

A Brief History of Jews in Poland

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Since the tenth century when six Slavic tribes formed an alliance against Germans and Bohemians to form a state, Poland has been ethnically diverse. Western Polish territories remained susceptible to German infiltration and settlement and the subsequent advances these brought.¹ Poland retained its Slavic and Catholic character despite its borders' instability and the inclusion of large numbers of Lithuanians, Ukrainians and White Russians.² Accepted at first, Jews became scapegoats for ethnic tensions and thwarted nationalist aspiration.³

Jewish immigration to Poland began in 12th century. Escaping persecution elsewhere, they were welcomed in Poland for their knowledge and skills.⁴ Polish kings issued charters that protected Jews from, among other harassments, forced baptism, theft, and violence. In 1264, the Polish king issued a charter prohibiting Christians from accusing Jews of using human blood in their rituals (a charge known as the "blood libel"). Much can be surmised about the relationship between Christians and Jews by the need to stipulate, "A Christian who fails to help a Jew attacked at night is required to pay a fine."⁵ In 1364, at a time when Jews were blamed for the plague in Western Europe, the Polish king guaranteed their safety. Later charters allowed Jews to practice their religion and protected them from specific harassments. For instance, Christians could not force Jews to take money on the Sabbath even in repayment of debts.⁶ Jewish life would flourish in Poland for centuries and Jews would contribute to the development of commerce in Lithuania and Poland.⁷

By the 1500s, many Polish towns had synagogues, mikvahs (ritual baths), slaughterhouses to prepare kosher meat, hospitals and cemeteries. Jewish communities enjoyed the autonomy to govern themselves and collect the taxes their communities owed the Polish crown.⁸ At this time a compendium of halachah (Jewish religious law) was codified known as the Shulcan Aruch. First compiled in the 1560s by Rabbi Yosef Karo, a rabbi from Spain living in Palestine, it reflected only "Sephardic" tradition. In the 1570s Polish Rabbi Moshe Isserls added notes containing German-Polish or "Ashkenazic" traditions.^{9*}

The relatively peaceful co-existence of Jews and Christians in Polish lands would not last. The rise of nationalist movements resulted in increased violence against Jews as early as the mid-17th century when the Cossack Chmielnicki Uprising against Poland sparked a terrible pogrom.¹⁰ While Poles and Lithuanians held Ukrainians and White Russians in contempt, all viewed Jews with varying degrees of disdain. In many areas, class divisions reflected ethnic divisions, particularly in Galicia, an area of Poland that would become a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Here, Ukrainians were predominantly peasants, Jews merchants and artisans, and Germans craftsmen. Nationalist rebellions often inspired anti-Jewish pogroms as well.¹¹

During this period, an enthusiastic spiritual movement known as Hassidism, led by Israel Ben Eliezar, or the Baal Shem Tov, encouraged simple, sincere prayer, fervent joy in song, and humility. Many Eastern European Jews found hope in this movement despite their increasingly precarious political and economic situation.¹² While many Polish Jews continued traditional study and worship, toward the end of the 19th century others embraced secular Zionism.¹³

In 1791, when Poland was divided between Russia, Austria, and Prussia, Polish Jews became subjects of new homelands. Czarist Russia was by far the most antisemitic, forcing Jews to live in western provinces known as the "Pale of Settlement". Here, the majority of Jews in Europe would eventually be reduced to dire poverty in rural areas. Young Jewish men were drafted to serve up to twenty-five years in the Tsarist army. Jewish children were forced to attend boarding schools designed to destroy their culture.¹⁴ Tzarist policies resulted in the pogroms of 1881-1883 and encouraged the virulent antisemitism that survived into the Polish state reconstituted by the Treaty of Versailles in 1918.¹⁵

As a result of industrialization and hard economic times, Polish Catholics increasingly left the countryside to seek employment in towns and cities where they viewed established Jewish merchants and tradesmen as "foreign" competitors. Forced out of their jobs and into poverty, Jews were seen as a "surplus" population.¹⁶

For Further information see *The Jews of Poland*, Facing History and Ourselves

[The Virtual Jewish History Tour](#), Jewish Virtual Library
[Beyond the Pale: The Jews of Lithuania and Poland](#)

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- ¹ Weinberg, Gerhard L. A World At Arms. Cambridge University Press, 2005, 59
- ² Palmer, Alan. The Lands Between: A History of East-Central Europe since the Congress of Vienna. Macmillan: New York, 1970, 4
- ³ Friedlaender, Saul. The Years of Extermination Harper Collins, New York, 2007, 6
- ⁴ Jews of Poland. Facing History and Ourselves, 1998, 33-34
- ⁵ Ibid, 36
- ⁶ Ibid, 37
- ⁷ Bauer, Yehuda. The History of the Holocaust. Franklin Watts: New York 2001, 29, 33
- ⁸ Jews of Poland 36
- ⁹ "Shulcon Aruch" Torah.org. July 26, 2007 http://www.torah.org/advanced/shulchan-aruch/Jews_of_Poland, 37 *Some non-Jewish students mistakenly believe that Jewish Law is ever expanding. This would be a good opportunity to explain otherwise. While there are always new situations which need to be interpreted, e.g. new technologies, this does not entail a new "law."
- ¹⁰ Bauer, 33
- ¹¹ Palmer, 4, 59, Jews of Poland, 42
- ¹² Jews of Poland, 46-48
- ¹³ Bauer, 43
- ¹⁴ Jews of Poland, 33-34, Bauer 39
- ¹⁵ Palmer, 196
- ¹⁶ Friedlaender, 7