# HISTORY OF JEWS IN POLAND

THE SOUTHERN INSTITUTE
FOR EDUCATION AND RESEARCH
THE JEWS OF POLAND: CHRONOLOGY

**9th Century**   Jews begin to settle in Poland.

**1367**   Kazimierz the Great, Polish king, issues a charter of 'tolerance' granting legal rights to Jews.

**1648**   Cossacks massacre Jews in Ukraine and Poland.

**1773**   First partition of Poland by neighboring powers; 1792 Second partition; 1795 Third partition; Poland disappears from map of Europe.

**1914-1918**   World War I; Poland is laid waste.

**November 11, 1918**   Poland is re-established at war's end; independence confirmed by Treaty of Versailles; pogroms against Jews across Poland.

**1929**   World depression begins.

**1933**   Hitler appointed German chancellor.

**1937**   The political party National Camp for Unity, unabashedly anti-Semitic, assumes power in Poland and enjoys cordial relationship with Nazi Germany.

**1938**   In March, Hitler seizes Austria; Jews are forced to scrub the streets of Vienna as mobs howl with laughter. In September, the Munich Pact is signed and Czechoslovakia stripped of Sudetenland (Poland participates in dismemberment); in October, Polish Jews living in Germany are brutally expelled to Poland; on November 9-10, 1938, Kristallnacht erupts.

**March-April 1939**   Nazis seize truncated Czechoslovakia; Anglo-French-Polish alliance is signed, guaranteeing Polish

independence.

**August 23, 1939**   Nazi-Soviet Pact signed in Moscow; secret protocol calls for the division of Poland.

**September 1, 1939**   Nazi Germany attacks Poland; on September 17, 1938, the Soviet Union attacks Poland.

**June 22, 1941**   Nazi Germany attacks Soviet Union.

**March 17 1942**   'Operation Reinhard,' the systematic destruction of Polish Jews, begins.

**July 22-23, 1942**  'Evacuation' of Warsaw Jews to Treblinka begins.

**September-October 1942**  Liquidation of Czestochowa ghetto.

**April 19, 1943**   Warsaw ghetto uprising begins.

# THE JEWS OF POLAND: BRIEF HISTORY

The first Jews traveled through Poland in the 8th century and began to settle there in the 9th century. From the time of the First Crusade to the Holy Lands in the 12th century until the mid-17th century, Poland was a refuge for Jewish people who had been expelled from Western and Central Europe. The majority of Jews who came to Poland were from German speaking lands.

In 1367, Kazimierz the Great, the Polish king, issued a charter granting the Jews in Poland the same rights under the law as enjoyed by the nobility and the gentry. For several centuries, Poland was a land of relative tolerance for Jews, although simple 'Jew hatred' always existed.

## 'CHRIST KILLERS'

Prejudice against 'Jews' had deep roots. In the 4th century, as the struggle between Christianity and Judaism intensified, Jews were stamped with the pernicious label "Christ killers," meaning that Jews as a 'people' were responsible for the death of Christ. The theological basis for anti-Semitism, the account of Christ's crucifixion, what Polish historian Alina Cala describes as the "calamitous formula," is found in the New Testament, St. Matthew 27:

> "And the governor [Pilate] said, 'Why, what evil hath he [Christ] done?' But they [the Jews] cried out the more, saying, 'Let him be crucified.'

> When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather

a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, 'I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it.' Then answered all the people, and said, 'His blood be on us, and on our children.'"

Anti-Semitism proved to be a unifying force. Historian Alina Cala, author of <u>The Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture</u>, wrote, "The process of internalizing the tenets of the faith which went on in Europe through Middles Ages had as one of its most important elements the blaming of the Jews for the death of Jesus. Every year Christ dies and is resurrected. The existence of the universe depends on this."

In Polish towns, on Good Friday, a figure resembling Judas was traditionally hung in front of a Jew's house. People said, "Judas, you are as greedy for money as a Jew, and that is why he was hanged." The Judas figure was subsequently dumped in a river.

Polish expressions:

"Where the devil cannot act, the Jew can."

"The Jew, the German, and the devil are children of the same mother."

"Everyone is against me like the Jew against Jesus."

"He barges in like a Jew to heaven."

**KEY TEACHING POINT: In 1965, the Second Vatican Council established that the Jewish people were *not* responsible for the death of Christ.**

In Poland, the Jews were denied the right to own land. They settled in the small towns and cities. The urban centers were inhabited largely by Jews and Germans (with whom, ironically, the Jews were identified). The Jews were an urban people with few farmers among them. In feudal times, the Poles and Ukrainians populated rural stretches and remained a people devoted to the tilling of land.

## 'GOLDEN HANDS'

The Jews were typically engaged in labor that involved their hands, earning for themselves the proud sobriquet of "golden hands." In the language of the Old World, the Jews were artisans, or craftsmen. They were cobblers, tailors, tin-smithies, water carriers, porters, scribes, tanners, peddlers of thread, etc. Most of the Jews, like most of the Poles and the Ukrainians, were desperately poor. Jews (relatively few) owned most of the stores and a large number of the factories (Germans owned the rest; Poles were little represented in industry, except as workers).

Jews were viewed as an 'alien' body because they didn't till the soil. "He hurries like a Jew to the scythe," Poles joked. Or "He has as much success as a Jewish farmer."

The merchant was viewed with suspicion and his profession with "laziness."

"If a Jew didn't cheat a Gentile, he would wear a long face for the whole day."

## ESTATE MANAGERS

Jews managed the estates of Polish nobles and were required to collect taxes from the peasants. Jews (and Polish nobles) were viewed as oppressors. Under the auspices of the nobles, the Jews became tavern owners, providing moments of indulgence for peasants but also bitterness occasioned by the indebtedness that was often incurred.

Polish expressions caught the angry spirit:

"The peasant gleans, the lord squanders, the Jew profits."

"The lord plots the ruin of the peasant with the Jew."

"You torment me like the Jews did Jesus."

"Everyone is against me like the Jew against Jesus."

## USURY

The Christian churches prohibited their flock from the "dirty" business of usury, that is, of money-lending with interest. The task fell to the Jews and with it all the disagreeable potential that accompanies the lending of money.

Polish expressions:

"The Jew does not eat breakfast before he cheats."

"You can rely on a Jew like on a broken watch."

"He sits like a Jew on money."

"Let's love each other as brothers but let's settle our accounts like

Jews."

"The Jews have the apartment house, the Poles the street."

**MONOPOLY ON COMMERCE**

Jewish merchants were accused of creating a monopoly on certain trades which prevented non-Jews from the possibility of engaging in business. There was bitter resentment at what was viewed as exploitation. Non-Jews complained that they were being economically strangled by Jews.
Jews were viewed as "cunning and dishonest." And yet, as neighbors, they were viewed as "good, polite, kindhearted, and friendly."

**GHETTOES**

In the towns and cities of Europe, Jews were forced (by Vatican decree) to live in ghettos where they were strictly segregated from non-Jews. Jews were also forced to wear distinguishing regalia, such as a 'yellow star,' to identify them as Jews. There were no ghettoes in Poland, but Jews lived in side by side the Gentiles – but at a distance. In 1492, the Jews of Krakow were expelled from the city. In 1527, the Jews of Warsaw suffered the same fate. Expulsion was the recurrent fate of Jews throughout Europe.

Jews were viewed as cowards and unwilling to defend themselves. Polish expressions: "He's hurrying like a Jew to war," or "He's as useful as a Jew with a rifle."

In Poland, the land of tolerance, tolerance began to fade.

**KEY TEACHING POINT: Everything that the Nazis did to the Jewish people had a precedent in European history: pogroms, expulsions, the 'star of David' marking, the forced concentration in ghettoes, the public humiliation, etc. The Nazi 'contribution' to the history of anti-Semitism was the "modern technical innovation" of gas chambers.**

- As Raul Hilberg, the first historian of the Holocaust, wrote: "The Nazis did not discard the past, they built on it. They did not begin a development. They completed it."

- He added: "The missionaries of Christianity had said in effect, 'You have no right to live among us as Jews.' The secular rulers who followed had proclaimed, 'You have no right to live among us.' The German Nazis at last decreed, 'You have no right to live.'"

## COSSACK REVOLT

In 1648, the Cossacks rampaged through Ukraine and Galicia, killing Jews and Poles in great number. Yet the "biological substance" of the Jewish people survived the pogroms, allowing for the Jewish belief that they could survive anything if only they "weathered the storm" and did not fight back. The Nazis would take grievous advantage of this precedent.

## PARTITIONS

In the latter part of the 18th century, Poland suffered the first of three disastrous partitions at the hands of her powerful, and rapacious, imperial neighbors: Russia, Prussia [Germany], and Austria. The loss of nationhood intensified the hard feelings Poles felt towards Jews. It was necessary to explain the catastrophe, and

the Jews, an "alien" people, emerged as the likely scapegoat. It was difficult, after all, to blame oneself for life's shortcomings, real or imagined.

## AUSTRIAN GALICIA

In the early 19th century, the lands in the south of the dismembered Polish nation, including the region of Galicia, were annexed to the far-flung Austrian Empire, ruled from imperial (and glittering) Vienna. In 1867, the Austrian Empire would become the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Under the relatively benevolent rule of the Habsburgs, the Jews of Galicia enjoyed legal rights that were unknown, for example, by the Jews living nearby under Russian (Tsarist) control.

## BLOOD LIBEL

One of the most pernicious, and bloody, myths about Jewish people concerned the 'blood libel.' Jews were accused of kidnapping Gentile children before the Jewish Passover each year. The 'purpose' was to prick the veins of the children for 'the blood of Christ,' which was used in the preparation of Jewish matzo bread. A Jewish man named Beilis was accused of 'blood libel' and tried in 1913. He was acquitted but the slur "Beilis" was flung at Jewish people thereafter.

## OST-JUDEN

The Jews of Galicia often migrated to Prague and Vienna (cities within the Habsburg Empire) where they became the despised "ost-Juden," the "Eastern Jew" who was foreign to the sensibilities of many, including Vienna's assimilated Jews, who weren't free of prejudice against the "ost-Juden."

The Jews of the Habsburg Empire viewed Franz Josef, the long serving Kaiser (or emperor), as a "friend." Holocaust survivor Henry Galler remembered the Kaiser's portrait, with the portrait of his wife Elizabeth, that hung in an honored place above the bed in the room Henry shared with his grandparents. "Everybody in my family could speak German fluently," Henry said. "They were teaching us German to speak. We had even preserved Austrian money. Austrian letters were plentiful in the drawers all over."

## LEGAL EMANCIPATION

The Jews were emancipated in the 19th century. They were allowed to live and work outside of the ghettoes. The emancipation of the Jews was bitterly protested by the developing Polish middle class, which viewed the Jews as economic competitors.

## DIFFERENCE BASED ON BLOOD

In the latter part of the 19th century, the old debate on the Jewish question took on a new form. Jews, hitherto viewed as unacceptable because of their religion, were now viewed as unacceptable because of their genes. It was the blood that coursed through their veins that set them apart from the Christian populace. This so-called scientific basis of anti-Semitism excluded the possibility of Jews being assimilated. They were a separate people, "aliens" in a Gentile world, and what happened to them did not matter. A major obstacle to eventual Jewish destruction was overcome: what happens to the Jews, it doesn't matter.

## SOCIAL DARWINISM

With the advent of Social Darwinism, many began to view the different nationalities and ethnic groups of Europe as competitors against one another in "a struggle for survival." The term anti-

Semitism, or hatred of the Jews, first appeared in a book published in Vienna in 1873, the title of which reflected the racial anxieties of the day: <u>Victory of Judaism over Germanism.</u>

## CAPITALISM

In the age of liberalism and capitalism, the old restrictions of the feudal order were discarded in favor of (relative) political plurality and laissez-faire economics. Some Jews benefited enormously under the new political and economic systems. In the popular mind, Jews and capitalism (and liberalism) were closely linked.

## COMMUNISM (BOLSHEVISM)

This was a time when communism began to win popular appeal. It spoke of an idyllic future in which discrimination was prohibited. Many leading communists were Jews, and many impoverished Jews rallied to the red banner. Relatively speaking, not many Jews became communists. Communism was an atheist creed, and the overwhelming majority of Polish Jews were very religious. Nonetheless, Jews as a group were identified with communism. The Polish expresion was "Jew-communism," or "zydokomuna."

## DUAL PERILS

In the 19th century, Jews suffered the dual perils of being identified with capitalism on one hand and communism on the other. It was a time filled with anxiety. Europe was undergoing a profound transition. Many people suffered; many were left behind; the Jews were blamed.

## WORLD WAR I

On August 1, 1914, the First World War began when the Imperial

German armies attacked France, triggering Russia's intervention against the German and the Austro-Hungarian empires. Poland became a principal battle ground in the east where the imperial armies clashed repeatedly.

**KEY TEACHING POINT: The Nazis, of course, didn't acknowledge the contributions of Jews who had served in the German or Austrian armies during World War I and who, in many cases, had been awarded medals for bravery. This debt of honor was repaid in a different coin.**

World War I brutalized the populace. Misery was visited upon all. Hunger, devastation, and epidemics prevailed. Accused of spying for the Germans and Austrians, the Jewish population was uprooted and expelled by the Russians. The German and Austrian soldiers were brutal and arrogant but generally behaved decently towards civilians, including the Jews. The behavior of the Russian soldiers was quite different: it generally involved rape and pillage. In the First World War, the Jews of Galicia embraced the Germans, a precedent that would serve them badly in 1939, when a different brand of German arrived.

### RED PERIL

In the autumn of 1917, the Bolsheviks (communists) seized power in Russia, and the prospect of a 'red tide' sweeping across Europe became real. The 'Jews' had always been identified with communism. The unsettled times inflamed anti-Semitism. In 1918, at the end of World War I, the German and Austro-Hungarian empires collapsed. In this power vacuum, the independent Polish nation first saw the light of day. In the first years of Poland's independence, Jews were murdered in pogroms across the new Poland.

The Treaty of Versailles confirmed the re-establishment of the Polish state, but the delegates, influenced by the pogroms in Poland, insisted that Polish diplomats insert a clause protecting Poland's minority populations, including Jews. The Polish officials reluctantly agreed to the clause but resented it, as did Poles in general. It was an affront to Poland's honor.

## DISCRIMINATION IN THE NEW POLAND

In the new Poland, Jews (and Ukrainians) were denied jobs in the civil service and in public schools.

Jews were excluded from workers' guilds. Non-Jews didn't want the competition. Polish universities severely curtailed Jewish enrollment, establishing a 'quota' system for Jewish admission and 'back benches' where Jewish students were forced to sit. Universities were hot-beds of anti-Semitism. Jews could not serve as officers in the Polish army, except as doctors.

## NEIGHBORS BUT NOT COUNTRYMEN

In cities and towns, Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians lived close to one another but always at a 'distance.' They were neighbors but not countrymen.

They were separated by myths, religion, economics, and centuries of stereotypes. They lived in separate worlds, and each group preferred it that way.

"We weren't separated by the line," said a Jewish survivor. "But socially, everybody stuck to their own. The Ukrainians stuck to their own, the Poles to their own, Jews to their own."

However, friendships crossing the racial-ethnic-religious divide were not untypical. When the Nazis came, these friendships assumed new meaning, and some friendships proved sad mockeries.

# WORLD WAR II

Hitler and Stalin, though arch-enemies, signed a 'non-aggression' pact in August 1939, the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (named after the Soviet and Nazi foreign ministers). Hitler's purpose was to dissuade England and France from honoring their treaty obligations to Poland. In a secret protocol, Hitler and Stalin agreed to divide Central and Eastern Europe between themselves. Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Two days later, much to Hitler's surprise, England and France declared war on Germany. The German Army occupied Oleszyce on September 12th. Ukrainians wildly greeted them. The Gestapo, as everywhere, quickly executed members of the Polish leadership as well as the 'richest' Jews.

**KEY TEACHING POINT: The Nazis invariably humiliated and terrorized Jews in public spectacles and destroyed the synagogues with the gaiety of a circus. This was an effort to demoralize the Jews, and to inform local people that it didn't matter what happened to the Jews. They were 'sub-human,' and everybody could take advantage of them. The public humiliation of the Jews further brutalized the perpetrators *and* the bystanders.**

The Nazis established a *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) and began extracting bribes. A group of Jewish policemen was organized – and

used as an instrument of German rule.

They wore caps with a 'star of David.' Jews were robbed, starved, murdered, and forced to wear a white armband with a 'star of David.' They weren't permitted to walk on the (wooden) sidewalks; they had to walk in the muddy streets. Men and boys were taken to build roads and treated inhumanely. The poorest people couldn't bribe their way out.

### 'OPERATION REINHARD'

The mass murder of the Polish Jews, called 'Operation Reinhard' by the Nazis, began in March 1942. The Belzec death camp was located near Oleszyce – only three train stations away. Arriving at Belzec, Jews were beaten, robbed of their last belongings (including their hair and golden teeth), and sent to 'showers,' where they were gassed by carbon monoxide. Except for five-hundred Jewish men who were enslaved and forced to 'work' at Belzec, the victims were murdered within a few hours of arriving.

**KEY TEACHING POINT: The Nazis and their collaborators were murderers *and* thieves. Theirs was mass murder based on racist ideology *and* on human greed.**

The Nazis counted, weighed, and bundled the possessions (including wedding rings) of the murdered people. These 'goods' were packed off to Germany. Money, jewelry, and gold were deposited in a Berlin

bank. After the war, many Nazi killers lived off this 'loot' after they had obtained false 'documents,' assumed new identities, and immigrated to South America and elsewhere. The Nazi collaborators also profited. They received Jewish property. And ordinary people profited: they moved into Jewish homes and/or took over Jewish stores. Greed walked hand in hand with murder. No wonder that surviving Jews weren't welcomed home after the war: former neighbors were living in their homes.