenment** is called Haskalah. It began in Germany, from where it spread to other countries. The Haskalah reached Poland as well, but its influence in that region was comparatively weak. Only a very small but influential group of Jews from Warsaw and Lvov accepted the Haskalah ideas. Their principal goal was the reform of the education system and inclusion of secular courses in the curriculum. According to the Haskalah,

mastering of lay knowledge by Jews would lead to cultural and social advancement of the nation. Assimilation and active involvement of Jews in the culture of their adopted country was yet another aspect. The Haskalah movement was to trigger the rise of civil consciousness, identity and patriotism.

Haskalah initiated the process of reform within Judaism and openness towards foreign influences. Increasingly more Jews participated in everyday life of the country and had an influence on all aspects of social life. It did not ignore religious autonomy, but was opposed to the distinctness in morals or customs manifested, among others, in wearing traditional attire or use of a separate language, calling for the abandonment of Yiddish. Polish Jews did not have the same opportunities to embrace emancipation as those from France or Germany, and only in the late 19th century, thanks to legislative changes and a wider acceptance by Polish society, were Jews tempted to become closer to Polish culture and society.

CULTURAL TRENDS: HEBREW, YIDDISH AND POLISH

The development of Jewish secular culture in Poland reached its height in the late 19th century and lasted until the outbreak of the World War II. While the surge of pogroms lead to the increase of separatist inclinations, novel political ideologies



brought pioneering social developments. On the one hand was the rise of the Zionist movement and on the other assimilation. Within the Jewish culture in Poland the trends can be related mainly through language preference.

The development of Hebrew literature was due mainly to the efforts of the Zionist movement.

Alongside the desire to create a Jewish State in Palestine, they wanted to bring back to life the Hebrew language, used for centuries merely for prayer. Naturally followers of assimilation wrote in Polish. Their contribution to the development of Polish culture was enormous, as intellectuals and thinkers. They may be called Polish Jews or Poles who had a Jewish heritage.

The emergence of Yiddish literature was a unique phenomenon. Yiddish became the heart of the Diaspora's cultural heritage, despite being sneered at by the reformers. Through Yiddish, new artistic, political and social trends were able to reach the Jewish masses. Secular culture began to separate from religion; the press and books reached a wider circulation with the publication of outstanding literary works.

JEWISH POLITICS IN POLAND

Political activity of Polish Jews was characterised by considerable diversity. The first groups formed came under the heading of *Chovevi Zion* (Chivat Zion). These organisations are now considered the forerunners and foundation-builders of modern Zionism. When, at the end of the 19th century, Polish political parties were formed, Jews often created their own splinter groups.



Solely Jewish parties were established at the end of the 19th century and were distinguished by three basic trends; *Zionist*, *socialist* and *religious*. Their aims and objectives varied considerably. The Zionists guidelines were set by **Theodore Herzl** and aimed to create a national base for Jews in Palestine. They collected money for the purchase of land as well as prepared their followers for new life conditions and work there. These ideas were the guiding principles of the Zionist Organisation of Poland (*Histadrut*), subordinate to the World Zionist Organization. Strong influence was gained by *Poalei Zion* (Workers of Zion),

active in Poland from 1906, and whose aim was to create a Jewish socialist state in Palestine, as well as to bring in national and cultural autonomy for Jews in countries with large Jewish populations. Another group was the *Mizrachi*, an organisation founded in Vilnius in 1902, whose aspiration was to create a national Jewish centre in Palestine, a religious state ruled by orthodox principles of Judaism.

In 1897, the most influential Jewish political party, faithful to the social-democratic principles, was formed in Vilnius. It was named the General Jewish Labour Union, popularly called the Bund. Its principle aim was to attain national and cultural autonomy for Jews in those countries, where Jewish population was particularly numerous. The Bund placed considerable emphasis on the enhancement of secular education and self-education circles, especially among the working class, artisans and tradesmen. The Bund was very critical of the Zionist concept and ideal.

Among the orthodox Jews, the greatest influence was won by *Agudat Israel* (Union of Israel), founded in 1912. Agudat considered Jews as a religious and not a national community; it therefore came out mainly in support of their religious and commercial rights. Initially Agudath resisted Zionism, but from the 1930s it accepted the idea of emigration to Palestine. Numerous influential Chassidic tzadikim (righteous) and prominent religious leaders became active members of the party.



A Bundist demonstration, 1917

“THE FINAL SOLUTION WAS A TURNING POINT IN HISTORY.
FROM THE FOURTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES THE MISSIONARIES OF
CHRISTIANITY SAID TO THE JEWS:
“YOU MAY NOT LIVE AMONG US AS JEWS”.
IN THE MIDDLE AGES THE SECULAR RULERS
DECIDED: “YOU MAN NOT LIVE AMONG US”.
FINALLY THE NAZIS DECREED: “YOU MAY NOT LIVE.”

RAUL HILBERG, HISTORIAN