

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

by Michael C. Steinlauf



The cities and towns covered in this volume, currently all located within the Republic of Poland, were ruled until the end of the eighteenth century by the Polish nobility. The exceptions are Gdańsk (Danzig) and Wrocław (Breslau), which were populated and ruled primarily by Germans until World War II. Polish authority over the region was consolidated in the Middle Ages and reaffirmed under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795), which at the peak of its expansion contained not only the area within today's Poland, but also the lands making up today's countries of Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Slovakia as well as parts of Rumania and Hungary. It was in this vast territory, populated by a great variety of ethnic and religious groups, that Jews escaping persecution in Germany settled in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and then rooted themselves over the succeeding centuries.

In comparison to some Western European rulers, the Polish kings and landowners offered Jews favorable conditions under which to develop their lands. Within the relative tolerance and decentralization of the Polish Commonwealth, Jewish communities were able to rule themselves to a great extent. Jewish communities were run by elected councils, called *kehillas*, which were, in turn, subject to a kind of Jewish national council called the Council of the Four Lands. This high degree of political autonomy went hand in hand with religious and cultural autonomy. In other words, these Jewish communities were able to live according to their own traditions and lifestyles, with little outside interference, for many centuries. Within this vast area, which we call today Eastern Europe, they were able to establish a coherent Jewish civilization: the Yiddish-speaking world known as Eastern Ashkenaz.

In the late eighteenth century, foreign invasion and internal political turmoil led to the dissolution of the Polish Commonwealth. The cities and towns covered in this volume were then incorporated, depending on their location, either into the Austrian or the Russian Empire until the end of World War I. Both of these empires—the Austrian primarily with a carrot and the Russian primarily with a stick—tried to break down Jewish autonomy and turn the Jews into “loyal

subjects.” During this period, two new movements divided these Jewish communities internally as well. The first was *Hasidism*, a mass religious movement, centered around charismatic leaders called *tsaddikim* or *rebbe*s, that wanted to instill new life into Judaism. The second was *Haskalah*, a reform movement, at first involving only handfuls of Jews, which wanted Jews to model themselves after “progressive” Europeans. By the end of the nineteenth century, *Haskalah* had produced secular Jewish mass movements, including Zionism and Jewish socialism, which further divided the Jewish communities.

After World War I, the cities and towns in this volume were again under Polish rule, this time within a newly created Polish nation-state. In the new situation, the Jews encountered, on the one hand, comparative democracy to develop Jewish institutions and culture, both traditional and modern, but on the other hand, increasing anti-Semitism, fomented by Polish nationalists.

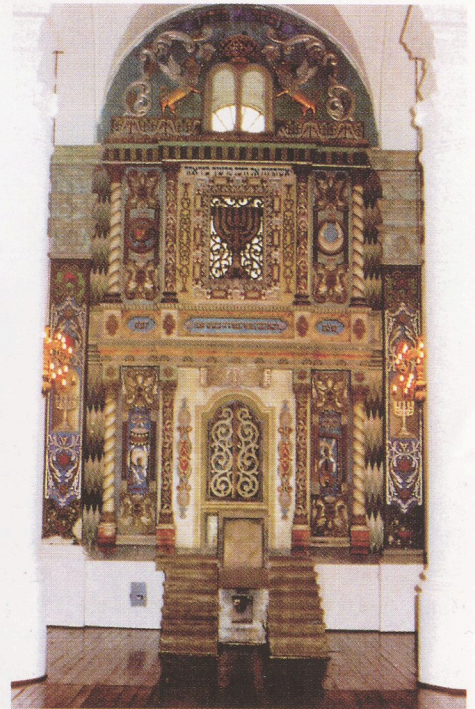
This was the situation when Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. Most of the cities and towns in this volume were immediately occupied by the Germans, several first by the Soviets and then by the Nazis. Soon after their entrance into a city, the Germans would select a Jewish Council,



Town square in Staszów, 1996



7 ■ Synagogue in Włodawa now houses a museum with a Jewish section, c. 1985



8 ■ Synagogue in Włodawa, interior, 1991 (see fig. 7)

which they called a *Judenrat*, to do their bidding, and also established a “Jewish residential quarter,” or ghetto within which Jews were required to live. Within the ghettos, which were soon sealed, hunger and disease took a terrible toll. Eventually, the Jews within the ghettos were either shot on the spot or shipped to camps, where most were immediately murdered and many of the remainder worked to death. Three million Jewish citizens of the pre-war Polish state were murdered; they accounted for half the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The Germans also killed 2 million non-Jewish Poles.

The reconstituted Poland that arose after the war lost its eastern territories to the Soviet Union, but in return, acquired previously German lands in the west. During the first post-war years, some 50,000 Polish Jews who had survived the Holocaust in Poland, joined by 200,000 who had survived in the Soviet Union, attempted to reestablish lives in Poland. However, a ruined economy combined with near-civil war between Communists and nationalists, and above all, violent anti-Semitism that culminated in a pogrom in Kielce in 1946 in which 42 Jews were murdered, resulted in the departure, primarily for Israel and the United States, of most surviving Polish Jews. Of the handful who remained, some found positions in the government of the so-called Polish People’s Republic, which remained within the Soviet bloc until 1989. In 1968–1970, a government-sponsored “anti-Zionist campaign,” linked to an attack on attempted reforms of the Communist system, drove 20,000 Jews, primarily employed in the government, out of the country.

Beginning in 1980, with the rise of the Solidarity movement which eventually helped to overthrow communism in Poland, some Poles, especially in student and intellectual circles, began to express interest in Jews, Judaism and Poland’s Jewish past. Such interest has deepened since the fall of communism and has taken many forms. Often with help from Jews abroad, Holocaust-related monuments have risen throughout Poland; there are festivals of Jewish music, art and film; in Warsaw and Kraków, there are research institutes for the study of Jewish history and culture; over the past seven years, more than 20 books by Isaac Bashevis Singer have been translated into Polish. At the same time, with censorship lifted, extreme nationalist and anti-Semitic rhetoric can be heard as well. But, particularly as compared to other post-Communist societies, such views have remained marginal and relatively inconsequential.

Today, there are an estimated 5,000–15,000 Jews in Poland, several Jewish periodicals, a Yiddish theater, a Jewish school, a pre-school, summer camp and functioning synagogues in a number of the larger cities of Poland.

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