

Polish Jewry

Dos Lid funem Oysgehargen Yidishn Folk:

(The song of the murdered Jewish People)

'Woe is unto me,

Nobody is left

There was a people and it is no more

There was a people and it is...Gone. Wiped out.'

Itzhak Katzenelson.

Born Karelitz, lived in Lodz, incarcerated in the Warsaw Ghetto and murdered Birkenau 1944

Jews were first invited into Poland around the tenth century. They came through voluntary migration at the invitation of princes and kings who wanted Jews to help Polish commerce in their fledgling country. Fleeing Black Death, Blood Libels, Crusades and expulsions Jews moved from Germany and South West Europe and established what would become the centre of the Ashkenaz world, indeed the greatest Jewish community on earth. By 1500 there were 10,000 Jews in about 85 towns with early settlements in what were to become major centres of Jewish life Warsaw and Kazimierz. Jews excelled as middle men in finance, salt mines and agriculture. Jews established themselves in foreign trade, food, leather and clothing.

However Jews became an oppressed and suffering minority. Many Poles and the Polish church were disturbed by the Jews' success, and with their success and prominence came classic medieval anti-Jewish sentiments and laws, often imported from neighbouring German lands. Jews were separated from Christians in separate living areas, socialising was discouraged and Jews were to be readily identified by the wearing of the distinctive Jew badge. The Church's attitude and the maintaining of separation and distinctiveness defined the situation of Jews in Europe and especially Poland for a thousand years. There was always a dangerous balance for the Jews to navigate between protection of princes and kings and the hatred and hostility of the Church, artisans, and peasantry.

Yet despite poverty, hardship and anti-Jewish outbreaks, Polish Jewry viewed themselves as in a good position especially when compared with the Jews of Germany or the Iberian peninsula. The Jewish population grew to half a million by the first half of the seventeenth century, representing 5% of the total population of the Kingdom of Poland, which then included the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Jews viewed their fate in *Polin* ('Dwell here') as part of the Divine plan on the inevitable road to the coming of the Mashiach.

"All nations come to an end but not the Jews"

Jews soon settled in a thousand places all over Poland. They created great communities, large and small with their distinct Polish-Ashkenaz culture infused with and bolstered by Jewish Tradition and led by great Rabbinic scholars and leaders. The Kings of Poland gave the Jewish communities a semblance of real power and they were given official recognition of their self-government. The Jews collected taxes, paid the Rav and the Shochet, supported the Shtadlans, ran its Bet Din, helped the sick and the poor. Supported education, the Beth Hamidrash, fortified Synagogues in places such as Brody, Lublin, Jaroslav, Zamosc and many others, and had the ultimate power of the little used

Herem. The Polish kehillot cultivated the differences between Jew and non-Jew in language “juicy *mame loshen*”, dress, culture, learning, values and behaviour.

All local Kehillot came under the unique and special countrywide Council of Four Lands, *the Va’ad Arba Aratsot*. Sometimes the Four Lands would become Five Lands with the inclusion of Lithuania. The Va’ad of four or five lands demonstrated the greatest degree of Jewish autonomy ever attained by the Jews of Europe (1580-1764). It simply had no equal in all of Europe. It represented all Jews. It was accepted by the Kehillot as the supreme authority in communal matters.

Nathan of Hanover chronicled:

“The pillar of justice was in the kingdom of Poland, as it was in Jerusalem before the destruction of the Bes Hamikdosh...the leaders of the Four Lands were like the Sanhedrin...They had the authority to judge all Israel ...and to punish each man as they saw fit”

The period of late sixteenth century to the mid seventeenth century became known as the Golden Age of Polish Jewry, and if it was rightly famed for the power of its Va’ad Arba Aratsot, it would become even more famous and renowned for the greatness of the Rabbis that graced that period with their phenomenal erudition, learning, codification, teshuvot and Yeshivot.