

POLISH JEWRY: A CHRONOLOGY

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The old castle and the Maharsha synagogue in Ostrog, connected by an underground passage. Built in the 17th century, the synagogue was named after Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Eidels (1555 – 1631), author of the work *Hidushei Maharsha*. In 1795 the Jews of Ostrog escaped death by hiding in the synagogue during a military attack. To celebrate their survival, the community observed a special Purim each year, on the 7th of Tamuz, and read a scroll or *Megillah* which told the story of this miracle. Photograph by Alter Kacyzne. YIVO Archives. Courtesy of the Forward Association.

A Haven from Persecution

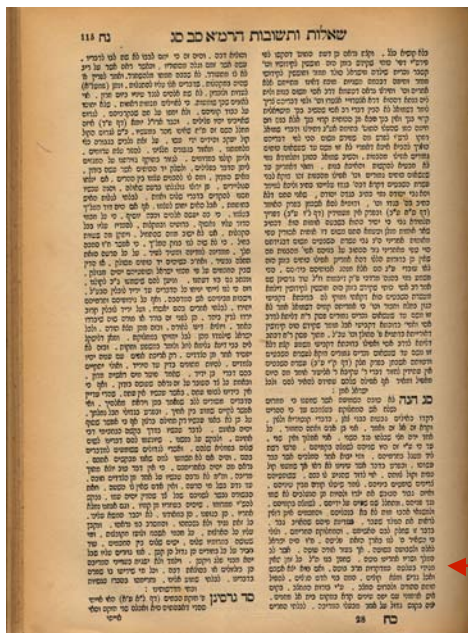
YIVO's dedication to the study of the history of Jews in Poland reflects the importance of Polish Jewry in the Jewish world over a period of one thousand years, from medieval times until the 20th century.

In early medieval Europe, Jewish communities flourished across a wide swath of Europe, from the Mediterranean lands and the Iberian Peninsula to France, England and Germany. But beginning with the first crusade in 1096 and continuing through the 15th century, the center of Jewish life steadily moved eastward to escape persecutions, massacres, and expulsions. A wave of forced expulsions brought an end to the Jewish presence in Western Europe for long periods of time.

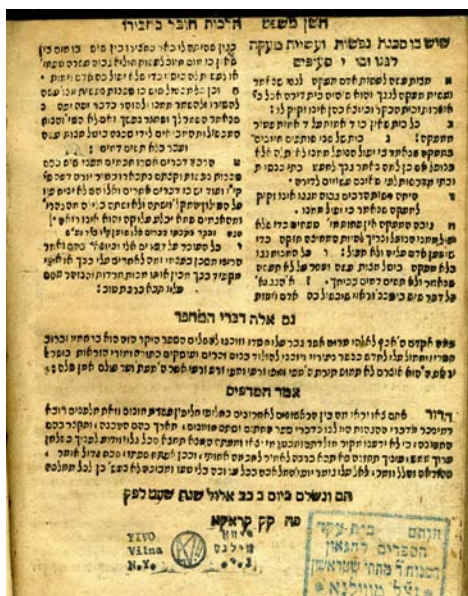
In their quest to find safe haven from persecutions, Jews began to settle in Poland, Lithuania, Bohemia, and parts of Ukraine, and were able to form new communities there during the 12th through 14th centuries.

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Responsum by Rabbi Moshe Isserles (known as the REMA), in which Rabbi Isserles refers to 'the land [of Poland] as a haven provided by G'd for the Jewish people where they can live free of the persecution experienced in other countries. Written in Hebrew, in the style of an ode, in rhymed verse. Born in 1520, Rabbi Isserles lived in Krakow until his death in 1572. Reprinted in Warsaw in 1883, by the printer R' Yitschak Goldman. Strashun Collection. YIVO Library.



The Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) by Rabbi Joseph Caro with commentaries and annotations written by the REMA, Rabbi Moshe Isserles (c. 1520-1572). The halachic works of the REMA influenced Ashkenazic Jewry for centuries. Printed in Krakow in 1619, 47 years after the author's death in 1572. From the original collection of Matisyahu Strashun, son of Rabbi Shmuel Strashun. YIVO Library.

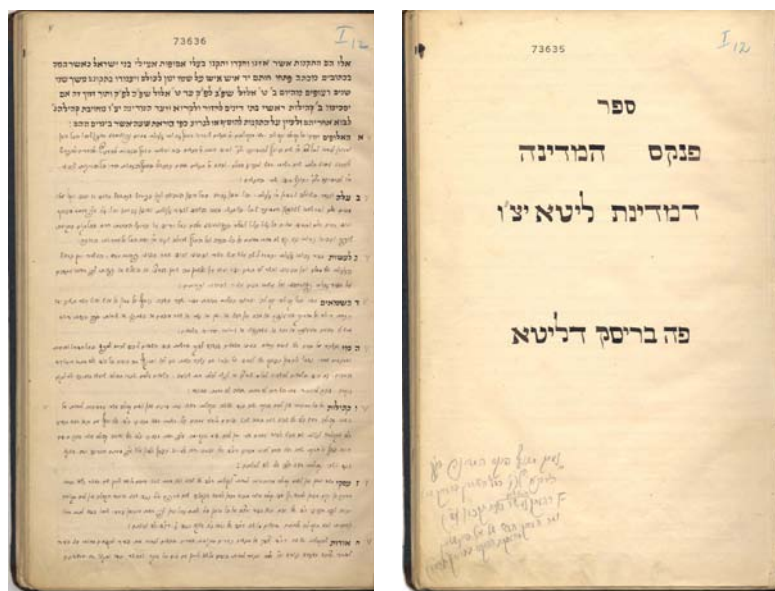
By the 15th century, and even more so by the 16th century, the Jews of Eastern Europe were well established in the new host countries, with their own institutions, centers of learning, and flourishing economy.

As historian Bernard D. Weinryb notes,

In economically backward Poland the Jews, being an urban element, were able to make themselves useful economically and organizationally.¹

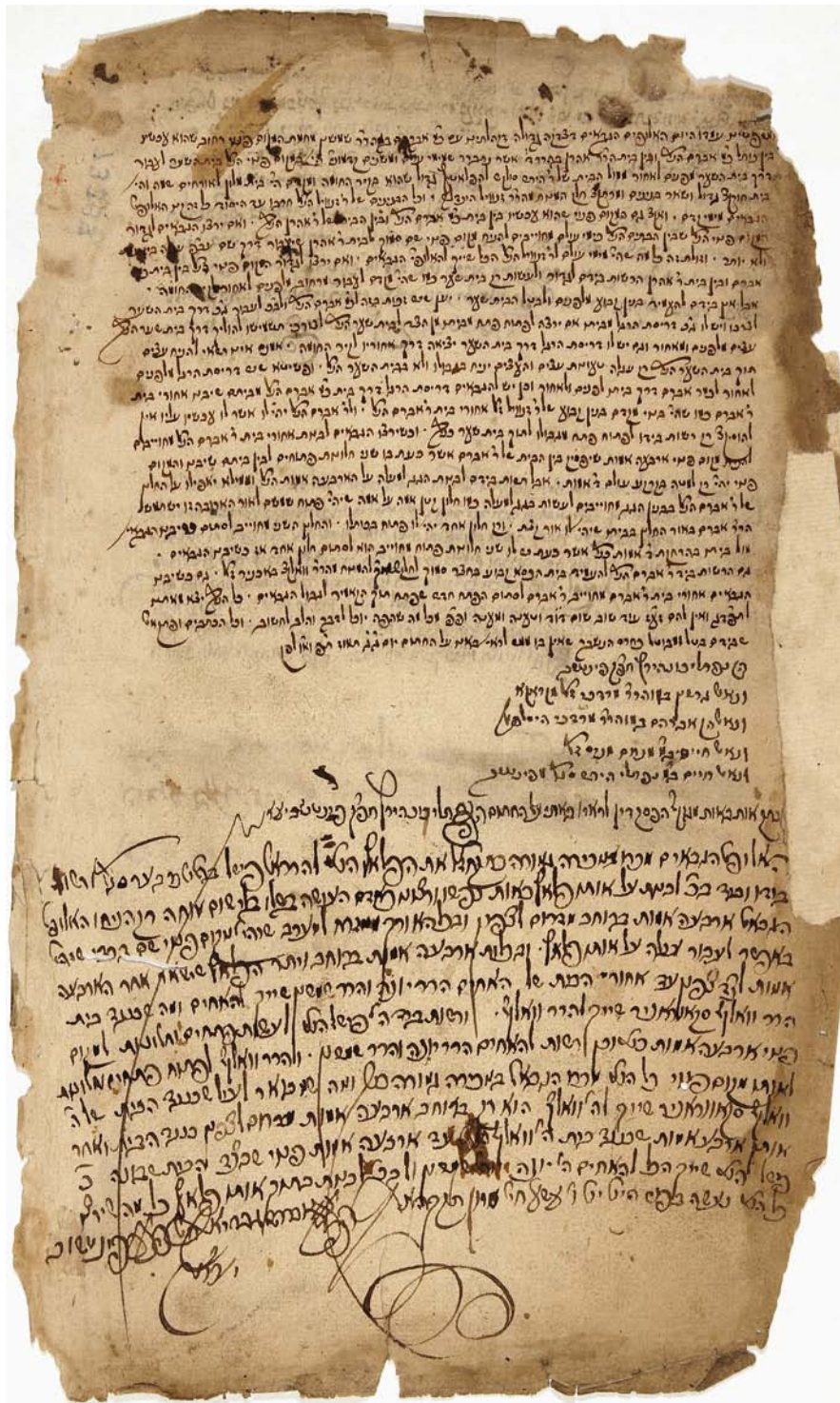
In the 15th and 16th centuries, the Jewish population of the Polish Crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania reached 25,000, or 0.6 per cent of the total population.

In the year 1580, the Council of Four Lands (*Vaad Arba Aratzot*), the highest authority of the Jewish autonomy in Poland, was established, and in 1623, a parallel Council for the Land of Lithuania (*Vaad Medinat Lita*) came into being.



Council for the Land [State] of Lithuania. *Pinkas Hamedinah d'Medinat Lita*, Brisk (Brest). Copy by A.L. Faynshtayn produced in 1886 from the original Brest copy. The Council passed legislation affecting economic and religious life and organized the collection of taxes from the Jewish community. Papers of Simon Dubnow. YIVO Archives.

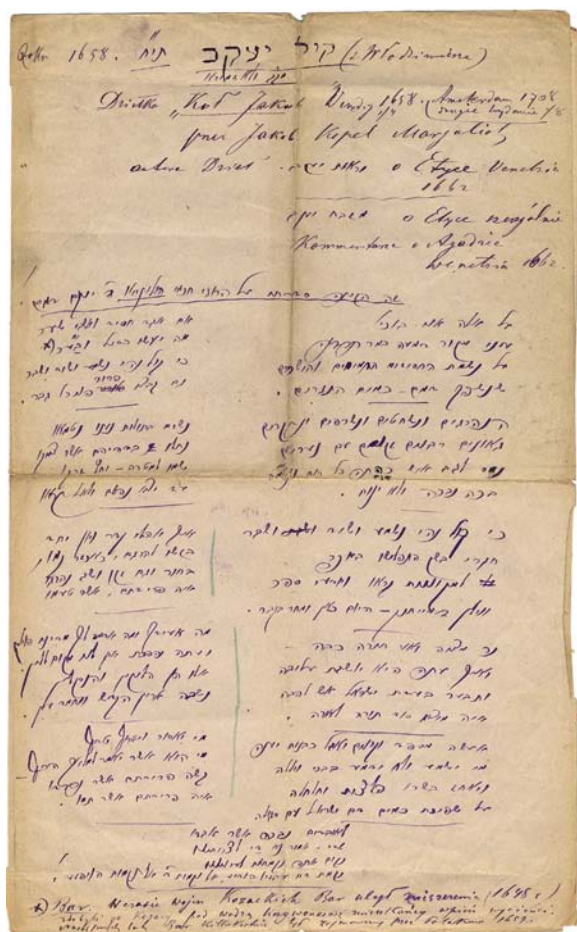
1. Bernard D. Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland: A Social and Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland From 1100 to 1800* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1982), 11.



Page from the *Pinkas* (record book) of the Jewish community of Pinczow. The *Pinkas* records the events of the community over the years, including legal, economic and religious matters and covers the period 1632-1740. Papers of Simon Dubnow. YIVO Archives.

An Era of Tranquility Ends

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the security of Jewish life in Poland was threatened by periodic waves of violence. In 1648-1649, a peasant uprising and Cossack revolt against Polish rule in Ukraine under the leadership of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, swept through towns with large numbers of Jews. The Jews were seen as serving the interests of the Polish nobility and as many as 20,000 were massacred. In addition, thousands of Jews became refugees. In 1655-1656, after an interval of only a few years, Jews were again victimized, this time in the crossfire of the Muscovite and Swedish invasions of Poland. In 1768, a large number of Jews in Uman were slaughtered in the Haidamak rebellion, another Cossack revolt.



Selihot (penitential prayers), composed following the Khmelnytsky pogroms of 1648-1649 known as the *Gzerot Takh-ve-Tat*. The anniversary is observed until the present day on the 20th of Sivan, during the summer. Copied from the book *Kol Ya'akov* (The Voice of Jacob), Venice, 5418 [1658], Hebrew. Papers of Simon Dubnow. YIVO Archive.

Jewish Life on the Eve of the Partition

Jewish life in the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom was also punctuated by a series of severe internal crises of a religious and economic nature that further weakened the Jewish communities. Nonetheless, throughout these times and until the fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the 18th century, the Jewish population grew, and its numbers spread over the territory of Poland-Lithuania, from Poznan province in the west to the Belorussian cities of Minsk and Vitebsk in the east, and to the far reaches of the Dnieper river in the southeast. As Weinryb notes,

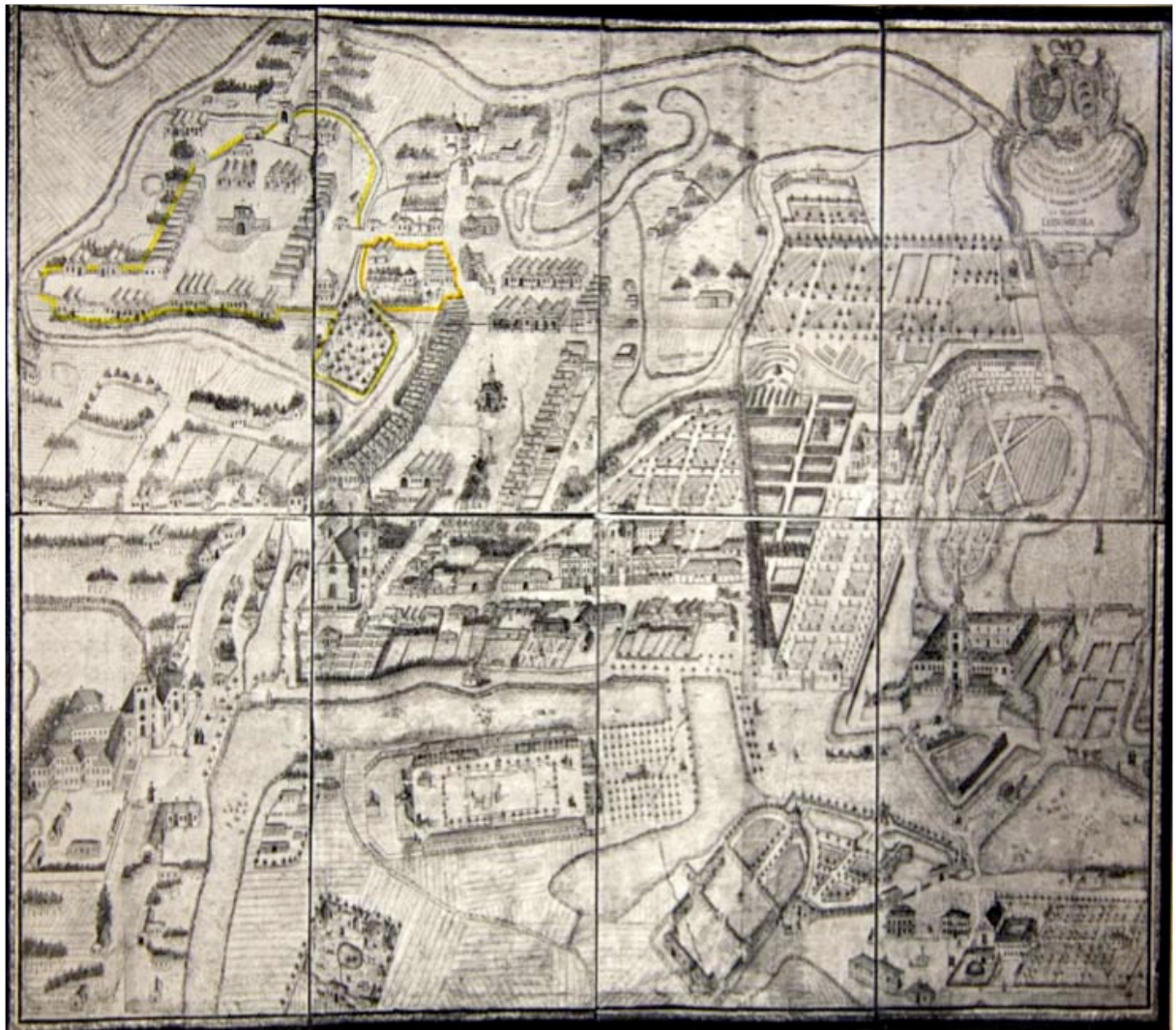
The expansion of the Jewish population continued even during the century or so of Poland's decline. On the eve of the Polish partitions some three quarters of a million Jews lived in Poland and Lithuania, constituting about 10 per cent of the country's total population. At that time Polish Jewry comprised the largest single group in world Jewry.²

At the dawn of the 18th century Polish Jewry was still famous in the Jewish world for its communal institutions; its statewide parliamentary authorities, *Vaad Arba Aratsot* in Poland and *Vaad Medinat Lita* in Lithuania, and its high level of Jewish learning and rabbinical scholarship. In 1791, the Commonwealth was home to close to 850,000 Jews, about 80% of world Jewry.



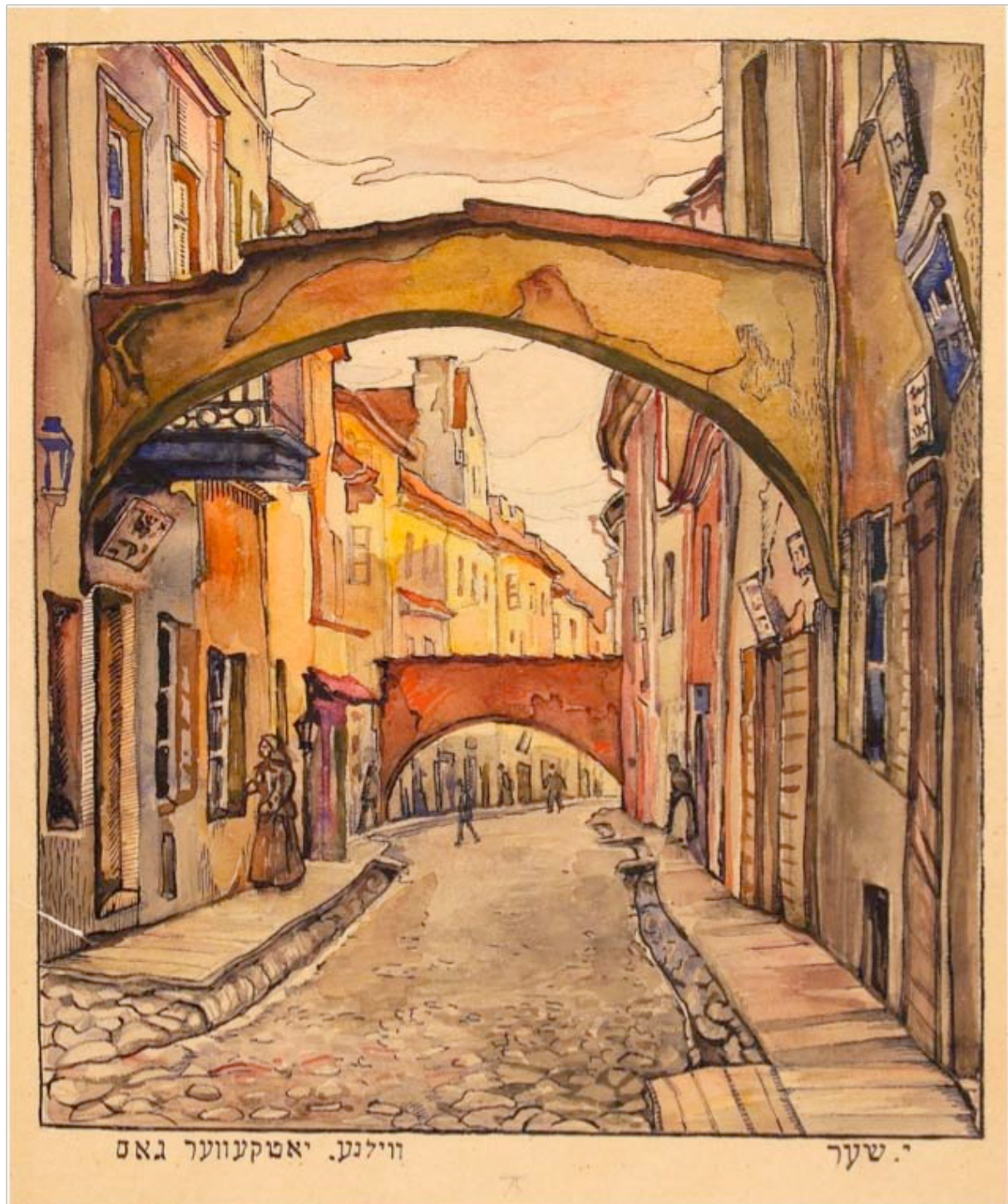
Communal Register or *Pinkas* of the Jewish community of Pitrovits (Piotrowice), 1726-1809 [5486 to 5569], 61 pp. Handwritten, Hebrew. Note Dubnow's stamp at the bottom of the page. Papers of Simon Dubnow. YIVO Archives.

2. Ibid.



Reproduction of a bird's eye view map of Rzeszów (Yiddish: Rayshe) in 1762. By the architect Stanisław Szczek. The location of the Jewish quarter is highlighted in yellow. Papers of Stanisław Szczek. YIVO Archives.

Poland Partitioned



Artist: Jakob Szer (1895-1944). Yatkever Gas (Jatkowa Street). An old historic arched street in the Jewish quarter of Vilna. Collection of Art and Artifacts. YIVO Archives.

Between 1772 and 1795, Poland was gradually conquered and partitioned by Prussia, Russia, and Austria. It ceased to exist as an independent state for the next 123 years, except for a brief period in 1800-1814 during the Napoleonic wars.



Map showing partitioned Poland, 1815-1918. Lucjan Dobroszycki and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image Before My Eyes*. (New York: Schocken Books, in cooperation with the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research), 1977, xvi.

During the partition period, separate segments of Polish Jewry lived in the Grand Duchy of Posen (Poznan) under the rule of Prussia; in Galicia, under the rule of the Austrian empire; and in the Polish Kingdom, under the Russian tsars. Large numbers of Polish Jews also lived in the former eastern provinces of the Commonwealth, which were annexed to Russia. Jews who lived in those territories had their right of residence restricted to the so-called Pale of Jewish Settlement, which included eastern provinces of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and certain adjoining western regions of the Russian empire. There were also special restrictions regarding cities that were off-limits for Jews.

In the 19th century, with the independent Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth erased from the political map of Europe, the term “Polish Jewry” nevertheless remained valid even as the Polish Jewish population lived in a territory divided among three different regimes. Jews in the partitioned lands retained many ties and characteristics from before the loss of Polish statehood.

As Gershon Bacon notes,

“There, a distinctly ‘Polish’ Jewry remained identifiable throughout.”³

At the same time, the Jewish world of Eastern Europe was going through a stormy battle between the Hasidim, fervent believers in Jewish religious revival, and the *mitnagdim*, their opponents, who were wary of the new mystical movement, fearing that the Talmudic tradition of learning and worship might be compromised.

The spread of Hasidism was most prevalent in Galicia and the southwestern provinces of the Russian Empire. It took the appearance in the early 19th century of a third group – the *maskilim*, adherents of the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment), who advocated modernization and cultural assimilation of the Jews, to unite the two warring camps against what they saw as a threat to the very essence of Judaism.



Left: Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman (1720-1797), known as the Vilna Gaon, or simply by the Hebrew acronym, the “Gra.” Known for his great erudition in Talmud and Halachah, and for his knowledge of the kabbalah, the Vilna Gaon was the spiritual leader of the non Hasidic Jewish communities. His teachings remain influential until the present day. YIVO Archives.

Right: Portrait of Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter (1865–1948), known as the *Imrei Emes*, the third Rebbe (1905-1948) of the Hasidic dynasty of Ger [based in Gora Kalwaria], one of the most influential Hasidic leaders in Poland before World War II. The Gerer dynasty traced its spiritual lineage back to the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement. YIVO Archives.

3. Gershon Bacon, “Poland: Poland from 1795 to 1939.” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* 14 March 2011. 6 December 2011;
<http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Poland/Poland_from_1795_to_1939>.



Studio portrait of Judah Leib Gordon (1831-1892), prominent Hebrew poet and journalist and an influential member of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) movement. From 1880 to 1888 he was the co-editor, with Alexander Zederbaum, of the periodical *Ha-Melits*. YIVO Archives.



Mendele Moyhker Sforim (1836-1917), Sholem Jacob Abramovich, the grandfather of modern Yiddish literature, reading a newspaper. Born in Kopyl, a town which was part of Poland until the partition of Poland in 1793, when it became part of the Russian empire. As a young man he studied in the Yeshivas of Slutsk and Vilna. At first he wrote in modern Hebrew. Wanting to reach the Jewish masses, he later wrote primarily in Yiddish. YIVO Archives.

Nineteenth Century

In the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, Polish Jews were subject to the policies imposed on them by absolutist rulers, which, by and large, were focused on dissolving all vestiges of Jewish autonomy and barring the Jews from many trades and professions, as well as from living and working in the countryside.



Papercut of a *Mizrah* and a *Shiviti* by Judah Hersch Langsner, depicting lions and other animals. The *Mizrah* was placed on the eastern wall of most synagogues, pointing to the East, in the direction of Jerusalem. *Shiviti* refers to the verse 'Shivit Hashem L'Negdi Tamid' (approx. trans: G'd is Before Me Always) which is displayed in many traditional synagogues. Hebrew writing. Galicia, 1868. Collection of Art and Artifacts. YIVO Archives.

The new rulers saw their Jewish subjects in a negative light, as an element foreign and isolationist in spirit, separated by the tenets of their religion and culture from the Gentile surroundings and stubbornly unwilling to change. Their response was to enact legislation in the vein of “enlightened absolutism” that, they assumed, would do away with the centuries-old Jewish autonomy and alien way of life and would bring the Jewish masses under the control of the state.

However, the legislation was for the most part repressive, even if its stated goal was to modernize the respective Jewish populations and accord them rights equal with the rest of the citizenry. The road to full emancipation of the Jewish masses proved to be tortuously long. Thus, for instance, in 1789, the Habsburg Emperor Joseph II issued an Edict of Toleration for the Jews of Galicia, which granted them limited civil rights if they assimilated. At the same time he abolished the institution of *kehillah*, which had been the cornerstone of Jewish autonomy, as well as all other privileges accorded the Jews in the past. But the process of enacting the reforms dragged on for many years until 1867, when Galician Jews finally received rights equal to those possessed by other Jews in the Habsburg Empire.

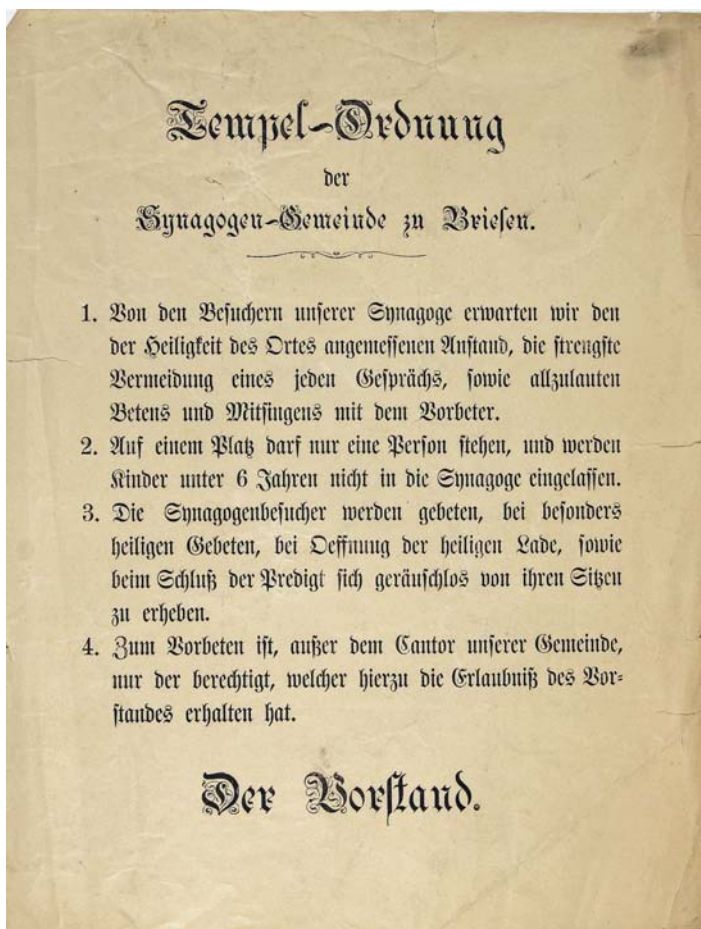


Left: Portrait of eleven-year-old Lippe Lurie, on the right, with his arm around his nine-year-old brother Alexander Sender. The Luries were a family of prominent industrialists who owned lumber factories and sawmills. Pinsk, 1870. YIVO Archives.

Center: Portrait of a Jewish couple, Pale of Settlement. YIVO Archives.

Right: A portrait of two well-dressed women. Siedlce, 1906. YIVO Archives.

In the Grand Duchy of Posen (Poznan), ruled by Prussia, the autonomous *kehillahs* were abolished in 1815, but full emancipation for all Jews would not be realized until 1869. There, for the most part, Polish Jews merged with their co-religionists from German lands or emigrated overseas.



Synagogue rules, 19th century. Part of Poland before the partition, Briesen was returned to Poland in 1918. Known in Polish as Wabrzezno. Records of the Briesen Jewish Community Council, 1871-1926. YIVO Archives.

In the Russian Empire in 1804, Tsar Alexander I approved a statute that reaffirmed the confinement of Jews to the Pale of Settlement (with two new provinces added); forbade Jews to reside in villages; abolished the institutions of *kehillah* and *bet din* (rabbinical court); and forbade the wearing of traditional Jewish clothes. In both 1821 and 1844, the law abolishing the *kehillah* was upheld.

In 1827, Tsar Nicholas I issued a ruling drafting Jewish boys from the Pale as young as 12 years old into the military for a term of 25 years (known as the cantonist system).

Имя отчество № по списку		Возраст лет	Рост с	Вид службы	Служба	Служба	Служба	Служба	Служба
3	Симонъ Симеоновичъ Корнелий	14	174	с	с	с	с	с	с
4	Исаакъ Исааковъ Израиль	14	174	с	с	с	с	с	с
5	Исаакъ Исааковъ Израиль	14	174	с	с	с	с	с	с
6	Исаакъ Исааковъ Израиль	14	174	с	с	с	с	с	с
7	Симонъ Симеоновичъ Корнелий	16	174	с	с	с	с	с	с
8	Исаакъ Исааковъ Израиль	16	174	с	с	с	с	с	с
9	Исаакъ Исааковъ Израиль	15	174	с	с	с	с	с	с
10	Исаакъ Исааковъ Израиль	15	174	с	с	с	с	с	с
11	Исаакъ Исааковъ Израиль	13	174	с	с	с	с	с	с
12	Исаакъ Исааковъ Израиль	24	174	с	с	с	с	с	с

Left: Official List of Recruits to the Tsarist army following the new conscription law passed by Tsar Nicholas I. The entries include the ages, ranging from 13 to 24, of the young conscripted men, 1827. Records of the Minsk Jewish Community Council. YIVO Archives.



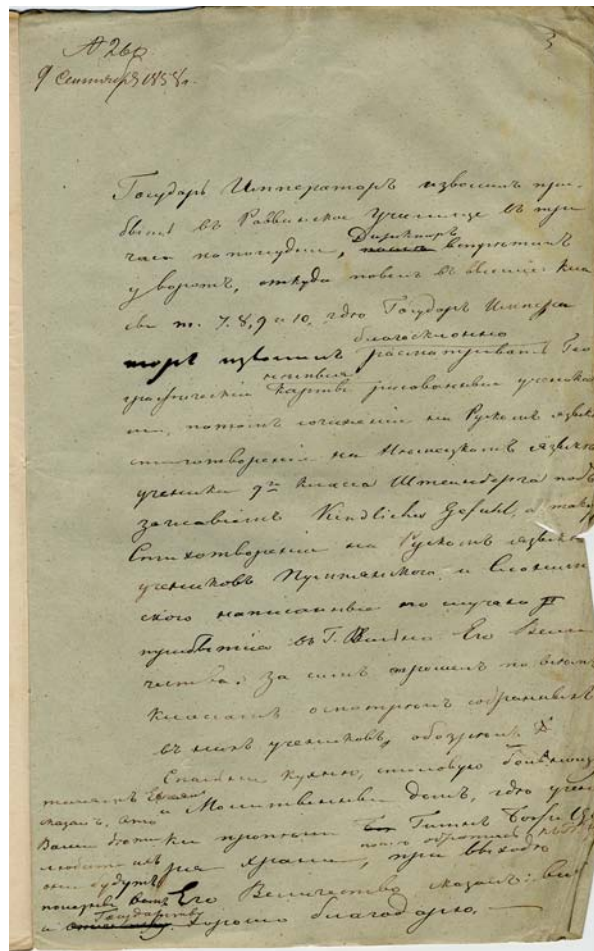
Right: A Jewish soldier in the uniform of the Tsarist army, Grodno, pre-1917. Territorial Photographic Collection on Poland, YIVO Archives.

In 1822, Jewish inhabitants of the cities of the Polish Kingdom were ordered confined to the “Jewish precincts.” Jews were again forbidden to wear traditional garments in 1824, 1845, and 1850.



Notice from the Vilna Police prohibiting Jews from living on the most prominent streets of Vilna. Yiddish and Polish. Handwritten notes by Dubnow. 10 September, 1823. Papers of Simon Dubnow. YIVO Archives.

In 1844, elementary schools for Jewish children with an explicitly russifying agenda were established. With a similar aim in mind, state rabbinical schools were opened in Warsaw, Vilna, and Zhitomir. Their graduates were expected to serve as teachers in the elementary schools and as “state” rabbis.



Visit of Tsar Alexander II to the Rabbinical Seminary in Vilna in 1858. The report describes the visit and notes that the Tsar, referred to as His Royal Imperial Highness, listened to essays written by the Jewish students, toured various rooms in the school, and that poems written by the students for that special occasion were recited before the Tsar. Records of the Rabbinical Seminary and Teachers' Institute. YIVO Archives.

Following the defeat of Russia in the Crimean War, and the death of Nicholas I in 1855, the debate on the status of Jews in the Russian Empire intensified.

In 1862, Tsar Alexander II agreed, on advice from the head of the civil administration in the Polish Kingdom, Margrave Aleksander Wielopolski, to grant the Jews of the Kingdom a limited emancipation decree.

Accordingly, Jews were permitted to acquire real property and to settle everywhere within the borders of the Kingdom of Poland (also known as Congress Poland).

However, this decree did not extend to the Jews of the Pale of Settlement. They saw no improvement in legal status until the very end of the Tsarist regime in 1917.



Rabbi Yitshak Elhanan Spektor (1817-1896), rabbi and halachic authority in Kovno, revered by Jews throughout the Russian Empire. He was known for his strong stance against the Russian government's attempts to encourage Jews to assimilate and for his support for yeshivot and religious schools targeted by the Russian government as part of its plan to alienate Jews from their heritage. Rabbi Spektor opposed the establishment of a rabbinical seminary in Kovno planned on the model of the seminaries in Vilna and Zhitomir. He advocated on behalf of Jewry on many issues and fought albeit unsuccessfully against the closing of the Yeshiva of Volozhin.

Many Jews from the Pale decided to migrate westward to Congress Poland where conditions seemed preferable to those in the Pale and where the Wielopolski decree permitted greater freedom of movement. In Congress Poland, they were called, "Litvaks" (rather inaccurately, since not all came from Lithuania).

The second half of the 19th century brought about the further modernization of Polish Jewry. At the same time, aided by the spread of political antisemitism, anti-Jewish sentiments intensified. The assassination of Alexander II in 1881 by the members of the radical group Narodnaya Volya ushered in a new era of violence and economic hardship for the Jewish community, as a wave of pogroms swept throughout the western provinces of the Russian empire.

Antisemitic propaganda came into wide use by political parties. The “Protocols of the Elder of Zion,” a fabricated tale of world Jewish conspiracy spun by the Russian secret police, was broadly disseminated. Official government policy toward Jews was expressed in the “Temporary Laws” (or “May Laws”) ratified by Tsar Alexander III in May 1882, with the stated aim of “defending the principal population from Jewish exploitation.” The laws mandated severe economic restrictions against the Jews. More prohibitions would be enacted with time.



Portrait of Leya and Peysakh Zilberman, an elderly couple. He kept an inn in Kozatshok (in the Pale of Settlement near Kiev) from where they were expelled due to the 1882 May Laws. The photo was sent to America where the couple’s children resided. Russian Empire. 1910. YIVO Archives.

In 1891, Jews were expelled from Moscow, propelling yet another mass of Jewish refugees into Congress Poland. In 1903, a savage pogrom in Kishinev initiated one more wave of pogroms which continued through 1907.



During the Kishinev Pogrom which took place on Easter, about 49 Jews were killed, about 100 severely injured, 500 slightly injured, and more than 700 homes and businesses looted and destroyed. This image shows victims of the pogrom at House No. 13 Asia Street, which was the home of 8 families and a grocery store. The perpetrators hunted down the residents who were trying to hide and killed them. Kishinev, 1903. YIVO Archives.

The pogroms and the 1913 trial of Mendel Beilis, who was accused of ritual murder on false evidence concocted by the government, galvanized world opinion against the rampant antisemitism in the Russian Empire.



Menahem Mendel Beilis with his family. Falsely accused of killing a Christian child, Beilis was acquitted of all charges at his trial in 1913. YIVO Archives.

The late 19th century brought forth the development of new ideologies within the Jewish community. Disillusioned by the demise of liberalism in Russia and influenced by emerging nationalist and socialist movements in Central and Eastern Europe, members of the Jewish intelligentsia sought new solutions to Jewish problems. Modern political movements, such as Zionism and Bundism, the specifically Jewish socialist movement, seemed to offer answers.



Studio portrait of the Okun Family. Russian Empire. Turn of the 20th century. YIVO Archives.



Wedding portrait of Avrum Abush Kurzweil and Hinda Rokhl Lewenthal. Przemyśl, 1885. YIVO Archives.



Mendel Eisenzweig, a tailor, his daughter Chaya Sarah(right) and an unidentified woman (left). Staszów, Poland. Turn of the 20th century. YIVO Archives.



Three generations: grandparents, parents and children pose along with a portrait of an absent family member, a man posing on a bicycle. Łódź, turn of 20th century. YIVO Archives.



Three generations of the family of shopkeeper Pesa, daughter of Rabbi Pyeshin, head of the Ramayles Yeshiva, and Yosef Szabad, a merchant (both seated, center). Their son Zemach Szabad (standing, back row, center) was a doctor, a leader of the Folkist party, a Senator in the Polish Parliament, and a founder of YIVO. Vilna, 1897. YIVO Archives.



Members of the Hirszowicz family, owners of one of the largest printing companies in Poland, Warsaw, turn of the 20th century. YIVO Archives.



Nahum Sokolow (1859-1936), prominent Zionist, with his wife and child. Sokolow was a writer for the Hebrew-language newspaper "Hatzefira," and later became the president of the World Zionist Organization. Warsaw. YIVO Archives.



Jozef Szereszewski, owner of the well known tobacco factory in Grodno, with his daughter. YIVO Archives.



Portrait of the daughter of the artist Maurycy Trebac. By the artist, 1913. Trebac (1861-1941) was a master portrait and landscape painter, popular in the 19th and 20th centuries, who also painted scenes from everyday life, including street and Jewish domestic scenes. He studied in the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow and later on in Munich and Paris. His paintings earned successes at exhibitions in Poland, Germany and the United States. Trebac and his wife died in 1941 in the Lodz Ghetto. Collection of Art and Artifacts. YIVO Archives.



Menorah, hand made by Chaim Aryeh Seifter at the age of 13, in Myslenice, Poland, 1872. Seifter made the menorah for his own bar mitzvah, making the molds and pouring the tin into them. In 1905, Seifter's son Jacob Seifter moved to America. His father gave him the menorah as a souvenir. In 1943, wishing to preserve the menorah for posterity, Jacob Seifter donated the menorah to YIVO. He wrote that it was painful for him to part with this artifact but that he hoped that by donating it to YIVO the menorah would be available for future generations. Chaim Aryeh Seifter died in Auschwitz in 1942. Collection of Art and Artifacts. YIVO Archives.

In Independent Poland, 1918-1939



View of Piotrkowska Street near the intersection of Zawadzka Street: passersby and vehicles on a commercial street. Łódź, 1920s. Photographer: Alter Kacyzne. Papers of Alter Kacyzne. YIVO Archives. Courtesy of the Forward Association.

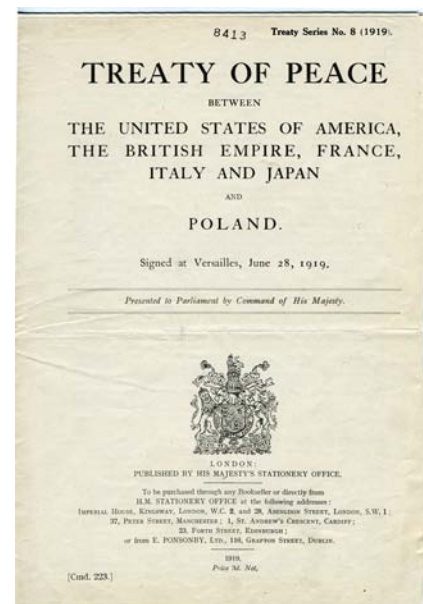
Political and Legal Status of Jews under the Second Polish Republic

As a result of the collapse of all three partitioning powers in World War I, and the rebirth of an independent Poland in 1918, Polish Jewry, divided for 123 years, found itself reunited within the borders of the restored Polish state.



Left: Map of the Independent Republic of Poland, before World War II. Lucjan Dobroszycki and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image Before My Eyes*. (New York: Schocken Books, in cooperation with the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research), 1977, xvii.

Below: Treaty of Peace and Minority Treaty, guaranteeing minorities including Jews, equal rights and the right to observe the Sabbath, under the new Polish republic. 1919. Wolf-Mowshowitch Collection, YIVO Archives.



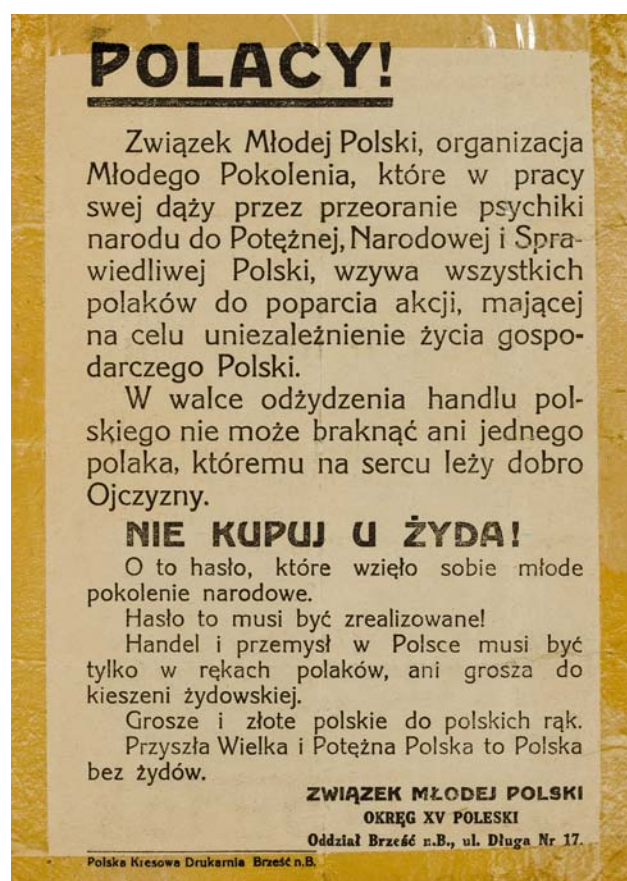
The new Poland initially gave its Jewish citizens civil and minority rights according to the National Minorities Treaty, signed at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, albeit under pressure from the Allies.

The Jewish minority strived to use this historic opportunity to achieve a degree of national and cultural autonomy but met with venomous reaction from the numerous opponents of equal rights for Jews. Pogroms erupted immediately after independence was declared on November 11, 1918.

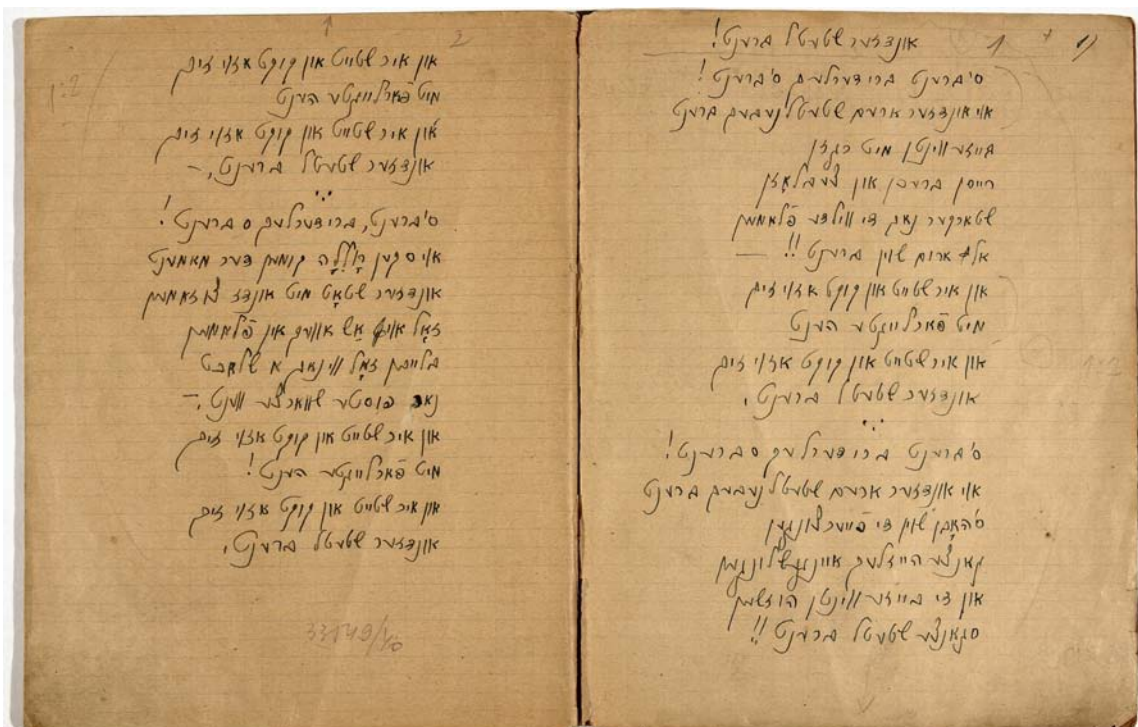
The 1920 and 1930s were characterized by anti-Jewish propaganda among the masses, rejectionist legislation in the Sejm (Parliament), and acts of violence in the streets, schools, and universities. Toward the end of the inter-war period, the government began seriously considering schemes to get its Jewish citizens to emigrate.



An antisemitic election poster distributed by the National Camp, town of Tczew, 1938. The poster reads “Jews to the Ghetto,” YIVO Archives.



Antisemitic flyer, issued by Związek Młodej Polski, (Union of Young Poland), Brześć nad Bugiem. c. 1938. YIVO Archives.



Manuscript of *Undzer Shtetl Brent* (Our Town is on Fire!) handwritten by the folk poet Mordechai Gebirtig, who composed the song after the Przytyk pogrom which took place in 1936. During the Holocaust period the song was sung in ghettos and concentration camps. Papers of Mordechai Gebirtig. YIVO Archives.

The Jewish Community Continues to Maintain its Vitality

Against this backdrop, the Jewish community continued to maintain its national vitality. Its many institutions in the areas of economy, labor, politics, religion, and culture carried on, as did the daily rhythm of life. Hostility was met with the resolve for self-defense.

Faced with discrimination on the part of the Polish government, which denied Jews equal treatment in the civil service, professions, higher education, and industrial and commercial enterprises, the Jewish community responded by developing an infrastructure of institutions and services essential for meeting the needs of the Jewish population.

Ideology and political affiliation strongly influenced the goals and programs of those institutions, and the chronic dearth of funds hampered many worthy undertakings, yet the fabric of Jewish life held against disintegration.

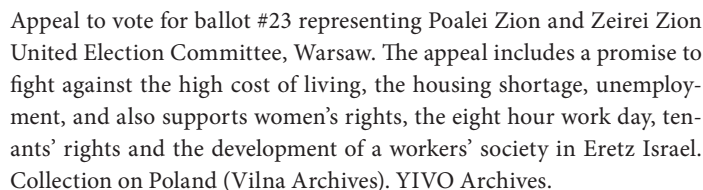
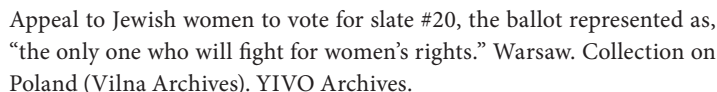
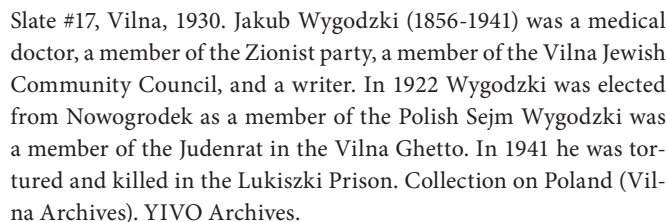
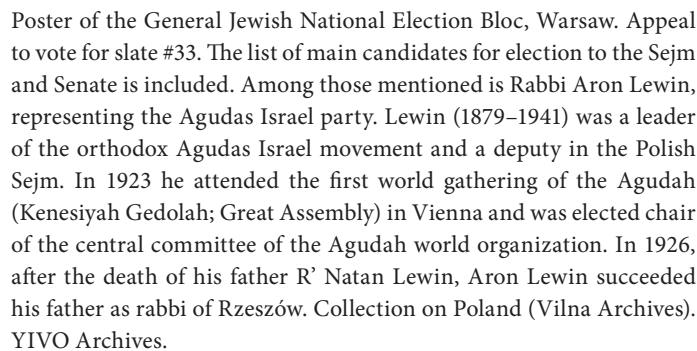
Jewish Political Life in the Interwar Period



The interwar period saw the rise of many Jewish political parties, on the national and municipal level, all of them attempting to resolve the issues facing the Jewish community. Voters line up to vote in the national Polish Parliamentary elections in a Jewish neighborhood in Warsaw. 1920s. Photographer: Alter Kacyzne. Papers of Alter Kacyzne, YIVO Archives. Courtesy of the Forward Association.



8 of the 13 Jewish members of the first Polish Sejm (Parliament), 1919. 1. Rabbi Halpern; 2. Noach Prilucki; 3. Rabbi A. Perlmutter; 4. Dr. M. Weinziher; 5. Yitzhak Grinbaum; 6. Ossias Thon; 7. Dr. A. Rosenblatt; 8. Dr. Ignacy Schipper. YIVO Archives.





Members of the Poale Zion (Labor Zionist party) and workers march in a May Day parade. Their signs carry Polish and Yiddish slogans – “Down with fascism!,” “Long Live a Jewish Workers’ Society in Palestine!” Warsaw, 1927. YIVO Archives.



Election poster of the Jewish Labor Bund in Poland. Interwar period. Collection on Poland (Vilna Archives). YIVO Archives.



Thirtieth anniversary celebration of the Jewish Labor Bund. Seated, 2nd from left: Bund leader Henryk Erlich. Warsaw, 1927. Archives of the Jewish Labor Bund. YIVO Archives.

Economic Life in the Interwar Period



The interwar period was characterized by widespread economic hardship and depression. Handwritten rabbinical announcement informing the Jewish population of Vilna that due to the dire economic situation and the cost of wine, it is permitted to celebrate the Passover with “sweet tea” instead of the required 4 cups of wine. YIVO Archives.



Left: This poster of the Jewish People's Bank in Warsaw urges people to save money as the best way to prevent economic hardship. After World War I, many banks and credit unions were established in Poland to address the economic depression. The AJDC was instrumental in funding many of these financial institutions. Collection on Poland (Vilna Archives). YIVO Archives.

Right: Poster listing demands to the City Council to improve conditions for the unemployed, for small shop workers and artisans. Bialystok. Prewar period. Collection on Poland (Vilna Archives). YIVO Archives.

Jewish Communal Institutions and Services in the Prewar Period

The new Poland witnessed a revival of the institution of the *kehillah* (kahal), the traditional Jewish community council which had been abolished early in the partition period. In independent Poland, local community councils were first established as early as in 1924; then, a 1927 statute made the creation of Jewish community councils obligatory in all Poland. Membership in the community was now compulsory for all Jews. The community board was chosen in the elections in which only Jewish men had the right to vote. These boards were supervised by the government, whose officials used frequently their right to dissolve the board and appoint their own commissioners instead. The *kehillahs* were charged with the maintenance of synagogues, ritual baths, cemeteries, Jewish religious schools, and charities, and with the supervision of Jewish butchers.



Vilna Jewish Community Council: The members of the council included Dr. Zemach Szabad, Rabbi Yitzhok Rubinshtein, Dr. Wygodzki, and Boris Kletzkin. A painting of the Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Elijah son of Shlomo Zalmen (1720-1797), hangs overhead. YIVO Archives.



Members of the *Kehillah* (Jewish community council) at a festive celebration. (2nd from left) Yisroel Krakow. Lowicz, 1920s-30s. YIVO Archives.



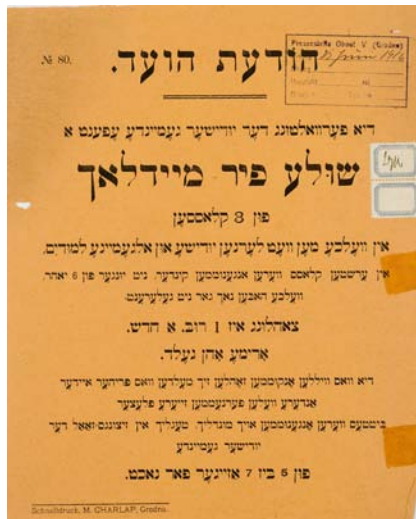
Jacob Trockenheim, member of the Polish Sejm and Senate, and Vice President of the Warsaw Jewish *Kehillah*, posing with children while on a visit to an orphanage. Warsaw, 1917. YIVO Archives.

"TOZ"
 W SOB. 11/6-10 LISTOPADA 1926 r.
 punktualnie o godz. 3-iej p. p.
 w lokalu **Krawieckiej**
Synagogi przy ul. Szkolnej № 63
 ODBĘDZIE SIĘ
ODCZYT
P. Dra IZGURA
 NA TEMAT:
SRODKI ZAPOBIEGAWCZE w czasie
EPIDEMII
"WSTĘP WOLNY"
 שבת דעם 6 טען נאוועמבער ה.
 פונקטליך שעה 3 בייטאג
 וועט אין דער שניידערשער שוהל שקאלנע נאם 63
 פארקומען א לעקציע
פון ד"ר אייזנר
 א. ד. ש.
 די נויטיגע פערמיטונגס מיטלען אין צייטן פון עפידעמיע
 איינשרייב פריי

Health care activities by communal organizations. Announcement of a lecture sponsored by TOZ, titled "Protective Measures in Time of Epidemic" by Dr. Izgur, 11/6/1926. Held in the Tailors' Synagogue in Rowno. YIVO Archives.

Education, Culture and the Arts

Of greatest importance in keeping the Jewish minority in Poland close together was the growth and role of educational and cultural institutions. Jewish political parties created school systems outside the framework of Polish public schools in order to educate children in accordance with their ideological and national programs.

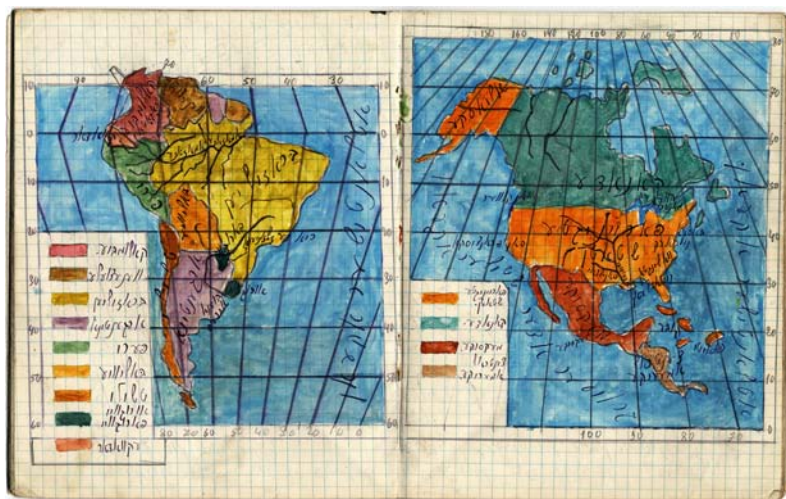


Announcement of the opening of a school for girls at which Jewish and general subjects will be taught. School fees are one ruble per month. The poor can attend for free. Grodno, 1916. YIVO Archives.

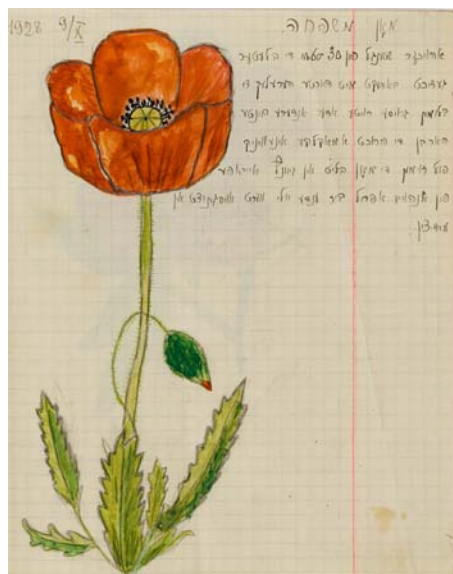
For instance, the schools of TSYSHO (Tsentrale Yidishe Shul Organizatsye – Central Yiddish School Organization) were resolutely Yiddishist in outlook, teaching students all subjects in Yiddish and promoting doctrines of socialism and ‘doikeyt’ (hereness; i.e., pursuing Jewish national life in the country of one’s origin).



Students and staff of the sixth class of the Yiddish secular M. Glouberman Folkshul. Pinsk, 1930s. YIVO Archives.



Page from the geography notebook of a student in a TSYSHO (Central Yiddish School Organization) school: in Lodz. Hand-drawn maps of North and South America. YIVO Archives.



Nature notebook belonging to a student in a Yiddish school. The title of the essay: "The Poppy Family" is accompanied by an illustration of a poppy flower. There were about 16,500 students in the TSYSHO school system in Poland. YIVO Archives.

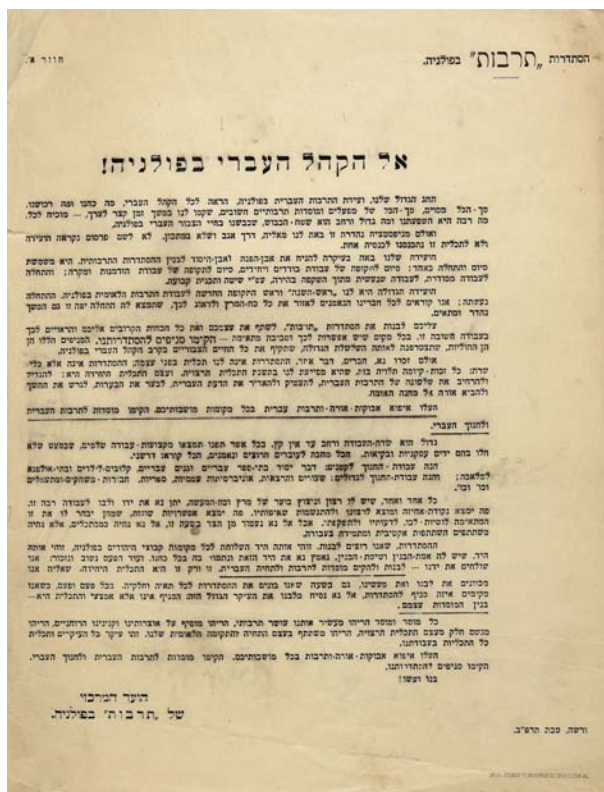


Diploma and report card of a student in the Eight-grade Gymnasium of the TSYSHO school in Święciany. June, 1928. YIVO Archives.

With a different ideological program, there were the Tarbut schools which promoted Hebrew and were close to the Zionist movement.



Top: Children at work in a classroom at a Hebrew-Language Tarbut School. YIVO Archives.



Left: Leaflet addressed to the Jewish community of Poland, calling upon it to take part in the establishment of institutions related to the Tarbut Movement, which was dedicated to Hebrew education and which supported the Zionist movement. Students in the Tarbut schools studied and wrote modern Hebrew. There were about 45,000 students in the Tarbut school network. Warsaw, 1922. YIVO Archives.

The vast religious school networks included the Yavne schools of the Miz-rachi party and the Chojrew and Beis Yaakov schools of the Agudas Israel. Elementary religious education continued to be delivered in the traditional heder and higher level religious studies were taught in the yeshivas.

The Beis Yaakov school system was a network of religious schools for girls in Poland, with about 35,500 students, established by Sarah Schenirer in Kra-kow, in 1917. The main objective of the schools was to strengthen students' commitment to Jewish religious life and to Jewish traditions by providing a broad base of knowledge, which included both Judaic and General Studies.



Rabbi Meir Schapira (c. 1887-1933), founder of the well known Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin, and originator of the Daf Yomi learning program, a method of learning the Talmud one day at a time so that the entire Talmud is completed in seven and a half years. YIVO Archives.



Students and teachers studying in a Yeshiva in Rze-szow. Papers of Menachem Kipnis. YIVO Archives. Courtesy of the Forward Association.



Students of the Beis Yaakov School for girls in Rozdol, Poland. YIVO Archives.

There were also Jewish vocational schools that were maintained by the ORT and other organizations.



A class in locksmithing at the trade school of the *Kehillah* (Jewish community council). Grodno, 1925. YIVO Archives.



Girls in a class at an ORT trade school for seamstresses in the first year of the program's existence. (Yiddish sign on wall) "May good fortune come to the hands and forehead from which sweat pours." Glubokoye, 1923-1924. YIVO Archives.



In the main hall of the student residence of the School of Nursing, supported by the AJDC, at the Jewish Hospital. Nurses pose reading newspapers in a room with a piano, carpets and plants. Warsaw, 1939. YIVO Archives.

Culture, Literature and the Arts

The interwar years in Poland saw the flowering of Yiddish culture. As Ezra Mendelsohn notes,

Along with the preservation of traditional Jewish culture went the remarkable experiment to create in Poland a secular Jewish national culture based on Yiddish which was designed to serve as one of the cornerstones of Jewish autonomy.⁴

Yiddish press, literature, theater performances, film productions, and fine arts flourished on a scale unknown before.



Isaac Leib Peretz (1852-1915), was a Yiddish writer and playwright and is considered one of the fathers of modern Yiddish literature. Born in Zamosc, Poland, Peretz later settled in Warsaw. He wrote stories, folk tales and plays. Peretz's works include *Oyb Nisht Nokh Hekher* (If not Higher) and the short story *Bontshe Shvayg* (Bontsche the Silent). Peretz died in Warsaw in 1915. He was buried at the Okopowa Street Jewish Cemetery. YIVO Archives.



Abraham Sutzkever (1913–2010). One of the greatest Yiddish poets of the 20th century. Partisan and leading member of the underground Paper Brigade during World War II which saved many precious manuscripts and artifacts. Known for his prolific output of poetry about Jewish life in Vilna before and during the war. Founded the literary quarterly *Di goldene keyt* (The Golden Chain) in Israel. Sutzkever's poem "Unter dayne vayne shtern" (Beneath the Whiteness of Your Stars) has become a popular song commemorating the Holocaust and was set to music by Avreml Brudno. YIVO Archives.

4. Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 63.



The prewar period in Poland saw the proliferation of a rich and varied Yiddish, Hebrew and Polish language Jewish press, with the Yiddish press in the lead. The *Moment* and *Haynt* were two of the most popular Yiddish dailies in Poland.

Left: The cover of the *Illustrated Moment* depicts British Cabinet Minister Neville Chamberlain photographed before leaving for a conference at the League of Nations, 1924. Newspaper Collection. YIVO Library.

Right: An issue of *Haynt* reports on a rabbinical conference in Warsaw with the participation of leading Hasidic and rabbinical leaders. 1909. Newspaper Collection. YIVO Library.



Members of the literary movement, *Yung Vilne* (Young Vilna), Vilna, 1937. Among the writers pictured in this image are Chaim Grade (top row, second from left) and Avraham Sutzkever (top row, second from right). YIVO Archives.



Announcement of the upcoming appearance of the theatrical ensemble of Ida Kaminska and Zygmunt Turkow, The Warsaw Jewish Art Theater (WIKT) theatrical troupe. Krakow. YIVO Archives.



Actors of the Yiddish stage in interwar Poland, with Esther Rachel Kaminska, mother of the Yiddish theater in Poland, in the center. YIVO Archives.

This was the environment in which YIVO, the Yiddish Scientific Institute, was organized and flourished, in all ways part of the vibrant milieu of Polish Jewry which it observed, documented, and described.

Polish Jewry After World War II

Polish Jewry emerged from World War II mortally wounded, the victim of the genocidal war against the Jews by the German Nazi state. Most of the surviving Jews emigrated to Israel and elsewhere. A small Jewish community of a few thousand remains where millions once dwelled. Today, to quote Bernard Weinryb, “Millions of former Polish Jews – and descendants of Polish Jews – are spread the world over: in Israel, the Americas, European countries, South Africa, and Oceania. These constitute the majority of world Jewry and the bulk of Ashkenazic Jewry today.”⁵



Family portrait of Elyohu Linkowski with his wife and children. Lodz, 1926. YIVO Archives. Courtesy of the Forward Association.

5. Bernard D. Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland. A Social and Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland From 1100 to 1800*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1982), 13.



The Bund Family. Tomaszow. YIVO Archives.



Abraham Gepner, his wife Stefania, daughter Aniela Borowik and others at the Gepner summer house in Radoszyce, 1931. Gepner was a prominent industrialist, philanthropist and communal leader. He was on the Warsaw Jewish Community Council. Abraham Gepner died in the Warsaw Ghetto. YIVO Archives.



The young heir to the Aleksander Rebbe in Ciechocinek, posing outdoors. One of the largest Hasidic groups in Poland before the war, the Aleksander dynasty and the majority of its followers were killed in the Holocaust. Photographer: Menachem Kipnis. 1926. YIVO Archives. Courtesy of the Forward Association.



A street scene: a Jewish man in traditional dress, and a young girl on the sidewalk, outside a barber shop. Lask, 1939. YIVO Archives.



Portrait of youngsters at a meal outdoors, at a summer camp run by the Bialystok TOZ-OZE. YIVO Archives.