

The Jews of Poland

By DEVORAH KIRSCH

Part I: Fear and Hope

The history of the Jews in Poland is largely steeped in bitterness. Nevertheless, their accomplishments were magnificent. The scholarship, chassidism, and literature survive, though the culture they sustained tragically perished over forty years ago.

Jewish life in Poland existed as early as the 10th century. The first sizable group established itself in Silesia, in western Poland. The community truly developed in the late Middle Ages, when the German Jews, the *Ashkenazim*, fled the worsening persecutions of their homeland and migrated east. Poland at the time was a kingdom jointly ruled by Lithuania.

Initially, the Jews found themselves welcome. In Poland-Lithuania, where the area was far less developed than in the west, they filled a much-needed role as administrators. They moved to the cities — Warsaw, Cracow, Lvov, and Brest-Litovsk; in no time Poland became a haven and an Ashkenazic heartland.

Indeed, Poland was the safest place for Jews, as well as a land of opportunity. There they expanded rapidly into agriculture and commerce. Moreover, they retained links with Jewish families in Germany and Holland, and in doing so dominated trade. Merchants roamed the fairs, exporting grain and cattle from Polish markets. Their access to fabrics and luxuries, as well as their business acumen, endeared them to the nobility, at the time too busy fighting wars to tend to their estates.

The more ambitious landowners leased their estates to Jewish entrepreneurs, who in the process helped to colonize and develop many areas. Jews became stewards and advisers; every noble, complained the anti-Semites, had “his” Jew, who guided him in business affairs. In 1503, the monarchy appointed a chief



The Law

As Jews moved into the Baltic region — Lithuania, Latvia, and the surrounding regions, they established communities and yeshivos. In the 16th century, Brisk, Cracow, Vilna, Lvov, and Lublin — initially backwater towns — became dynamic centers of Torah learning. They blessed the Jewish world with countless luminaries, most notably in the field of *halachah*, Jewish law.

rabbinate, which exercised power over law and finances. The Jews themselves set up a Council of the Four Lands, with elected central leadership. They enjoyed an autonomy not known since the days of the Exilarch, the leader of the Jewish community in Babylon.

As their influence widened, so did their migration spread. Jewish backers were attracted to the Ukraine, which Poland had conquered. They began to settle all over the Baltic region, their population growing in leaps and bounds.

Strained Relations

The Jews' relations with their neighbors grew strained. German immigrants brought to Poland not only their own crafts and guilds (craftsmen's unions), but also their traditional hatred. They exerted great influence; in fact, quite a few Polish towns were overwhelmingly German in origin and way of life. In some, Jews were either banished or restricted; in 1494, a number of pogroms took place. In Cracow, where the local merchant class was strong, Jews were for awhile kept out.

Often, rulers exploited this hostility by selling towns a decree *de non tolerandis Judaeis* (Latin: "not to suffer the presence of Jews"), so that the Jews could be legally expelled. Many Jews moved to certain municipal boundaries, where the nobility extracted money in exchange for protection and special privileges. Apparently, their presence was considered more lucrative than their absence.

The Catholic Church exerted weaker political influence in Poland than elsewhere. Poland during the 16th century was a haven for radical Protestants. Lutherans and other "heretics" had fled Germany, which was spiritually being torn asunder by the Reformation. The Polish aristocracy, a highly-cultured lot, had ties with Bohemia, in southeast Germany, a

The Lawgiver

"From Moshe to Moshe, there was none like Moshe" — this was a praise accorded to only two men in Jewish history. One was Maimonides (the Rambam). The other was Rav Moshe Isserles — known more commonly to us by his acronym — Rema.

Kabbalist, scholar, writer, and philosopher — the Rema was, above all, a gifted lawmaker. Through him Ashkenazic practice was established. And he made Poland a major center of Jewish learning.

(There are many areas in which the practice of Ashkenazic Jews — those stemming from northern European roots — differs from that of the Sephardic Jews: those having their roots in southern Europe and the Oriental countries. For example, Ashkenazic Jews do not eat beans or rice on Pesach, while Sephardim do. Ashkenazic tradition does not permit a man to have two wives, while Sephardim never accepted this restriction. Ashkenazic males have the custom of covering their heads all day long, while Sephardim must do so only while engaged in religious rituals. Part of Judaism's beauty is that it allows for varying laws and customs, as determined by different rabbis and communities.)

The Rema was born in Cracow — then the Polish capital — in 5280 (1520). The Rema's family was distinguished. His father, a communal leader and a *shtadlan* (mediator) in the

hotbed of Catholic dissension.

Nevertheless, the Church remained hostile. It pushed vigorously for the Jews' segregation. At one time, the Jews were accused of converting Christians and smuggling them to the Ottoman Empire, where the Jews had trade ties. Throughout the years they suffered harassment from Jesuits (many from Germany); in addition, Christian merchants complained about the competition.

By the 17th century, the Jews were leading a very good life. Active in all economic spheres, they continued to display muscle in finance and trade. However, the Jews had begun to rely on loans, often from Christian merchants. Many borrowed beyond their means. Since Jews are prohibited by the Torah to charge each other interest, they were reluctant to extend each other credit. But without it, they could not pursue their endeavors.

The *heter iska* came into popular usage in 1607. It is a document which makes the lender a partner in the business deal he is supporting. That being the case, the money given by him is no longer a loan, but rather an investment.

The Jews maintained close ties with the aristocracy. Entire towns developed around estates, where many Jewish employees worked. Under the *Arenda* system, a nobleman leased a group of estates at a fixed rate and specified the number of years (usually three) that the Jews managed and received income. The assets included mills, breweries, distilleries, and inns. The Jews were able to flourish. In many cities, Jews made up either the majority or the entire population. The *shtetl*, or "small town," and its unique culture was rapidly becoming a mainstay of Polish Jewry. In addition, the Jews served as the go-betweens for the noblemen, collecting taxes from the serfs — the peasants who worked the land.

Unfortunately, tensions arose between the serfs and their Jewish managers. The



Jews were seen as accomplices to the nobles, who ruthlessly oppressed and exploited the serfs. Absentee and spendthrift landlords, completely insensitive to the plight of the peasantry, renewed leases to the Jews at a great price increase — which in turn forced the Jews to raise the taxes of the peasants.

In the Ukraine, the populace particularly resented the injustice. Once again religion reared its head: these serfs, who were Russian Orthodox, despised the Catholic nobles and their Jewish middlemen. The latter were singled out, as they were the ones with whom the Ukrainians had the greatest contact.

Many Jews tried to alleviate their condition. Many shortened working hours, and even freed the serfs from work on Jewish holidays. However, other Jews

royal courts, was known for his philanthropy. He spared no expense for his son's education.

Luxury meant little to young Moshe. Almost from the cradle he devoted his life to Torah knowledge, and exhibited the telltale signs of a prodigy. He was sent to Lublin, where he studied with Rabbi Shalom Shachne, an expert in *pilpul*. This kind of Talmud study is marked by a willingness to draw into one's study a wide range of subject material. It was to shape young Moshe's train of thought.

In Cracow the Rema established a yeshiva of his

responded differently. Sensing hostility in the air, they learned military arts and self-defense. Towns were fortified, and many synagogues had guns mounted on their roofs.

Finally, in the spring of 1648, the Ukrainian peasants revolted. Under the leadership of a petty aristocrat named Bogdan Chmielnicki, they swept through Poland. What followed turned out to be (at the time) the greatest bloodbath ever against the Jews.

Although all of Poland fell victim to the Ukrainian onslaught, the Jews suffered the most, for they were the main targets. They fled villages and *shtetls*, scrambling for safety in the fortified towns. The Poles, who had in the past worked side by side with the Jews, abandoned them or even turned them over to the Cossacks in

exchange for their own lives.

In one fortress the Cossacks actually disguised themselves as Poles to gain entrance; once inside, they drowned several hundred Jews and tortured countless others. Elsewhere they razed synagogues, desecrated ritual ornaments, and burned holy books.

After the "Chmielnicki Massacres," the Jews were left dazed and ruined. Their property was destroyed; an estimated 100,000 people — over 300 communities — were lost. The catastrophe was a turning point: the Jews, who had grown too secure in their new homeland, finally realized their vulnerability.

They tried to pick up the pieces and rebuild their lives. Jewish commerce and population grew; however, the situation had changed for the worse. Poland was being dismembered among her neighbors in a series of wars. Jewish refugees besieged the cities; existing communities were already overburdened with debt. The once progressive nobility had grown petty and tyrannical — the general populace, hostile.

Shabbetai Zvi Arrives

The next 30 years of suffering brought changes to the Jews in their outlook. Long before this time, mysticism had been gaining a foothold in Europe. Kabbalah, its study once largely confined to the educated Sephardim, was being disseminated after their dispersal, caused by the Inquisition. The *Zohar*, printed and distributed throughout different lands, fired the spirituality of many Jews.

The system of Kabbalah developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed, (better known as the Ari z"l) in the Land of Israel, won many converts in Poland, even before the disasters. Its emphasis on meditation and prayer as a direct access to G-d attracted many Jews, who searched for the Torah's hidden meanings to explain the recent events.

own, which attracted scholars from all over Europe. He delved deeply into *halacha*, and answered widespread queries. His brilliance not only made him an authority, but earned him a position on the local *bais din* (rabbinic court), in spite of his very young age.

The Rema corresponded frequently with Rabbi Yosef Caro, the author of the *Bais Yosef* and the *Shulchan Aruch*. The Spanish sage played a major role in the Rema's scholarly endeavors. One of the Rema's works, *Darchel Moshe*, is an annotation of the early and late *halachic* decisors (*poskim*) which Rav Caro had omitted in his *Bais Yosef*.

The Rema is most famous for his addendum to the *Shulchan Aruch*, called *HaMapah*. Literally meaning the "tablecloth," the Rema modestly explained how it was intended to "spread over" parts of Yosef Caro's work (*Shulchan Aruch* means "set table"). Because Rav Caro, a Sephardi, had based his decisions on Sephardic masters, the Rema felt that the Ashkenazim, who followed their own interpretations, needed a separate and definitive voice.

Relying heavily on Tosafos and other Ashkenazic Sages, the Rema made annotations and additions to the *Shulchan Aruch*. Wherever necessary, he analyzed, explained, and disputed the *halacha*. Like Rav Caro, he valued local customs and elevated them to the status of law. The Rema was criticized for favoring the customs of

What mysticism offered most was the promise of redemption. Usually in darkest times the Jews hope most desperately for the Messiah to come and take them out of exile. Though the belief in the Messiah was always integral to Judaism, by the mid-17th century it seemed particularly relevant. In fact, to many his imminent coming seemed inevitable, in light of everything that was happening around them. Kabbalists promised the Jews that prayers and piety could bring holier times ahead; all the recent calamities were a preparation.

At the same time, many ignorant Jews began to absorb and integrate Gentile superstition and folklore into the religion. The prevailing despair fostered the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional climate. Enough Jews were ready to turn to anyone who promised to be either a miracle-worker or a messiah.

The most famous — or infamous — of these was Shabbetai Zvi, who arrived in 1665, in a very timely fashion, since many mystics considered the following year propitious for the arrival of the Messiah.

Shabbetai Zvi was an eccentric but highly charismatic man, whose emotions and imagination compensated for a lack of deep intelligence. The magnetism that made him exciting also made him unstable. According to modern psychology, he might have been classified as a manic-depressive — a mental disorder characterized by extreme and sudden mood swings. At times Shabbetai Zvi became hyperactive, and had delusions of grandeur (false feelings of importance). Shortly afterwards he would plunge into gloom.

During his manic, or excitable, phase, he often experienced hallucinations. Unlike a genuine prophet of G-d, who would act in accordance with the Torah, Shabbetai Zvi violated Jewish law — often flagrantly. He once "married" the Torah under a wedding canopy — calling it a mystic union. His flesh-and-blood marriages were less

successful; two ended in divorce. In addition, he had a tendency to blaspheme G-d and desecrate Shabbos. Finally he was expelled from Smyrna, his birthplace, as well as Salonika and Constantinople, in Turkey.

During his lucid periods Shabbetai tried to seek help for his behavior (evidently he did sense that something was wrong with him). Hearing of a young Kabbalist in Cairo who was known to have visions, Shabbetai Zvi decided to go see him. This person recommended to heal him became the mastermind of what was to come.

Nathan of Gaza, seventeen years Shabbetai's junior, was a brilliant and calculating individual. Born in Jerusalem, he had taken up the study of Kabbalah on his own, and mastered meditation techniques. However, without a proper guide, he dangerously formulated his own ideas, as well as his own image of how the Messiah should be.

During a self-induced trance, Nathan imagined meeting Shabbetai Zvi and proclaiming him the Messiah. Shortly afterwards Shabbetai came to his door to discuss his troubled mind.

Instead of curing him, Nathan convinced Shabbetai that his visions were actually prophetic, and that he was the Messiah. Nathan twisted Lurianic theory around Zvi's biography and character, for greater credence. In no time, with Nathan at his side, Shabbetai rode around town dressed in royal robes, making his claims public.

Why did so many people believe him? One reason, already stated, was Shabbetai Zvi's dynamic personality. He was charming, and positively regal. Moreover, his knowledge of Kabbalah — and Nathan's — managed to win over many of the rabbis. Nathan of Gaza became an effective publicist. Certainly he believed in his friend; through clever Kabbalistic arguments, he furthered Shabbetai's claims.

A good number of rabbis, however,

Poland over those of other lands; nevertheless, his opinion is considered critical in deciding Jewish law.

Besides halacha, the Rema wrote on philosophy. Interestingly, some of his ideas have found their way into modern science. Long ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle had stated that the earth was composed of four elements — fire, water, air, and earth. This view remained accepted for many centuries.

The Rema, however, disagreed. He believed that Hashem had created the world out of small particles — "separate and distinct entities." Were he alive today and a physicist, the Rema might have seen his words verified — in atomic theory!

His scholarship gained attention all over Europe. In addition, it enhanced his country's reputation as a center of Torah scholarship. Until then, Poland (and Lithuania) was mainly an agricultural wilderness, connected by a group of backwater towns. Though rapidly swelling with a Jewish population, the land remained devoid of outstanding personalities.

The situation changed during the Rema's lifetime. Under his influence, the Jews of Poland forged a network of dynamic yeshivos — each producing numerous scholars. From them would emerge the leaders of religious movements to come. By the time of the Rema's death, in 1572, Poland had replaced Germany as the homeland for Ashkenazim.

were not taken in, and they considered Shabbetai Zvi a fraud. However, they could do nothing to stop him. Those who tried feared attacks by the masses, who were desperate for a Messiah and completely won over by Shabbetai. Triumphant this oddball made his way northward, creating fervor wherever he went.

So dazzling was he that he blinded people to reality. This "Messiah" was doing things not in accordance with the Torah. He ate forbidden fats and incited others to sin. Anyone who opposed him he branded a sinner and excommunicated on the spot. In one synagogue Shabbetai Zvi took a Torah scroll in his arms and sang a Spanish love song to it. He then proclaimed that the Redemption would take place on June 18, 1666.

He outlined his plans: he would take over Turkey and make the sultan his servant. Next he would go to the River Sambatyon, a legendary body of water beyond which supposedly lived the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, and bring them back. To prevent the Turks from rebelling and wreaking vengeance in his absence, the Jews had to do penance.

The Jews believed him, and by winter of 1666 they were in ferment. In cities all over Europe, they prayed, fasted, and took ritual baths. In Poland, where they had so recently suffered, the euphoria was strongest. There, the Jews beat themselves, lay down naked in the snow, and sold all their possessions. Even their Christian neighbors were affected, believing he was the Messiah.

The Muslims reacted differently. When he arrived in Turkey to claim his rightful place on the throne, the "Messiah" was arrested and brought to the sultan in chains. There, he was interrogated by an authentic Kabbalist and proclaimed an imposter. The sultan offered Shabbetai a choice: execution or Islam. Immediately Shabbetai converted; under the title "Keeper of the Palace Gate," he survived

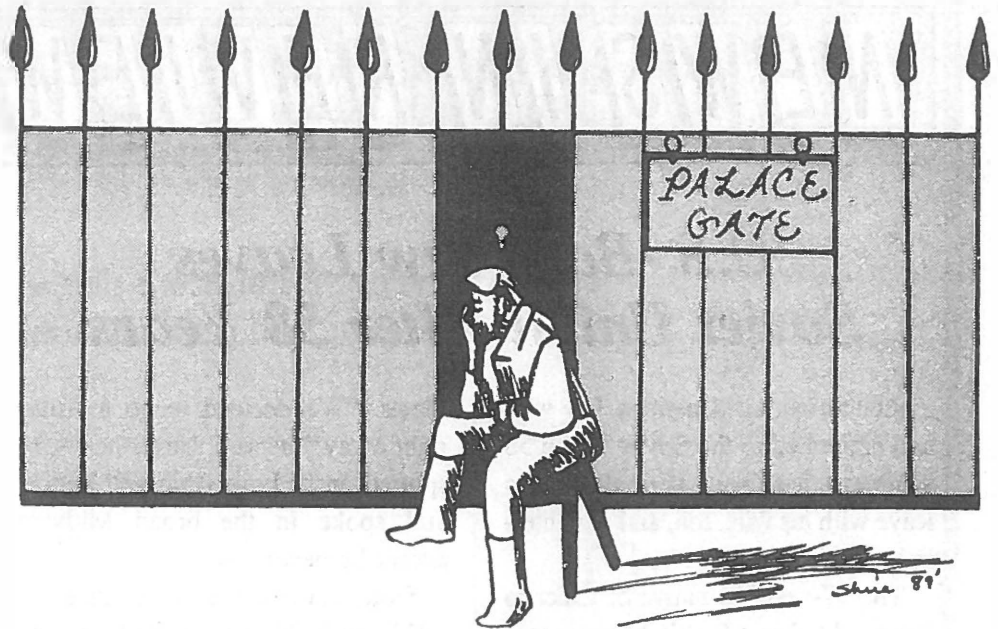
Jews of Poland

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on a government pension.

The Jewish world was stunned — especially in Poland. There, the people, who had looked so eagerly for a redeemer, now felt themselves hoodwinked, and became mired more deeply in misery. Even Nathan of Gaza's argument, that Shabbetai Zvi had "converted" as a way of purifying himself and transforming evil into darkness, failed to rouse their spirits. Most of them turned their backs on Nathan and his insane friend.

However, Nathan kept alive the Shabbeteian sect. He corresponded with Zvi, whose behavior at the Turkish court had grown so erratic that Muslims and Jews alike bribed the sultan to have him banished. Nathan, undaunted, remained loyal,



and continued to keep in contact.

Most of the sect's disciples eventually converted to Christianity or Islam. However, the movement exerted influence in Poland. In the following century, a Polish Jew

named Jacob Frank followed in Shabbetai's footsteps. He too imagined himself to be the Messiah, and encouraged his followers to engage in all sorts of forbidden practices. He too converted to Islam — then Catholicism, then Russian Orthodoxy, depending on where he was threatened with execution.

By the 18th century, the Jews of Poland were despondent. Deluded by kooks and fakers, they had given up all hopes of upliftment. However, in the darkest times, the light truly does become strongest. Polish Judaism was about to encounter a great change and challenge.

(To be continued)

Writing Contest

Students Can Win \$20 — \$50

If you are between the ages of 10 and 18 and you wish to submit an article or a story on a Jewish theme, we will give you \$20 if we publish it.

After four articles have appeared, the writer of the best of the articles will receive an additional award of \$50.

All entries become the property of **The Jewish Reader**, and will not be returned. The decision of the editors as to the winning articles is final.

Send entries to:

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Teachers who wish to coordinate this project with us may reach us at (718) 692-3900.

CONTEST WINNERS

We would like to congratulate the winners of Torah Quiz No. 1 and 3.

Contest No. 1:
Chanie Rimler, 18, Bais Rivkah

Contest No. 2:
Sarah Silber, 12, Bnos Zion of Bobov
Chaim Dov Fishelis, 11, Mesivta Tiferes Yerushalayim

There was no winner for Torah Quiz No. 2.

\$1.50

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The Jewish Reader

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You shall count from the day you offer the omer seven full weeks.

TO OUR READERS

We hope you had a kosher and happy Pesach! The days between Pesach and Shavuot mark the Counting of the Omer. In the times of the Temple, the Jews brought an offering of barley on the second day of Pesach — the *korban ha'omer*. We commemorate that offering by beginning *sefiras ha'omer*, the Counting of the Omer, on that day.

This period is one of semi-mourning, as we take note of the fact that the 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Akiva all died during these days. Our Sages tell us that they were punished because they did not have the proper respect for one another. We are taught that the Second Temple was destroyed due to *sinas chinam*, baseless hatred. Certainly an effort to destroy this bad trait will hasten the rebuilding of the Temple. This issue's cover, featuring a sheaf of barley, recalls the *korban ha'omer* and looks forward to the day when we will again be able to bring offerings to G-d.

"The King and the Pawn" concludes the story of a chess prodigy and his elderly friends.

"Torah Highlights" discusses the sabbatical year and its importance as an indicator of Hashem's continued involvement with the world.

"The Jews of Poland" begins to explore a glorious history that was second only to Babylonia — Bavel — in producing Torah scholarship.

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MAIL ROOM

On Pins and Needles

Dear Editor,

The Jewish Reader is the best! I can't wait for your magazine each month!

Chana Feldman
Brooklyn, NY

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The Adar II Issue

Dear Editor,

I found "Herschel — A Philanthropist" (Adar II) inspiring. Kindness comes in all forms. Only when we give of ourselves, and not just our pocketbooks, do we truly come to know the mitzvah of *tzedakah*.

Yisrael Cohen
Philadelphia, PA

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Dear Editor,

I really liked "The Jews of Germany, Part II." It is one of the most powerful articles I have read. The biography of Rav Hirsch brings to life a great leader.

The other two parts of the article I found disturbing. When I read about German Jews and assimilation, I couldn't help comparing their situation to ours. In addition, "150 Years of Hatred" showed that people like Hitler did not wander into Germany by accident.

History is not a bunch of random facts and dates. It teaches us valuable lessons. I hope people absorb them — in order to avoid mistakes.

Chaim Lowe
Brooklyn, NY

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Touching Article

Dear Editor,

I enjoy your magazine tremendously. The article "He Won't Miss Me" (Kislev) was especially touching. Keep up the excellent work, and congratulations on a superb publication.

Chaim Chashuvim
Staten Island, NY

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