

**Kurek - Jewish Ghettos from 4**

aspects of the puzzles... while new areas of the Polish-Jewish terra incognita surface. The task has become more and more difficult. It is partly caused by the fact that Polish-Jewish relations during WWII is a subject in which each Jew and each Pole seems to be an expert. That is why there are now more emotions on the subject than concrete facts. More than forty years ago, the first woman professor at Columbia University, Philosopher Hannah Arendt, a Jew, wrote, "these emotions are very often used to hide a real truth."<sup>1</sup>

This led me to ask myself:

What is it in WWII that the Poles would like to hide?

What is it that Polish Jews would like to hide?

Regarding the Poles we know the truth. For 60 years we have tried to explain why we were not able to rescue Polish Jews from the Holocaust. What is the truth as Polish Jews see it?

Professor Arendt, one of the first to research the problem of Jewish participation in the Holocaust has written: "The issue I am working over was the issue of the Jewish administration's cooperation with the persons implementing the 'Final Solution,' and this issue is so uncomfortable because it may be confirmed that these people were not the traitors. (There were traitors as well, but this is not important)."<sup>2</sup>

Looking for traces of what was described by Hannah Arendt, I questioned Jewish historical sources as to the reality of Jewish Ghettos in Poland during WWII. According to Professor Arendt, "members of the Jewish administrations co-operated with Germans in implementing the Final Solution."

In my research regarding the functioning of the Jewish ghettos in Poland during WWII, I took into account that the Jewish ghettos were the only areas where there was a functioning Jewish administration. Because Poles lived outside of the Jewish ghetto walls during the war and did not know exactly what was going on inside, I searched for answers in Jewish historical sources

When I was analyzing information from the well-known diary of Adam Czerniaków, Ringelblum's chronicles and the Łódź Ghetto Chronicles, I came upon an unexpected discovery, which demands a re-examination of the previous way of thinking about the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations during WWII. This discovery is a fact: The Jewish ghettos in Poland during WWII were not places of isolation for Polish Jews created by the Germans. In their quest for autonomy, the Polish Jews built the ghettos themselves, with the permission and co-operation of the Germans occupying Poland.

**Jewish Autonomy**

To fully understand the issue of Jewish autonomy in Poland we have to go back to when the first Jews started to settle in Poland. It is a well-known fact that in the middle of the Thirteenth Century the Jewish colonies in Poland were so numerous that in the year 1264 the Kalish Prince Bolesław Pobożny decreed the Kalisz Statute, in which the rights of Jewish colonies were formed. The Statute put the Jewish colonies under the prince's power and guaranteed the Jews the right to create their religious communes and freedom of economic activity. This Statute was confirmed and spread to the whole of Poland in the Fourteenth Century by King Kazimierz the Great, who promoted the possibility of Jewish colonization in Poland.<sup>3</sup>

We may ask, why did Polish princes and kings in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and ensuing centuries create these positive conditions for Jewish colonization? There are many hypotheses about this. It seems that the most logical and significant reasons were social and economic. Polish society, similar to societies of other European countries, was comprised of four social groups: the king, nobility, clergy, and peasants. The king's task was to keep power

in the Polish Kingdom, the task of the nobility was to defend the kingdom's borders, the role of the clergy was to pray, and the peasants to work the land.

The Polish climate was very favorable for grain production. In the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries, Poland had an over-production of food, especially grain. But in the Middle-Ages in Poland there was no way to sell it abroad. In Polish society there was no group which was able to specialize in the trading of food products.

Among the four social groups it was absolutely impossible for the king and the clergy to be engaged in trade. The peasants didn't have knowledge of the world and its financial possibilities. The only social group which would have been able to be involved to the grain trade was the nobility. But Polish law banned the nobility from engaging in trade under the threat of losing their noble stature. Nobody from the nobility wanted to lose their status so it was necessary to find a social group which could transport the food produced by the Poles and sell it abroad, for a profit.

The Polish kings made their choice and selected the Jewish people, who were oppressed in Europe, but who were experienced in trade and had the necessary contacts and access to capital. The reason for Jewish colonization in Poland was deeply rooted in the contemporary economy.

It is important to note that the proposal made by the Polish kings and princes for the Jews to settle in Poland and engage in food trading was made at a time when "Jewish life space" was rapidly diminishing in Western Europe. Almost all important countries of Western Europe denied the Jews asylum.

The Jewish historian Majer Balaban had written: "The fates of Israelis were similar everywhere. The same human emotions [...] pushed the Jews from the borders of Loraine and France, through Germany to Poland, to concentrate the Jews there in a small space [.....]. The [Polish] kings took care of them in the most appropriate way. These kings, with small exceptions, were positive to the Jewish needs. To the honor of Poland it had to be said that in the long line of Polish kings there was no one who treated the Jews as did King Karol IV of Prussia had, who sold Jews for heavy money to the city's crowds, or as King Albrecht V had, who, based on the accusation of one woman burned all of Vienna's Jews in 1421. [...] Not to mention the Jews' exile from England (1290), from France (1306), and from Spain and Portugal in the XIV century. It is only from this point of view that we should look at the history of the Jews in Poland. [...] The Polish Jews were not exiled and it was a great success in times of the dark medieval period. This degree of tolerance was unknown in the whole of Europe. The fair treatment by the king and the support of the nobility were the fundaments for the Jews who settled on Polish land as comfortably as was possible."<sup>4</sup>

The Jews therefore played a concrete role in the economic structures of the Polish state. Castellan Jacek Jezierski wrote in 1791: "I know the Jews as the support of Polish citizens, because there are no other sellers in Poland except of the Jews, who are exporters of the national product."<sup>5</sup>

The Jews, as Polish citizens, lived in the cities and in small towns and they had their own legal structure, religion and, until the end of the Eighteenth Century, had their own parliament, called "The Jewish Parliament of the Four Lands in Poland." This parliament was unique in the whole world. Poland was the only country in which the Jews were allowed to have a separate parliament for their people. The Jewish parliament functioned on the same principles as the Polish parliament, and the Head (Marshall) of the Jewish parliament (named by the Polish kings: "Judeanus, qui in nostra aula resident" or "The Jew who resides near our throne"<sup>6</sup>) legally represented the Polish Jews in the Polish state.

In the Jewish Parliament of the Four Lands and in their style of life, the Polish State guaranteed the Jews their own political, legal, social and religious structures. In modern terms this is full autonomy.

That situation existed as long as the Polish State itself existed. But during the partition of 1795, Poland disappeared from the map of Europe. Thus, together with the Polish State, Jewish autonomy no longer existed. None of the nations occupying Polish land (Russia, Germany and Austria) permitted the Jews to keep their autonomy.

Until 1795 the Polish Jews had no obligations to be involved in Polish political and military issues. This tradition was formed during several centuries that "leaving Jews to their own" created an ersatz of their own Jewish state.

This model which had functioned for several centuries started to erode at the end of the Eighteenth Century. In 1795 when the Polish State was destroyed, the social-political relations between Poles and Jews broke down unexpectedly, and forever. As a consequence of Poland's partitions, those elements which were not important in Polish-Jewish relations for centuries had now become the most significant.

The Poles had never accepted the loss of their own statehood and, for several generations fought in a death-and-life struggle to gain back their independence. During the 123 years of Poland's partitioned slavery, never more than 2% of Poland's Jewish population supported the Poles in their struggle for the reconstruction of the Polish State. Throughout the whole Nineteenth Century, the Poles realized they could not expect solidarity with the majority of Polish Jews in their struggle for freedom. During this time the Poles subordinated the conditions in which Jews would live in an independent Poland.

Historian Joahim Lelewel, in 1832, wrote (in Polish, German and French) an appeal to the Polish Jews: "The children of Israel! [...] On the day of Victory we would like to make a precise calculation with you, each son of Poland, a Jew or a Catholic, will make a report to say what he had done for the common benefit of Poland. How much had he supported the Motherland's reconstruction. Each effort and each service will be measured in the moment when we will be able to call this land our own, and when that time comes we will divide the freedom between us, all together or each alone, to the common harmony."<sup>7</sup>

The Polish attitude toward the Polish Jews during the 123 years was clear: if you would support us in the struggle for freedom, we would together create the Polish State. But if you would not struggle for the Polish state, we shall remember that.

On November 11, 1918 the Poles finally won their freedom for Poland. The Polish Jews immediately started their quest for autonomy at the Zionist Conference held in Warsaw in October, 1918, and demanded the application of national autonomy for Jews to be guaranteed in the Constitution.<sup>8</sup> The form of autonomy which the Polish Jews had expected to get in Poland was discussed in the Polish Parliament session in May, 1919. The Chairman of the Zionist Federation in Warsaw and all of Poland, Itzhak Grünbaum, who had arrived from Petersburg in 1918, had said: "We demand only one thing be given to the Polish Jewry; an opportunity to organize and to satisfy our specific needs. We demand to permit us to establish an organization which will satisfy the specific needs of the Polish Jews on the basis of the Polish Constitution."<sup>9</sup>

The ideas of Itzhak Grünbaum were developed by another parliament member, Samuel Hiszhorn: The Polish Constitution had to guarantee a self-government for the Polish Jews, whose borders will be the same as the border of a political commune, and which is headed by the General National Council.<sup>10</sup>

From these quoted sources it can be clearly seen that, in 1918, the Polish Jews demanded from the Poles the same life conditions as they were guaranteed by the Polish kings before 1795. It is easy to understand that the Jewish parliament member's proposal is simply a reconstructed form of the Jewish Parliament of the Four Lands.

Poland, during 1918 – 1939, known as the Second Polish Republic, had little in common with the state ruled by the Polish kings before 1795, known as the First Polish State. The Second Polish Republic was a democratic state with a President as its head, and the Poles – the state power as well as the people – were not able to understand or forgive the Jews for their lack of solidarity during the fierce struggle for Poland's independence. That is why there was no chance for any type of Jewish autonomy; not a Jewish parliament nor a territorial autonomy. However, the Poles gave Polish Jews the possibility to develop their culture, science, political parties and social organizations. But, understandably Poles did not want to hear anything about any form of political autonomy in 1918-1939, when today this seems only fair and logical.

Before WWII Poland was the biggest Jewish center in all of Europe, and one of the biggest in the world. About 3.5 million Jews constituted about 10% of Poland's population and more than 36% of the population of most Polish towns. Hebrew or Yiddish was used by 85% of the Jews as their mother tongue. In no other European country in the first decades of the 20th century do we find any similar statistics.

Who exactly were the Polish Jews before the eruption of WWII? They may be divided into at least three groups: Hasidism, the very few "Polonized" Jews; about 10-15% were so-called "emancipated" Jews; and the huge amount of the Orthodox Jews, who represented a specific Polish branch of orthodox – the Hasidism.

The Orthodox Jews (Hasidism) were centered in urban communities and lived in their own quarters, where only the Jewish language was spoken. One could be born a Jew, finish school and spend one's whole adult life not knowing any Poles nor the Polish language and not feel any necessity to know and learn such. According to Jewish memoirs from Lublin, on the eve of World War II, there were Jews who did not even know they were living in Poland!

Polish Jews had created their own system of survival, because they truly did not want to be assimilated. The most important elements of their system was organized isolationism.

Polish Historian Władysław Bartoszewski writes, "Before the Second World War there were several thousand Jews who became strongly rooted in Warsaw's Polish society (lawyers, doctors, engineers, journalists, writers and actors) and more than 300,000 who lived within their own ethnic group, in their own circle, in a sort a ghetto. No Jew would ever rent a room in this area to a baptized man, no matter if he were a Pole, a German or Scottish. It is a sin and impossible on principle for pious Jews to have someone not of their faith in their community. A home for religious Jews is a community and someone of another faith should not have access to it. The Jews have built their own ghettos through this type of isolation. That is why the Jewish ghettos in Poland were originally created by the Jews themselves. Jewish ghettos existed in Poland long before the German occupation, and it was not Poles who created these ghettos, but the Jews themselves."<sup>11</sup>

Jewish historian Aleksander Hertz said: "During the centuries of their stay in Poland, till the moment of the Holocaust, Polish Jews, living in the local ghettos had composed a caste system which had a custom form of social regulations which may have power bigger than most restrictive legal acts often without legal instruments."<sup>12</sup>

**To be continued - August issue**

*The key element for understanding what had happened to Poles and Polish Jews during WWII is the result of one thousand years of parallel co-existence.*