

# How Jews Came to Poland

A LEGEND: It happened in 1492 when the Jews were expelled from Spain. Where could these Jews flee, if not toward the East? After wandering for months, they finally reached a land of many forests. Suddenly, a heavenly voice called out to them in Hebrew: *Yli hPo POH-LIN*, Here shall you rest. And from that day on the country was known as Poyin (Poland).

In actuality Jews lived in Poland from the eleventh century, fleeing there from German expulsions and massacres. These refugees brought with them Ashkenazic (German in Hebrew) Jewish customs and communal structures as well as a German dialect mixed with Hebrew that eventually became Yiddish. The flow of Jews into Poland increased between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries when it reached its peak. By then the Jewish community in Poland had surpassed the German Jewish population. At first the Jews were able to take advantage of many opportunities in Poland in the trades and commerce. In large part they had to provide for their own social services and in return were left alone. Persecutions of Jews in Poland began in 1399.

In 1648 the Russian Orthodox Cossacks and Ukrainian peasants who lived in the southeastern part of the Polish Commonwealth rebelled against the Polish Catholic landowners and noblemen. Their leader, Bogdan Chmielnitski, not only attacked Poles and Catholics, but massacred tens of thousands of Jews.

The Chmielnitski rebellion left Poland weakened and in 1772 Poland's powerful neighbors, Prussia, Austria and Russia, divided Poland into three partitions. Despite a brief period of independence during the Napoleonic Wars in 1795, the division held. Most of Poland went to czarist Russia. In the smaller German area, Jews began to adopt German speech and manners and most moved to large German cities like Berlin. In the Austrian area, Galicia, Jews maintained most of their institutions and customs.

With the absorption of Eastern Poland, the Russians, who had until that time excluded almost all Jews, found themselves with a sizable Jewish population. They responded by allowing Jews to live only in the areas captured from Poland and a few other provinces to the south.

This area was called the Pale of Settlement. By 1885 there were over 4 million Jews living in the Pale. Between pogroms and restrictive measures, most Jews were kept in a state of poverty. The independent Polish nation which emerged from World War I was not much kinder to the Jews than previous rulers. Though the mandate to all the new countries of Europe was self-determination, democracy and freedom for minorities, each country reacted differently to its Jews. In Poland, there was anger because the majority of its merchants were Jews. The Poles instituted tax policies and monopolies to punish and exclude Jews. The democracy became a dictatorship and with it came discrimination and in the 30s, pogroms. The new Polish state had severe economic problems and many Jews faced unemployment and poverty. Despite this, in the small towns or shtetlach and in the great urban concentrations of Jews in Warsaw and other cities Jewish life flourished.

Throughout Poland the ideologies that had sprung up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Hasidism, Zionism, Socialism (the Bund) and enlightenment secularism, set up social services, great cultural institutions, centers of learning, publishing houses and even political parties. On the eve of World War II, Polish Jews were faced with great poverty and physical threats of intermittent pogroms, but they were the largest Jewish population in Europe. One third of Warsaw's population was Jewish, making it the second most populous city after New York. Poland was still the center of Jewish life in the world.

