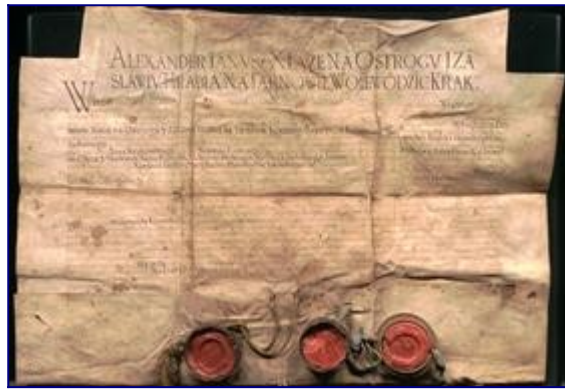


## Poland before 1795

The seventeenth-century Hebrew chronicler Gavri'el ben Yehoshu'a Schossburg characterized the historical status of the Jewish community in medieval and early modern Poland as “a delight to all the lands of the Exile for its Torah, honor and greatness” (*Petaḥ teshuvah*, 1651 4a). By the end of the seventeenth century, Polish Jewry had the highest number of Jews and the most individual communities of any Jewish population center; at least until the Shoah, the majority of Jews in the world could trace their ancestry to this region. Jews in Poland enjoyed extensive autonomy and collective economic prosperity, while developing sophisticated institutions of communal governance. Their rich cultural life included a complex infrastructure of religious and educational institutions, a wealth of significant additions to the Jewish library, and the cultivation and elaboration of received Ashkenazic and other traditions. Later generations have often regarded the precedents set by Polish Jewry in such areas as communal autonomy, education, halakhah, and Jewish self-definition as classic models.

### The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Between the founding of Poland in the tenth century and its partition and political destruction by [Russia](#), Prussia, and Austria at the end of the eighteenth century, the geopolitical definition of Poland underwent considerable evolution. Geographically, “Crown Poland” (Korona) expanded from a nucleus between the Odra (Oder) and Vistula rivers, eventually extending as far as the Baltic, the Dnieper, the Black Sea, and the Carpathian Mountains. By the early seventeenth century, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Poland’s formal name after the 1569 political union between Crown Poland and the Grand Duchy of [Lithuania](#)) was the largest country in Europe, encompassing all of post-1991 Poland, Lithuania, [Belarus](#), and [Latvia](#) as well as most of [Ukraine](#) and [Estonia](#).



Seventeenth-century version of the privilege to the Jewish community of Opatów, granted by Aleksander Janusz Ostrogski in 1670 with approbations and seals of subsequent owners of the town. (Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw, Collection of Parchment Records 5749)

The commonwealth was a constitutional monarchy with a king elected by the nobility (at most, 10 percent of the population). A parliament (Sejm) represented this same group and prevented the monarch from exercising absolute power. Cities and towns were usually organized as autonomous municipalities entitled to rights under a municipal charter granted them by the king; or under charters granted by individual nobles, who actually owned the towns located on their lands. The majority of the population consisted of peasant serfs who lived in villages, worked small plots of land, and owed feudal dues in labor, kind, or money to the landowners. The Polish economy was based on agriculture conducted on the lands owned mostly by the crown, the nobility (especially elite aristocratic magnates), and church institutions. Export of grain and other agricultural and natural products to the West, mostly by large landowners, constituted the main source of the country's wealth.

As Poland expanded through the centuries, it came to incorporate the various Slavic groups living east of the Vistula. It also attracted a panoply of immigrants: Germans, Italians, Scots, and Jews from the west; Armenians and Tatars from the south—each group with its own religion. Chiefly in response to political and economic realities, this multiethnic, multireligious state maintained a high degree of de facto toleration of non-Roman Catholic and nonethnic Polish groups (although this began to change during the seventeenth century).

# Jewish Settlement History



Torah Ark Curtain. Silesia, 1774. Velvet embroidered in silvered metal thread, cotton and silk on cardboard and cotton background in flat and raised stitches. The Torah curtain was donated to the synagogue by a benefactor in honor of the birth of his first son and depicts the sacrifice of Isaac, along with biblical verses from Genesis, Leviticus, and Psalms. (Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw)

There is no precise beginning to Jewish history in Poland. The earliest documentary references to Jews or Jewish institutions are made in passing: a responsum citing the decision of a rabbinical court in [Kraków](#) in the first half of the eleventh century; a 1085 chronicle noting how a Polish princess redeemed slaves from Jewish traders; the 1098 decision by a Bohemian prince to confiscate property of Jews who fled to Poland to escape persecutions. Routine legal documents appearing in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries take Jews for granted. For example, ca. 1150, "Petrus, the honored nobleman, acquired the village of Tinech [Tyniec, Tinz] from the Jews . . ."; or in 1203, "part of the village of the falcon breeders in Vratizlav [[Wrocław](#), Breslau] which was held by the Jew Joseph."

It seems unlikely that Jews resided permanently in Poland much before the twelfth century. Evidence of Jewish settlement on the northern shore of the Black Sea in Hellenistic and Byzantine times does not imply the existence of communities with a continuous history through the Middle Ages. Early medieval Jewish settlements

in Kievan Russia, some connected to the Khazar kingdom and some not, do not seem to have survived the Mongol invasion of 1240. Neither has anyone been able to prove that descendants of refugees from communities in [Khazaria](#), [Kiev](#), [Crimea](#), or elsewhere to the east constituted more than a token demographic or cultural presence in the vast pool of Polish Jewry.

The indicators that have reached us in the sources of the high and late Middle Ages—the Germanic origins of the Jews’ privileges; the acceptance of Ashkenazic rabbinic authority in Poland; the Yiddish language; and Polish coins inscribed with Hebrew letters minted by immigrant Jewish minters (1177–1296)—testify that the Jewish community in Poland had its roots in [Ashkenaz](#). As developing political stability and economic enterprises created attractive opportunities in Poland, and discriminatory legislation and incidents of persecution increased in Western Europe, Jews came to Poland. While their motivations for moving were somewhat different from those of their Christian neighbors, Jews were one stream in a large-scale migration to Poland from German-speaking lands in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries.

Around 1200, the Jewish population in Polish lands reached a critical mass that made the Jews’ existence demographically permanent and culturally significant. Jewish residence in Poland became an issue with legal, social, economic, and religious ramifications that called forth legislative reactions from both Jewish and Polish authorities. Thus it was sometime before 1217 that Rabbi Eli’ezer of Bohemia sought to convince Rabbi Yehudah Ḥasid in Regensburg that the small and poor communities of “Poland, Russia [i.e., Ukraine], and Hungary” required different principles of financing and organization from their mother communities in Ashkenaz, allowing them to pay their pararabbinic religious leaders out of contributions rather than from a regular communal budget. In 1264, the Grand Polish Duke Bolesław of [Kalisz](#) issued the first formal privilege for Polish Jews. This document, based on a German model adjusted to the Polish situation, was the earliest known attempt to routinize and regulate the conditions of Jewish residence in Poland.

## Demography

Sources for studying the historical demography of Jews in Poland are relatively few and problematic. Up until the eighteenth century, they consist primarily of tax rolls listing pieces of property, households, or individual taxpayers. Each of these categories is ambiguous and the lists themselves are often inaccurate.

Consequently, assessment of the Jewish population in Poland is subject to wide interpretation (as is that of the general population). For the earliest period (twelfth–fifteenth century), no figures may be substantiated. For about 1500, estimates range from approximately 10,000 to 30,000 (the total population in the commonwealth was 5–7.5 million); and for 1648, just prior to the Khmel’nyts’kyi uprising that resulted in significant population losses, Jews numbered 200,000 to 500,000 (the lower figure seems more realistic) out of a total population of 10–11 million. There is consensus, based on interpretation of the government’s census of Polish–Lithuanian Jewry in 1764–1765, that at that time there were approximately 750,000 Jews in the commonwealth (11–11.5 million total). This was the largest Jewish community of the period, perhaps representing as much as one-third of the world’s Jewish population.

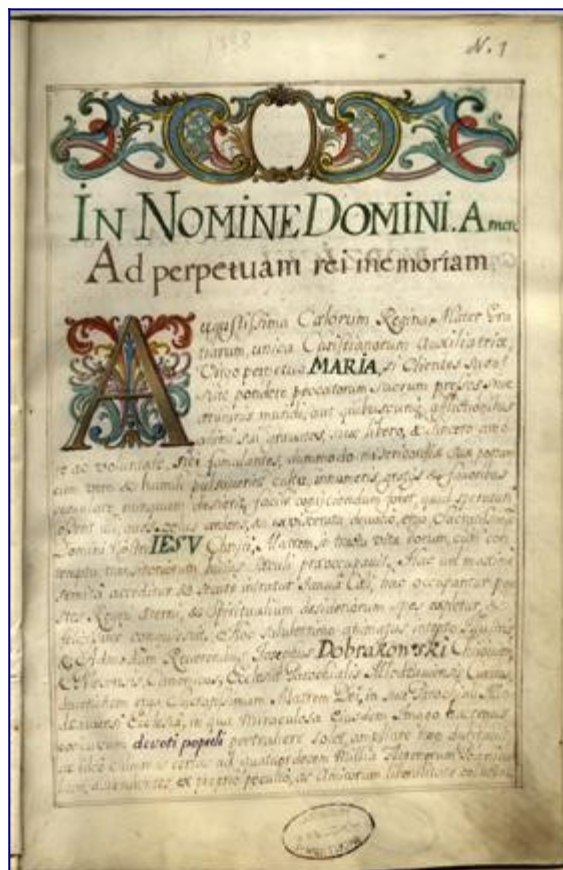


Oldest in-situ Jewish tombstone in Poland: Grave of Talmudic scholar Ya’akov Kopelman (d. 1541), Lublin. Photograph by Monika Krajewska. (© Monika Krajewska)

By the eighteenth century, some two-thirds of Polish–Lithuanian Jews lived east of the Vistula in the regions of the commonwealth where non-Polish ethnic groups predominated. Also, most Jews lived in towns and cities; thus while representing less than 7 percent of the general population, Jews made up as much as 50 percent of the urban population (less in the large cities in the western regions; more in the smaller cities and towns of the eastern areas—what would later be

referred to as [shtetls](#) [Jewish towns]). There were no West European-style formal [ghettos](#) in Poland. Most towns and cities had a defined Jewish quarter, though in many localities as the Jewish population grew, some Jews and Christians lived side by side. Some of the most important Jewish communities were in large, royally chartered cities such as [Kraków](#), [Poznań](#), [Lublin](#), [Przemyśl](#); [Lwów](#), [Luts'k](#), and [Ludmir](#) (Włodzimierz; Rus., Vladimir-Volynski) in Crown Poland (which included Ukraine); and [Brest](#), [Hrodna](#) (Grodno), [Vilna](#), and [Pinsk-Karlin](#) in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Jews were officially prohibited from living in Warsaw from 1527; however, by the late eighteenth century the city contained a significant Jewish community). In addition, communities in towns owned by nobility, such as [Brody](#), [Dubno](#), Krotoszyn, [Leszno](#), Międzyboż, [Opatów](#), [Ostróg](#), Pińczów, Zaslów, [Zamość](#), and Żółkiew ([Zhovkva](#)) came to rival—in size and economic, political, and intellectual influence—the royal cities.

## Political Status



Document concerning funds raised by Józef Dobrakowski, the parish priest of Młodawsk, which were loaned to the Jewish community of Pińczów to build a synagogue, 1738. (Archiwum Panstwowe, Kielce, Poland)

The fundamental terms of Jewish political status in Poland were clearly implied by the Bolesław privilege and successor documents granted by the Polish kings. These charters assumed that Jews were a vulnerable minority group requiring defense of their physical security, religious freedom, and economic activities. To provide this, Polish kings offered protective legislation, allowed Jews broad autonomy, and exempted them from the authority of municipal and ecclesiastical courts, while granting direct judicial access to the royal court system. In return, Jews were expected to live as a law-abiding, peaceable, and orderly community, and to make a disproportionate financial contribution to the crown's coffers and the economy in general.

This relationship was complicated by the fact that as Poland expanded, and especially after the confederation with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 1569 and the annexation of Ukraine, more and more Jews moved onto territories owned by nobility, in particular the huge latifundia of the aristocratic magnates. Such Jews owed their primary loyalty to their lords and it was the nobility who were both obligated to defend them and entitled to the economic benefits Jews provided. Latifundia owners had judicial authority over "their" Jews, including the right to hear appeals, particularly after 1539 when King Sigismund I ceded to the nobles full legal jurisdiction over Jews living on their lands.

Those who governed the Jews—whether king or noble—had an interest in promoting their safety and prosperity. A strong, secure Jewish community offered maximum economic benefits at minimum cost. Jews paid relatively high taxes, borrowed the lords' idle capital at interest, and promoted commercial activity. For the king, the Jews, as a predominantly urban element—not subordinate to municipal councils and local courts—were a valuable counterweight to the municipalities whose charters secured them a large measure of freedom from royal control. For example, allowing Jews, officially or unofficially, to circumvent town staple rights had the effect of vitiating traditional town monopolies and promoting freer [trade](#), a means that led to increased royal revenues. Nobles could found private commercial towns with significant Jewish populations and thereby could obviate the need to conduct trade in the large, royally chartered cities with all of the restrictions and fees they imposed on commerce.

As guarantors of Jewish rights, kings and nobles often intervened when hostile elements tried to limit Jewish activity or threatened Jewish safety and freedom. Administrators and soldiers were charged with protecting Jews from harm, and

frequently did so. Nonetheless, instances of rapacious behavior on the part of noble lords and officials at all levels are legion.



Torah breastplate. Polish school, ca. 1775–1800. Silver, agate, and colored glass. Muzeum Narodowe, Warsaw. (© Muzeum Narodowe / The Bridgeman Art Library)

The Polish church was committed to a traditional theology mandating discrimination and Jewish inferior status. A host of restrictions enjoined a large measure of physical segregation of Jews and limited commerce and daily intercourse with them. In practice, however, some church institutions were among the largest landowners in the commonwealth and made use of Jews in ways similar to the king and nobility. Jews and Jewish communities were particularly valuable as interest-paying borrowers of church monies, so that Polish church interests lay in fostering a prosperous Jewish community that could repay debts. Moreover, in Poland the relatively large number of “dissenting” religions (multiple Protestant and Orthodox denominations) meant that Jews and Judaism were less of a perceived threat and, proportionally, received less theological attention than in the West, at least until the eighteenth century.

Of chief concern to Christians was the economic competition Jews posed to Christian guild merchants and craftsmen. Jews were continually increasing the number of products in which they traded, expanding their clientele to include



more Christians and more areas of the town, and moving from wholesale to retail. Eventually, they also engaged more in [crafts](#). Christians might also complain about Jewish commercial practices such as organizing syndicates to buy in volume, lowering profit margins, and advertising. There were allegations about Jewish failure to bear a fair share of town taxes and defense expenses, illegal Jewish construction, and high Jewish housing density. Another issue was the Jews' purported privileged status vis-à-vis the Polish higher authorities.

Jewish grievances concentrated on the lack of security, discrimination in law enforcement, and tax gouging. Insisting that their contributions to defense efforts and tax revenues were disproportionate, Jews repeatedly claimed that their expanding economic activities were the result of hard work and the demands of the marketplace and not some conspiratorial plot. Additional construction merely reflected their high natural rate of increase.

Charters or privileges were what made Jewish life possible in a society in which they were defined as aliens. The competing and contradictory interests of the Jewish community and the Christian municipality were typically resolved or at least expressed in a "pact" in which the limits of Jewish economic activity were delineated. Such pacts were characteristic of royally chartered cities and towns. Common restrictions stated that Jews would be allowed to sell merchandise wholesale, but not retail, and only in certain areas of the town; that the clientele of Jewish barbers, tailors, and bakers be limited to Jews; and that the Jewish community pay an annual fee in exchange for commercial privileges. Christians often complained, however, that Jews flouted the restrictions agreed upon in the pacts; the documents were frequently renegotiated.

If the privileges represented desires of the kings and aristocratic noblemen (often reinforced by emoluments proffered by Jews) to allow Jews the freedom and security they needed to flourish and serve royal or seigniorial interests, the pacts showed that such intentions encountered resistance by significant elements in society. The actual outcome of the dialectic represented by the privileges and pacts depended on a complex calculus of economic considerations, sociological factors, and political maneuvering.

## Depredations



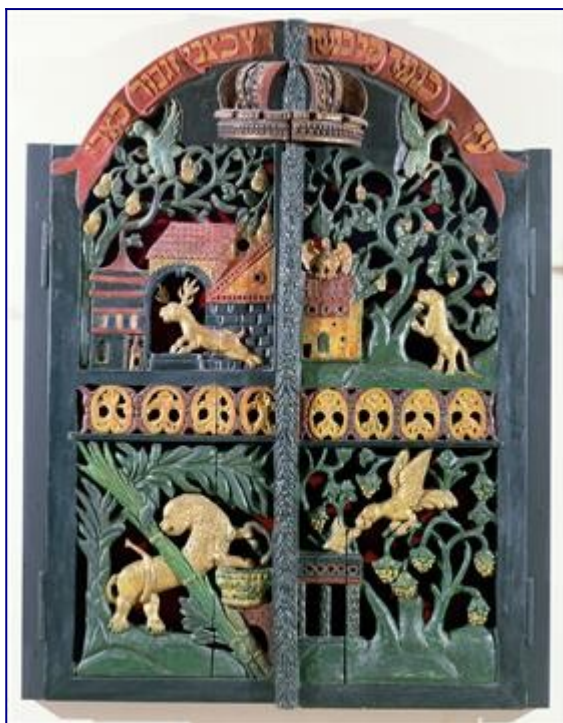
*Portrait of Elia (Ella? Elke?)*. Krzysztof Radziwiłłowski, 1781. Oil on canvas. Muzeum Narodowe, Warsaw. The Polish inscription on the back of the painting reads: “The king, stopping in Żwaniec [now Zhvanets, Ukr.] ordered Krzysztof Radziwiłłowski to paint this portrait of Chajka, the daughter of the merchant Abramek of Lwów, on 14 November 1781.” Some think that this is a portrait of Chajka’s daughter. (© Muzeum Narodowe / The Bridgeman Art Library)

Many agreed with Rabbi [David ben Shemu’el ha-Levi](#) (Taz) that Poland was a place where “most of the time the gentiles do no harm; on the contrary they do right by Israel” (*Divre David*; 1689). However, at times the elaborate legal and customary structures that were instituted to ensure a Jewish *modus vivendi* broke down. In addition to Jews being exposed (disproportionately, due to the nature of their businesses) to the same dangers as everyone else from the generally poor state of law enforcement and lack of security both in the towns and on the roads, Jews were the victims of blood libels, Host desecration charges, and other accusations that from time to time resulted in local attacks and [pogroms](#). The most widespread persecutions of Jews accompanied the combined peasant uprising and Cossack revolt against Polish hegemony in Ukraine, which began in the spring of 1648 under the leadership of Bogdan Khmel’nyts’kyi and targeted Jews in particular as representative of Polish rule. From a Jewish perspective, these events, known as [gzeyres takh vetat](#) (the persecutions of 1648–1649), consisted mainly of attacks by rebels against many Ukrainian, Belorussian, and eastern

Polish towns with large Jewish populations. As many as 20,000 Jews were killed, a like number became refugees, and some were forced to convert. The Muscovite and Swedish invasions of Poland, in 1654–1656, likewise brought death and misery to large numbers of Jews in the paths of the invading (and Polish) armies. In the eighteenth century, a series of Cossack (usually called Haidamak) rebellions culminated in the well-organized 1768 revolt, centered on the city of [Uman](#), that resulted in the deaths of many Jews.

## Jews in the Polish Economy

Whether authorities sought to encourage or to restrict Jewish presence, it was the Jews' economic activity that provided the primary justification. This activity was concentrated in five main areas: moneylending and [banking](#), commerce, [leasing](#) (arenda), artisanry, and service occupations.



Ark doors from the Bocian synagogue. Kraków, seventeenth century. Inscribed above the doors is the Hebrew saying: "Be strong as a leopard, light as an eagle, fleet as a stag, and strong as a lion [to do the will of thy Father]" (*Pirke avot* 5: 23). Heichal Shlomo Wolfson Museum, Jerusalem, Israel. (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

Jews coming to Poland from German lands were experienced in moneylending. Poles were disposed to have them deal in it, not only because of traditional Christian religious scruples concerning the practice, but also because the

expanding Polish economy was in need of [credit](#). In earlier centuries of Jewish settlement, Jews such as Aharon of [Poznań](#), Wołczko of Lwów, [Lewko](#) of Kraków, and Mosheh and Raḥel (Rashka) [Fiszel](#) lent considerable sums to the nobility, royalty, and municipal councils. Their economic power lent them political influence as well, both in the corridors of Polish power and within the Jewish community.

Eventually, however, Jewish lenders abandoned capital markets because of a variety of factors including competition by cash-rich monasteries and noblemen and objective economic conditions such as inflation. Jews' involvement in credit was then concentrated on short-term lending, usually in pawns, where rates varied between 20 and 50 percent. Pawnbroking, however, was usually a sideline and often became the responsibility of the woman of the family.

With the reduction of the importance of Jews as lenders came an increase (in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) of their importance as borrowers. Indeed, Jewish communities, which increasingly came to borrow to cover their capital and operating expenses, became the main credit customers of large-scale Christian moneylenders: the monasteries and certain nobles. Also significant were Jewish merchants who borrowed to finance merchandise purchases and other business expenses.

For Jews, much more important than the money trade was the [trade](#) in merchandise and commodities. There were international Jewish merchants often acting, at least officially, as agents of the king or aristocratic magnates. They played a major role in the commonwealth's import-export trade with Western Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and Muscovy.

Within Poland, Jews were noteworthy as suppliers to large European trading firms that established branches in the big Polish cities. These Jews were at the high end of a commercial chain beginning in the countryside with the Jewish peddler, innkeeper, or market vendor who purchased the surplus produce or handicrafts of particular peasants or small landowners. This produce was marketed by the purchaser or by subsequent retailers, jobbers, or wholesalers. They sold it either in the local town on market day, or farther afield at regional fairs, in a provincial town market, or in a large commercial city. It was not unusual to find a Jew from a small town in Ukraine selling thread, flax, furs, nuts, honey, tallow, or cloth in a

large city such as Lwów or even at international fairs in Breslau, Frankfurt, or Leipzig.

Reciprocally, nonlocal products made their way down through the chain from international importers to Jewish merchants who frequented large cities, to be distributed ultimately by Jewish storekeepers, vendors, and peddlers in towns and along the countryside. In addition to supplying foodstuffs, spices, tools, and textiles that were not produced locally, Jewish merchants paid peasants for their products—these payments were often the peasants' only source of cash. The Jewish commercial network was, typically, the main link between the rural population and the market economy.



"A Polish Jew." Copperplate engraving by Christoph Weigel after Caspar Luyken. *Neu-eröffnete Welt-Galleria* (Nuremberg 1703). (Moldovan Family Collection)

Beginning in the 1580s, legal sources began recording leasing (*arenda*) contracts between nobility latifundium owners and Jews. In 1594, for example, Prince Piotr Zabrzski completed an agreement with Efrayim of Międzyboż and Efrayim's Christian partner, Mikolaj Wransowicz. For the sum of 9,000 zloty, Zabrzski leased all his possessions located in the district of Krzemieniec, including "all the villages and settlements appertaining to these estates, together with the noble boyars, the burghers, and the serfs of those cities and villages . . . all their debts,

obligations, and privileges, with the *arendas*, taverns, tolls, ponds, mills, and their revenues, with the manors [*folwarki*], the various tithes paid by the boyars, burghers, and serfs of those districts, and all the other revenues . . ." (*Arkhiv Yugo-Zapadnoi Rossii*, part 6, I, article 78).

Such leases might have covered as little as one village or as many as several townships measuring hundreds of square miles. What was common to all of them, however, was the transfer of authority over the entire enterprise to the lessee (*arendarz*). He organized agricultural labor and production, marketed the estate's produce, collected revenues, and administered justice.

For latifundium owners, leasing was an easy method of administration and of ensuring revenues. For the estate lessees, *arenda* was a potentially profitable livelihood that afforded them relatively high status both within the Jewish community and in their dealings with gentiles. It had the potential to generate surplus income that could be invested in commerce or in short-term moneylending. Despite its advantages, however, leasing entangled Jews in the operation of Poland's feudal system. It was often Jewish lessees who in practice made feudal demands upon the serfs and enforced discipline. The bitterness they could arouse was reflected in attacks on Jews during the 1648 Khmel'nyts'kyi revolt. Sometimes the peasant rebels explicitly noted that they were taking revenge for Jewish rule over them.

Latifundium leasing was a "basic industry" for the Jewish community; each element of the lease—ponds, mills, taverns, customs house, and so on—or each geographical subunit of a large estate could be sublet to secondary (Jewish) lessees, creating a livelihood for dozens of additional families. Often, especially from the late seventeenth century, there was no lessee of the latifundium land, and the leasing pyramid began with the "general lessee" of all revenue sources only of a given town: tolls, taxes, forests, fishponds, mills, and liquor enterprises. His or her sublessees could be as small time as the operator of a single tavern in the countryside. The range and variety of lessees only underscore how pervasive and significant leasing was as a foundation of Jewish economic security in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

From as early as the sixteenth century, Jews were involved in crafts, especially those related to the requirements of *halakhah*: baking, butchering, tailoring, haircutting. In the eighteenth century, as the population grew and leasing and

commercial opportunities declined due to changing political and economic conditions, the number of Jewish artisans increased significantly and Jews expanded into such occupations as carpentry, metalwork, and candle-, soap-, potash-, and gunpowder making. Jewish artisans might be associated in some way with Christian guilds or establish an all-Jewish [guild](#) (Yid., *khevre*; Heb., *hevrah*); however, many Jewish artisans functioned as *partaczy* (bunglers), outside the guild structure.

A significant proportion of people were employed by the Jewish community to provide religious, social, and administrative services. Every community had beadles (Heb. sg., *shamash*; Pol., *szkolnik*) who functioned as agents of the communal administration or of the various confraternities and guilds, court bailiffs, and synagogue attendants. The ritual slaughterer (*shoykhet*) occupied an economically sensitive position because slaughtering was an important source of consumption tax revenue for the community; any mistakes he made rendered the slaughtered meat unkosher, costing the meat's owner dearly. There also was the communal rabbi who headed the court system, taught, decided halakhic questions, officiated at ritual occasions, and occasionally preached. Other functionaries, depending on the size of the community, included assistant rabbis, [cantors](#), bathhouse attendants, teachers, gravediggers, physicians, and [ba'ale shem](#).

## Jewish Community

Privileges promised Jews the right to live according to their traditions and granted protection from hostile treatment. Pacts demonstrated that the gentile population wanted the Jews in their midst to impinge on their lives as little as possible. Ironically, these two tendencies converged, creating a space in which all agreed that Jews should continue to articulate the medieval institutions of an autonomous Jewish community. As a result, every town, while geographically integral, consisted of—in political terms—two boroughs, Christian and Jewish. The Christian one was governed by a municipal council and magistrate court, functioning according to municipal law. The Jewish one was administered by a communal council (*kahal*), which derived its authority from privileges granted by the king or the magnate owner as well as from Jewish tradition. Both of these apparatuses were subordinate to the supervisory authority of the king's or owner's representative; neither could legally compel the other.

The communal government, with roots if not blueprints in Talmudic law, was dominated typically by affluent merchants and lessees (*arendarzy*) who were generally in a mutually supportive relationship with the rabbinic elite. In each town, this relatively small group (Heb., *yeḥide segulah, asefah*; Pol., *pospólstwo*) paid most of the taxes and therefore, in line with the regnant political theory of the day (which held leaders to be the guardians rather than the representatives of the people), possessed the right to vote and hold office. Through a system of electors they indirectly chose the *kahal* officeholders (*parnasim* or *roshim* [executive officers], *tovim* [assistants to the executives], *ne'emanim* [treasurers], *ro'eh ḥeshbon* [auditors], *gaba'im* [committee heads], *dayanim* [judges], and *shama'im* [tax assessors]). The general population of the community (*kehilah*) had no formal political role and included those who paid low or no taxes, all women, and single men.

Each town's *kahal* set and collected Jews' taxes; sponsored the Jewish court that adjudicated civil actions between Jewish litigants in the first instance; maintained Jewish religious institutions and services (synagogue, cemetery, *mikveh* [ritual bath], abattoir); superintended and to some extent sponsored the community's educational institutions; hired and supervised the rabbi and other professional staff; regulated economic and social behavior, frequently employing sanctions and punishments; provided charity and welfare; maintained a working relationship with Polish authorities, both serving as their administrative and judicial arm when applicable to local Jews, and securing Jewish interests by means of lobbying and negotiating with them. The *kahal*-procured financing for all of these functions came from internal taxation, the operation of revenue-producing monopolies leased from the estate owner, borrowing, or the sale of certain monopoly rights (e.g., the right [*ḥazakah*] to negotiate with the owner for a local estate lease; or the right to serve as doctor or rabbi in the community).

The *kahal* also loosely supervised—and often was in conflict with—a network of *kehvres* that could be devoted to the performance of a particular commandment such as burial, visiting the sick, dowering brides, or studying sacred texts. Some *kehvres* could be artisan guilds. In either case, the *kehvres* served the social and religious needs of their members (for example, holding prayer services and providing material aid) in addition to their declared *raison d'être*. These groups gave less affluent people, who were not candidates for offices in the *kahal*, an opportunity to be active and influential in communal life.





Jewish councils of Crown Poland, eighteenth century. (Adapted from material provided by Judith Kalik)

The existence of a large number of Jewish communities in Poland created situations in which jurisdictional conflicts could and did arise. For example, two independent communities might argue about which of them had the right to claim financial, administrative, and judicial jurisdiction over a local community that was too small to maintain its own *kahal*. Community [councils](#) might define and sanction bankruptcies differently, thus prompting bankrupt persons to migrate to the community or region offering the most favorable conditions and leaving creditors in the lurch. Rabbis from different communities ruling differentially on religious issues, particularly those with economic ramifications such as for operating leased estate concessions on the [Sabbath](#) or charging loan interest, could create a situation in which actions that were permitted in some places were prohibited in others, consequently destabilizing the economic or social framework. Such problems could be overcome if there were a central authority that had the power to set and implement Jewish communal policy on a countrywide basis, and to adjudicate intercommunal controversies as well as appeals from local communal courts.

For Polish authorities, having a central Jewish authority was the most efficient way for collecting annual taxes from Jews and negotiating with them on all other relevant issues. Rather than facing lobbyists from dozens of *kehalim* or attempting to promulgate and enforce rulings among hundreds of Jewish communities, the authorities used one central address to facilitate the ability to arrive at agreements and convey demands.

Such a central authority indeed developed, taking advantage of the opportunity afforded by the large periodic commercial fairs held in [Lublin](#), Jarosław, and elsewhere, attended by most major Jewish businessmen and many important rabbis. In the late sixteenth century, with the support of the King Stefan Batory, who was willing to grant official recognition to a central Jewish body that would be responsible for assessing and collecting taxes from Jews (no formal founding document is known), these meetings (ca. 1580) evolved into the Council of Four Lands (Va'ad Arba' Aratsot) for the territory of Crown Poland and Ukraine (which was subdivided into regions and districts) and the Council of the State of Lithuania (Va'ad Medinat Lita, made up of “chief communities” and their satellites) for the territory included in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. These bodies claimed legislative, judicial, and executive authority over communities within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Consisting of representatives from every region (in Poland's “Four Lands” there were also regional councils [*va'ade gelilot*], which in some cases predated the central council by several decades or more), they enacted administrative, economic, religious, and social legislation; imposed tax schedules on each region (or each community); settled intercommunal and other large-scale disputes; set guidelines for the financial, educational, and [charity](#) operations of local communities; decided how best to allocate collective resources; and employed lobbyists (*shtadlonim*) to protect and secure Jewish interests.

## **Jewish Culture**

On a subtle level, Jews shared much of the same culture as Poles, whatever its origins. For example, Jews believed in conventional political and economic theories, viewed Polish political institutions as legitimate (and even partially emulated them), and shared folk religious beliefs in the ubiquity of [demons](#) and the efficacy of [magic](#). Jewish material culture—architectural, [food](#), [dress](#), artistic, and musical styles—while distinctive, were largely variations on Polish models. In Jewish terms, Poland-Lithuania was regarded by the rabbis of the day as a separate, integral entity for halakhic and customary purposes.



"Juif Polonois" (Polish Jew). Etching by Jean Baptiste Le Prince, 1765. (Moldovan Family Collection)

Based on their respective theologies, Jews and Christians shared an assessment of Jews' fundamental otherness within dominant Christian society. This and the acts of violence perpetrated against Jews resulted in Jewish feelings of alienation and even fear. Privileges and judicial records provide ample proof that such feelings were not unfounded. Jewish culture in Poland was leavened by an underlying perception of insecurity and powerlessness. Gentiles in general were viewed as potential persecutors, and salutary Jewish circumstances were regarded as fragile and contingent. In response, Jewish culture encoded a stance of *kabdehu ve-hashdehu* (respect, but suspect) with regard to Christians. Rabbinic laws and communal ordinances attempted to restrict contact with non-Jews, and Jewish folklore often assigned a demonic role to its gentile characters.

But in their otherness, Jews maintained a positive evaluation of themselves and their way of life, entertaining feelings of Jewish solidarity and rejection of, and even superiority to, the hegemonic culture. This mentality, combined with the Jews' vernacular, Yiddish; their identifiable material culture; the Jewish calendar; communal institutions; Polish Jewry laws; and Jewish religious rituals, especially

prayer customs and food restrictions; demarcated the boundaries of Polish Jewish space. Within this space, Polish Jews created a multifaceted culture.

Much of this culture can be appreciated by examining the books of the period. As print, with its power to increase the audience for written knowledge exponentially, took hold throughout Europe in the sixteenth through seventeenth centuries, new books and new types of Jewish books, written or printed in Poland or imported from other centers of Hebrew publishing, constituted an important cultural tool. There were new synthetic codes of *Halakhah*, such as [Mosheh Isserles' Mapah](#) (printed in Kraków together with the Sephardic Yosef Karo's, [1569–1579], and [Mordekhai Yafeh's Levushim](#) [1590–1604; 1620]). Yafeh's magnum opus also included biblical, homiletical, philosophical, kabbalistic, and astronomical treatises, reflecting the expansion of the study curriculum resulting from the new availability of classic works of great Sephardic and Eastern scholars such as Sa'adyah Gaon, Maimonides, Nahmanides, Avraham ibn Ezra, and Bahya ibn Pakuda'.

The first known printed Yiddish book, *Mirkeves hamishne* (Kraków, 1534) was a biblical concordance intended for a nonscholarly audience. This audience included women; indeed, many books seem to have been written either specifically for them or for other categories of people with limited formal education. There were new Bible translations, epic poems, midrashic works, halakhic compendia on “women's commandments,” morality books, stories, special prayer collections ([tkhines](#)), and even illustrated children's books. These publications imply the adoption of the notion that the unlearned needed to know and had a right to know.

The new attention to women as potential readers accords with other developments, such as halakhic rulings making it easier for women to attend synagogue services, and [synagogue architecture](#) that, in the earlier period, made provisions for a women's annex (*vaybershul*) adjoining the main synagogue and, later, for a women's section (*ezras noshim*) that was an integral part of the synagogue building. All of these bespeak a desire to have women participate more actively and more knowledgeably in religious life.

Another important cultural vector reflected in the new library was the penetration of Kabbalah into daily life. The appearance of popular Zohar study aids as well as multiple editions of, commentaries on, and Yiddish translations of books such as

*Ḥemdat yamim, Shevet musar, and Shene luhot ha-berit* indicate that the arcane [mystical doctrines](#) that had been (and still were) the province of small circles of mystical adepts called Hasidim, were now also taking popular form. People believed that Kabbalah contained the true secrets of the Torah and thus of life itself. Jews also patronized experts in practical Kabbalah, [ba`ale shem](#), who as shamanlike communicators with the divine realm promised to apply supernatural knowledge and magic to solving people's health, social, and economic problems.

This turn to Kabbalah probably bloomed in the wake of the appearance of the putative messiah Shabetai Tsevi (1626–1676) in the Ottoman Empire and was fueled in part by mystical preachers and their books convinced of the apostate messiah's imminent return. While at least some Polish Jews responded to the initial news of the messiah in 1665–1666, and there were some prominent Polish believers, the extent of Polish [Sabbatianism](#) awaits fuller clarification. Sabbatianism's descendant, [Frankism](#), had its public debut in Podolia in 1755, but by the 1760s it retained little effect on the Polish Jewish community.

The mystically based movement that did establish itself permanently in the commonwealth was [Hasidism](#). It was the opening up of the old style hasidic circle to broader participation that cleared a path for the development of the new Hasidism. While conventionally viewed as the result of the activity of Yisra'el ben Eli'ezer, the [Ba'al Shem Tov](#) (Besht; d. 1760), scholars now agree that the Besht was probably the leader of a pietistic circle of mystics. He introduced certain doctrinal innovations that, together with subsequent organizational and ideological developments, led to the crystalization of the new Hasidic movement late in the eighteenth century.

Traditional Ashkenazic educational institutions were also present in Poland. Girls were usually taught at home by a tutor or a family member, rarely learning more than to read Hebrew letters. Their subsequent education was based on casual oral instruction and what they might read in Yiddish books. For boys, elementary education was conducted in the one-room schoolhouse called the [heder](#). Around puberty, most joined the work world; however, a small percentage continued in a [yeshiva](#). The first important Polish yeshiva was established by Ya'akov Polak, the pioneer of Polish-style Talmudic and halakhic study, in [Kraków](#) in the late fifteenth century. Kraków continued to maintain renowned yeshivas under such rabbis as [Mosheh Isserles](#) in the sixteenth century, [Yo'el Sirkes](#) and [Yom Tov Lipmann Heller](#) in the seventeenth century. Other leading Polish yeshivas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, their Golden Age, were in [Brest](#) (headed by [Shelomoh](#)

[Luria](#) and later Sirkes, among others), [Lublin](#) (Shalom Shakhna, Luria, and [Mordekhai Yafeh](#)), [Ostróg](#) (Luria, [Shmuel Edels](#), and Yesha'yah Horowitz), and [Poznań](#) ([Yehudah Leib ben Betsal'el](#), Yafeh, and Horowitz). Both heders and yeshivas might be financed by either public or private funds. Upon marriage, most yeshiva students left full-time study, but a few continued on to a [bet midrash](#) (publicly funded) or a [kloyz](#) (privately funded) where their full-time independent study was subsidized. Some of these *lomdim* (lit., learners) eventually sought rabbinic ordination.

In the period under consideration, higher education was confronted with three controversial issues that had ramifications for both the curriculum and the ways in which it was taught. The first was: should *halakhah* be codified in books or should the law be derived by individual rabbis case by case, based on their interpretation of the classic sources? This issue led in turn to the question of the nature and purpose of pilpul (casuistry); whether it was a tool for deriving actual law from classic sources or whether, if the new codes were a dependable source for knowing the law, its purpose should be to teach students how to reason. Finally, with so many new books available for study, should the yeshiva limit its curriculum to the classic halakhic sources or also include books, many of them Sephardic, of philosophy, biblical commentary, homiletics, morality, science, grammar, and Kabbalah? This last issue was often referred to as the debate over the study of philosophy or outside wisdom, but was actually an argument over what was to constitute the canon of Jewish studies.

## Partition Period

During the period in which Poland's neighbors were dismembering the country (in three stages: 1772, 1793, and 1795), the nation's elite tried to explore avenues of reform that would strengthen the state and enable it to resist foreign domination. One topic on the reform agenda was the Jews. Before and during the landmark Four-Year Sejm (1788–1792), various Polish politicians and intellectuals made proposals—all unsuccessful—for changing the Jews' status. A small number of early *maskilim*, among them [Menahem Mendel Lefin](#) (1749–1826) and Mosheh Marcuse (late eighteenth century), supported the reformers' objectives. [Berek Joselewicz](#) (1764–1809) took a more pragmatic tack, organizing a Jewish regiment that fought in the 1794 Kościuszko revolt against the Russians, hoping to demonstrate that Jews were not only *in* Poland, but *of* it, too.

When, in 1795, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth disappeared from the map, its Jews found themselves divided among three absolutist states. This marked the end of the history of Jews in Poland-Lithuania and the beginning of the history of the Jews in "Eastern Europe."

## Suggested Reading

Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2nd ed., rev. and enl., vol. 16, *Poland-Lithuania, 1200-1650* (New York and Philadelphia, 1976); Israel Bartal and Israel Gutman, eds., *Kiyum ve-shever: Yehude Polin le-dorotehem*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1997-2001); Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, vol. 1, *The Origins to 1795* (New York, 1982); Edward Fram, *Ideals Face Reality: Jewish Law and Life in Poland, 1550-1655* (Cincinnati, 1997); Jacob Goldberg, *Jewish Privileges in the Polish Commonwealth*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem, 1985-2001); Israel Halperin, *Pinkas va'ad arba' aratsot*, ed. Israel Bartal, vol. 1, 2nd rev. ed. (Jerusalem, 1989/90); Gershon David Hundert, *The Jews in a Polish Private Town: The Case of Opatów in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1992); Gershon David Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley, 2004); Elhanan Reiner, "The Ashkenazi Elite at the Beginning of the Modern Era," *Polin* 10 (1997): 85-98; Moshe Rosman, *The Lords' Jews: Magnate-Jewish Relations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); Moshe Rosman, "Innovative Tradition: Jewish Culture in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth," in *Cultures of the Jews*, ed. David Biale, pp. 519-570 (New York, 2002); Shaul Stampfer, *Counting the Losses* (Cambridge, Mass., forthcoming); Daniel Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State, 1386-1795* (Seattle, 2001); Adam Teller, ed., *Studies in the History of the Jews in Old Poland in Honor of Jacob Goldberg* (Jerusalem 1998); Bernard Dov Weinryb, *Texts and Studies in the Communal History of Polish Jewry* (New York, 1950); Bernard Dov Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland: A Social and Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland from 1100 to 1800* (Philadelphia, 1973).