

CHAPTER ONE

IN THE PODOLIAN STEPPE

The contents [of Mendel Lefin's *Der ershter khosed* (*The First Hasid*)] are obvious from the title. It investigates the origins of Hasidism, which was rooted in the cities of Podolia from the very beginning. Who knows what we lack in losing this book? He undoubtedly informed us truthfully [about Hasidism] because he was its contemporary, both in *time* and *place*.¹

Abraham Baer Gottlober (1885)

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

In 1569, in an act of state known as the Union of Lublin, the Kingdom of Poland and the Duchy of Lithuania came together to form the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The new state was one of the largest in Continental Europe, stretching from the Dvina in the north to the Black Sea in the south and from beyond the Dniepr in the east to Silesia and West Prussia in the west. The two parts of the Commonwealth shared a common king, parliament (*Sejm*), political structure, and foreign policy, but had distinct law codes, armies, and administrations. The Commonwealth's republicanism was unique in Europe, but severely delimited by the social structure of the state, the majority of whose denizens were peasants. Known as the "Noble Republic," the Commonwealth boasted one of the largest noble classes in Europe. Free from taxation, with almost unrestrained power in the Polish *Sejm* to enact legislation and elect the king, the Polish *szlachta* (nobility) enjoyed a high level of political rights compared to their noble peers in the rest of Europe. The Polish nobility regarded itself as descendants of a race of "heroic Sarmatians" who had defeated Rome. Central to their identity was an assumption of national uniqueness; believing the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to be the apotheosis of liberty, the *szlachta* defined themselves in opposition to other European nobilities and stubbornly mythologized their liberties, privileges, religion, culture, and economic structure. They gave pride of place to their independence from the Polish king.² Economically,

¹ Emphasis in the original. Abraham Baer Gottlober, "R. Isaac Baer Levinsohn and His Time—Memoirs of the History of the Russian-Jewish Haskalah," *He'asif* (Warsaw, 1885), 7. Cited by Avraham Rubinstein in [Joseph Perl], *Über das Wesen der Sekte Chassidim* (ed. Avraham Rubinstein; Jerusalem: Publications of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1977), 5, footnote 28.

² The nobility alone had a voice in the *Sejm*; clergy, burghers, and peasants had no repre-

the nobility was similarly empowered, although the greatest wealth was concentrated in the hands of about twenty magnate families, and not distributed equally among the *szlachta*. For example, in the 1770s, 1.9 percent of the *szlachta* controlled 75 percent of the nobles' wealth in Lithuania. The eastern lands of the Commonwealth, in Podolia, Volhynia, and Ukraine, were dominated economically by the huge *latifundia* (agricultural plantations) of a few magnate families.³

Characteristic of the Commonwealth was its ethnic and religious heterogeneity. Home to Poles, Germans, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Belorussians, Ruthenians, Letts, Estonians, Turks, Armenians, Italians, Scots, and Jews, the Commonwealth tolerated Protestantism, Greek and Armenian Orthodoxy, Ukrainian Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism.⁴ This diversity was even more pronounced in the private cities of the eastern and southeastern part of the state. For example, in sixteenth-century Zamość, Scots, Jews, Italians, Hungarians, Germans, Greek Orthodox, and Armenians comprised the forty-four home owners in the city.⁵ The childhood memoirs of Jacob Frank, the eighteenth-century messianic pretender, relate that when the *shamash* (beadle) of the Jewish community of Korolówka knocked on the doors of the Jews to rouse them for penitential prayers in the month before the New Year, he also knocked on the doors of Polish Christians and Armenians, attesting to the heterogeneity of the town.⁶ Yet, the implicit religious tolerance of the Commonwealth would be sorely tested, as with so much else, in the political crisis that began in the seventeenth century.⁷

Poland suffered numerous foreign incursions and wars during the seventeenth century, including a series of Cossack rebellions (beginning in 1591 and culminating with the notorious Chmielnicki revolt in 1648–1649), the Northern War (1655–60), the invasion of Muscovy in 1654, the Turkish invasion of 1671, which resulted in the Ottoman acquisition of almost one-third of Commonwealth territory, and the wars with Sweden (1700–1721).

sentation. See Jerzy Lukowski, *Liberty's Folly: The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Eighteenth Century, 1697–1795* (London: Routledge, 1991), 20–22, 77, and 222–23 and Jerzy Jedlicki, *A Suburb of Europe: Nineteenth-Century Polish Approaches to Western Civilization* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999), 1–3.

³ Jerzy Lukowski, *The Partitions of Poland, 1772, 1793, 1795* (London: Longman, 1999), 10–15 and Lukowski, *Liberty's Folly*, 14.

⁴ Frank E. Sysyn, *Between Poland and the Ukraine: The Dilemma of Adam Kysil, 1600–1653* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 6.

⁵ Edward Fram, *Ideals Face Reality: Jewish Law and Life in Poland, 1550–1655* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 1997), 20.

⁶ Chone Shmeruk, "Investigations into Jacob Frank's Childhood Memoirs," *Gal-Ed* 15–16 (1997): 39.

⁷ In 1733, for example, non-Catholics were barred from civil office. See Lukowski, *Liberty's Folly*, 22.

One Polish historian has argued that the ruin resulting from the wars of the mid-seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century was “as devastating to Poland as the Black Death, which missed Poland, was for western Europe.”⁸ The unremitting assault on Poland’s sovereignty continued in the eighteenth century, culminating in the three partitions in 1772, 1793, and 1795 by Austria, Russia, and Prussia.

Jewish Settlement in the Noble Republic

All peoples tend to embellish the longevity of their settlement in a region, as if to secure their rightful claim of residence and belonging. The Jews of Poland were no different. The “Khazar theory of origins,” a Polish-Jewish etiology tale that gripped the imaginations of medieval and modern Jews alike, posited that the Khazar kingdom in the region of the Black Sea was the *Ur*-community of East European Jews.⁹ Pressure from the tenth-century Kievan state dissolved Khazaria, whose king and inhabitants had converted to Judaism in the middle of the eighth century, but its Jewish population remained in eastern Europe, the legend goes, settling communities throughout the Slavic world. There is little evidence to support this account as the basis of Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe. More credible is the analysis that the Jews of early modern Poland are the descendants of German Jews who migrated eastward, beginning in the eleventh century, and became a significant stream simultaneous with German migration to Poland in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. Because Muscovy and Prussia were barred to the Jews, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became the most important area of Jewish settlement in Europe. Immigration rose in the second half of the fifteenth century when Jews were expelled from the lands of Germany, Austria, Silesia, and Bohemia. By the end of the century, there were between 10,000 and 15,000 Jewish souls in Poland.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ The most famous example is *Sefer hakuzari* (first printing, 1506) by the poet and philosopher Judah Halevi (before 1075–1141), in which the converted Khazar king conducts a philosophical religious dialogue with representatives of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Aristotelian philosophy. Modernizing Jews turned to Halevi’s work throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both as an expression of religious tolerance and ardor for Hebrew poetry. See Shmuel Werses, “Judah Halevi in the Mirror of the Nineteenth Century,” in *Megamot vetsurot besifrut hahaskalah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 50–89. Ovadiyah ben Pesakhiah, the protagonist of Joseph Perl’s satire, *Bohen tsaddiq*, relates with amazement the “truth” of the existence of the Jewish kingdom of Khazaria, which is confirmed during his travels to the region of the Caspian Sea. See [Joseph Perl], *Bohen tsaddiq* (Prague, 1838), 89–90.

¹⁰ Bernard Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976), 3–32.

The Jewish population rose dramatically with the geographic expansion of Poland that took place after the Union of Lublin. The Commonwealth encompassed Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine (including Podolia and Volhynia), and Rus' (Ruthenia or Red Rus'), the area that came to be called East Galicia (see map 1). These southeastern regions became particularly hospitable to Jewish settlement as a burgeoning economy based on grain grew with the expansion of noble holdings in the steppe.¹¹ The vast plateau of the Ukraine, known for its mineral-rich, black soil, became the breadbasket of Europe as raw materials were shipped on Poland's many rivers north and northwest. To maximize production, Polish magnates turned their estates into agricultural plantations, which, from the sixteenth century onward, were worked by enserfed peasants who were legally bound to the land and to weekly labor duties (*corvée* or *robot*). The magnates, who sought to exercise complete control over their estates and to restrict the privileges of the burghers, stunted urban development. Yet *szlachta* hostility to urban life created a huge obstacle to their desire for economic growth.¹² They needed managers and administrators to oversee their affairs and hence turned to Jewish intermediaries to manage their holdings, in the process encouraging Jewish settlement in their towns. From the mid-sixteenth century onward, Jews were an essential component in the Polish colonization of the Ukrainian provinces of Volhynia, Podolia, Braclaw, and Kiev; indispensable to the management of the newly acquired magnate lands, the Jewish population of Ukraine increased thirteen-fold between 1569–1648.¹³ By 1765, more than half of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's Jewish population (750,000) lived in private, noble-owned towns.¹⁴ This economic interdependence between magnate and Jew had a portentous effect on the region in general and on the Jewish community in particular.

¹¹ Sysyn, *Between Poland and Ukraine*, 24; Shmuel Ettinger, "The Participation of the Jews in the Settlement of Ukraine (1569–1648)," in *Bein Polin leRusya* (ed. Israel Bartal and Jonathan Frankel; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1994), 107–43; Adam Żółtowski, *Border of Europe: A Study of the Polish Eastern Provinces* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1950), 2.

¹² Maria Bogucka, "Polish Towns between the Sixteenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *A Republic of Nobles: Studies in Polish History to 1864* (ed. J. K. Federowicz; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 138–56.

¹³ Ettinger, "The Participation of the Jews in the Settlement of Ukraine (1569–1648)," 107–43 and Shmuel Ettinger, "The Role of the Jews in the Settlement of the Ukraine in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Bein Polin leRusya* (ed. Israel Bartal and Jonathan Frankel; Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 1994), 143–49.

¹⁴ M. J. Rosman, *The Lords' Jews: Magnate-Jewish Relations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 1990), 39.

Although since the thirteenth century Jewish immigrants had been subject to the direct authority of the Polish king, by the mid-sixteenth century they became subject to the local lord. The *Sejm* of 1539 granted owners of private towns the exclusive right to place obligations on their Jewish populations, which, in turn, freed the Jews from royal authority and opened up enormous administrative and economic opportunities for them.¹⁵ Denied settlement in royal towns in the western part of the state, and subject to competition from Christian burghers and guilds, the Jewish community looked east toward the private towns of the Polish nobility, where they were welcomed with favorable privileges, including the right of municipal residency and self-government. In private Polish towns the Jewish community enjoyed a special economic relationship with the local lord, in contrast to the native townsmen, who were hampered in their efforts to encourage urban industry. For example, native burghers were forbidden to export any of Poland's raw materials on the Wisła River, except for cattle and oxen, while Jewish middlemen virtually dominated all other commercial activity on the river.¹⁶ From the sixteenth century onward, the Jews of Poland were increasingly concentrated in noble lands and had turned away from collecting taxes for the king and toward a variety of economic roles associated with the nobles' *latifundia*. Jews collected taxes on private estates, ran inns and taverns, extended credit, and were involved with both foreign and domestic trade.¹⁷

The Jews were an essential feature of the landscape of southeastern early modern Poland. As William Coxe, an early nineteenth-century British traveller in the borderlands remarked, "In stating the different classes of inhabitants the Jews must not be omitted. This people date their introduction into Poland about the time of Casimir the Great, and as they enjoy privileges which they scarcely possess in any other country, excepting England and Holland, their numbers have surprisingly increased."¹⁸ So, too, were they an integral component of Polish urban life. At the time of the census of 1764, there were Jewish communities established in at least 823 private towns.¹⁹

¹⁵ Jacob Goldberg, "The Privileges granted to Jewish Communities of the Polish Commonwealth as a Stabilizing Factor in Jewish Support," in *The Jews in Poland* (ed. Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk, and Antony Polonsky; London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 31–54; Adam Teller, "The Legal Status of the Jews on the Magnate Estates of Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century," *Gal-Ed* 15–16 (1997): 41–63.

¹⁶ Lukowski, *Liberty's Folly*, 20–22, 77; Gershon Hundert, "Some Basic Characteristics of Jewish Life in Poland," *Polin* 1, no. 1 (1986): 31; Rosman, *The Lords' Jews*, 39–40.

¹⁷ Judith Kalik, *Ha'atsulah hapolanit veyehudeihah bemamlekhet Polin-Lita bere'i hatehiqqah bat hazeman* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997) and Ettinger, "The Participation of the Jews in the Settlement of Ukraine (1569–1648)."

¹⁸ William Coxe, *Travels in Poland and Russia* (London, 1802; repr. New York: Arno, 1970), 118–19.

¹⁹ Lukowski, *Liberty's Folly*, 77–80 and Artur Eisenbach, *The Emancipation of the Jews in*

Concentrated in the private towns of the Polish nobility, the Jews were legally free, neither juridically bound by the authority of the Christian magistrates nor subject to municipal taxes. This singular status of Polish Jewry, which by the mid-eighteenth century constituted at least half of the Polish urban population and was the principal component of the middle class, engendered deep animosity on the part of the beleaguered native burgher class.²⁰

Poland, 1780–1870 (ed. Antony Polonsky and trans. Janina Dorosz; London: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 28.

²⁰ Gershon Hundert, "Jewish Life in the Eighteenth-Century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth," in *Qiyum veshever: yehudei Polin ledoroteihem* (ed. Israel Bartal and Israel Gutman; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1997), 226.