CHAPTER 5B

EASTERN EUROPE

Eastern Europe must be understood in the context of two sets of geographical contrasts mentioned before. Firstly, the division between the economically, politically, and culturally more advanced western regions of northern Europe and its more backward eastern regions. In these latter domains, the Jews could benefit from this relative backwardness as it allowed them to make valuable contributions to Eastern Europe during the last centuries of the Middle Ages, just as they had done in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in the western regions of northern Europe. The second, equally important contrast existed between interior and exposed areas. Both Hungary and Poland constituted the easternmost borders of Latin Christendom as they bordered on areas with other religious identities. As such, they were seen as the first line of defense of Latin Christendom and both countries experienced the violence that came with this exposure to hostile outside forces. Although the economic backwardness of the easternmost areas of northern Europe worked to the Jews' advantage, the anxiety and fear that came with being exposed to conflict with lands outside of Latin Christendom often worked to their disadvantage.

Once again, generalization is impossible and distinctions must be made, even within these areas of northeastern Europe as conditions in Hungary and Poland were quite different. We will first discuss the Jewish community of Hungary, and then move on to the larger and eventually more important Jewish community of Poland.

The history of the Hungary's Middle Ages begins around the year 1000. Positioned between Latin Christendom to the west, Byzantium to the southeast, and nomadic territories to the east and northeast, medieval Hungary encountered challenges from all directions. The strategy of Hungary's authorities was to align with Latin Christendom without falling into the hands of the German emperor. To limit the threat from the German empire, Hungarian rulers frequently allied themselves with the Pope. The Byzantine threat ended with the decline of Byzantium starting in the early thirteenth century, while the threat from the nomadic territories became acute in the 1240s with the invasion of the Mongols. Despite widespread devastation, Hungary recovered fairly quickly, meanwhile strengthening its ties with Latin Christendom.

Hungary's location not only had international ramifications but also influenced the mix of people living within the kingdom. The population was quite diverse, including Jews, Muslims, and Cumans (a tribe of Turkic nomads). Such diversity as existed in places like Hungary was usually good for the Jewish community. They were able to use their skills and economic abilities most effectively in such diversified settings.

Before the year 1000, while there were some Jews in these areas that later became the medieval kingdom of Hungary, the Jewish population of medieval Hungary can be traced back to northern Europe, especially Germany. You can see this firstly, in where they settled – mostly in the northwest part of Hungary, closest to Germany from where the majority of Hungarian Jews originated. Moreover, the legal status of Hungarian Jews was based on a decree by King Bela IV in 1251, which was basically a copy of a charter issued for the Jews of Austria in 1244. This foundational charter was regularly confirmed throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Interestingly, the Jewish community in medieval Hungary does not seem to have grown much in size; it remained relatively small throughout the Middle Ages.

Economic activity among the Jewish population in Hungary began with trading and artistry (especially coin minting). As time went on, the Jews became gradually more involved in moneylending. This is no surprise, as we already saw that Jews participated in moneylending in many counties across Europe. However, there are some differences between Jewish moneylending in Hungary and what we saw in other countries. On the one hand, there was nothing like the sophisticated lending against land that we saw in England and northern France. On the other hand, a number of wealthy Hungarian Jews did emerge, some with connections to the crown and to powerful nobles.

During the later centuries of our, the papacy regularly exerted pressures, seeking to impose restrictions on Jewish activities. These demands of the Church point to an unusual position achieved by a small number of jews. Hungary's rulers showed reluctance to part with the services of their Jewish advisors and officials, even despite their usual cooperation with the Pope. As we shall see, the attempt to completely drive out the Jewish population in 1360 was quickly recognized as a bad decision and was almost immediately reversed.

During the mid-thirteenth century, Hungary was in shambles by the invasion of the Mongols from the east. Although death and destruction were rampant, the kingdom recovered fairly quickly, which seems to indicate that the basic infrastructure remained intact. While both Jews and Christians suffered during the invasions, there is no indication that the Jews were singled out either by the Mongol invaders or later by the Christian population. King Bela IV's chapter for Hungarian Jews seems to have been part of his program of reconstruction, attracting more Jews into his kingdom to help the economy. A century later, the Jews of Hungary were less fortunate during the outbreak of the Black Death. While they did not suffer at the same level as what we saw elsewhere, some of the anti-Jewish allegations did arouse suspicion and anger among the Christian populace. This suspicion led to the king's decision to expel the Jews from Hungary in 1360, although this decision was revoked only four years later, after realizing that this had been a bad decision for the country.

Not much is known about the cultural and spiritual life of medieval Hungarian Jews. In western-Hungary, archeologists have discovered synagogues and cemeteries from the late Middle Ages, and it seems that the Jews of Hungary were part of the larger medieval Ashkenazi Jewish culture. We have recorded proof that Hungarian rabbis had regular interaction with rabbinic scholars further west, but Hungary does not seem to have been a thriving intellectual center. It looks like the Jewish community of Hungary was a mere outpost of the more westerly Jewish communities of northern Europe, and of the faster-developing community of Poland.

The early development of Poland occurred around the same time as that of Hungary and coincided with the rise of Jewish life in the central areas of northern Europe.

Organized political life in Poland began in 1025 with the coronation of Boleslav the Brave, the first major ruler of the Piast dynasty. Poland's governance developed differently from the presumptuous German emperors and from the gradual power buildup of the monarchies in French and England. The monarchy established by Boleslav the Brave quickly broke apart into various principalities, after which the Piast rulers slowly rebuilt their power, which reached its peak when Boleslav the Great (1333-1370) restored royal authority. The result of this unusual development was that the Polish kings of the late Middle Ages (and later) were depended on the support and cooperation with the nobility.

This uncommon relationship between the king and the nobility had major implications for the Jews. On the one hand, Jews had to not only maintain relationships with the monarchs of Poland but also with its noblemen, which to some extent stretched the Jews' abilities. On the other hand, as a result, Jews never became a source of irritation for the nobility, which happened in countries where Jews were mostly dependent on the king, whereby they were perceived as allies of a power-accumulating monarchy and therefore damaging to the aspirations of the local rulers. As we shall see, these unusual political circumstances in Poland impacted Jewish economic activities as well.

Like in Hungary, there is occasional evidence of early Jewish presence in Poland. However, real Jewish settlement seems to have started in the twelfth century. Because Polish Jewry would eventually play such a significant role in Judaism, there has been much interest in its beginnings. In particular, the question has been debated whether Polish Jews descend from the Khazar kingdom, an eastern-European principality whose leadership accepted Judaism sometime during the first half of the Middle Ages. There is something exotic and romantic about the possibility of Polish Jewry origins in Khazar civilization. But moreover, it suggests that the supposed biological and ethnic unity of Jewish people is made up and that a large section of the current Jewish community is not biologically related to earlier Jewish populations. However, the hypothesis that the origins of Polish Jewry lie with the Khazars does not stand the test of careful examination. While there is agreement on the historical reality of the Khazar kingdom and the conversion of its leadership to Judaism, very few traces remain of the actual Khazars, their practice of Judaism, or what eventually happened to them. More importantly, every aspect of Polish Jewry - location, political status, economic activity, and cultural norms - points to the community originating further west, in German lands, just like the Hungarian Jews. In fact, the Jewish migration from German territory into developing Poland was an integral part of a larger process. The Polish authorities were interested in fostering the immigration of urbanized groups, both Christian and Jewish, from German areas on order to help develop their own lands.

As we have learned before, there was a steady eastward pressure that brought Jews to settle in Poland. In 1290, Jews in England were expelled and moved eastward. Thereupon, Jews in Germany also began to move east due to economic challenges and repeated persecution. Migrating Jews found refuge in Hungary, but Poland became a more significant haven for them. The pattern of Jewish settlement in Poland clearly reflects Germanic origins. The primary areas where Jews settled first were in the western parts of Poland, those areas closest to German lands, with movement further eastward taking place slowly and gradually.

Jewish legal status in Poland also reflects German origins. The charter that Prince Boleslav of Kalisch issued for his Jews in 1264 is clearly an adaptation of an earlier charter issued by Duke Frederick of Austria in 1244. The date of this Polish charter-similar to that of the charter of Bela IV of Hungary-suggests a connection to the rebuilding efforts after the Mongol invasion. The first thirty clauses of the Polish charter are practically identical to the Austrian version, with only two noticeable changes. First, the limitation of interest rate to be charged by Jews in the 1244 Austrian charter is left out of the Polish charter of 1264. Instead, in its place is the indication *"we wish that no one dare to force a Jew to payment of his pledge on his holiday."* Both changes are meant to benefit Jews already present in Poland and to attract new Jews to move there.

In addition to these thirty stipulations, Duke Boleslav added six more clauses that reflect the position of Jews in the mid-thirteenth century on this eastern edge of Latin Christendom. One of these additional clauses shows the relatively wide range of economic activities that Jews were engaged in in this developing aera. Jews were emphatically allowed to buy and sell without any restraints. Anyone who interfered with this right would have to pay a fine. This closing stipulation of the 1264 Polish charter sounds very much like the earliest charters that were issued for the German Jews in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In many ways, the jews that moved into Poland were repeating what their ancestors had done in Germany a few centuries before. While Jews in Germany had almost exclusively moved into the moneylending business, the more primitive Polish economy enabled Jews to again diversify their economic activities.

The other central theme within the new clauses of the 1264 charter involves concern over Jewish security and wellbeing. For example, the charter states *"we order that if any Jew, compelled by dire necessity, cries out at night and if the neighboring Christians do not bother to provide the proper aid or heed the cry, every neighboring Christian shall be responsible to pay thirty shillings."* This and the following stipulation that Jews shall not be accused of using human blood since this act is against Jewish law provide impressive protection of Jewish newcomers. These blood libel had caused deep fears among the Jews of northern Europe which had moved them to seek repudiation from both the papal and imperial courts. In his charter, Duke Boleslav cited the Pope's repudiation as the grounds for rejecting any ritual blood accusations made against the Jews.

Duke Boleslav went even further. He realized that the blood libel originated from the more common suspicion of Jews killing Christian children. Boleslav stipulated that if such allegations would occur and be brought to court, for the Jew to be convicted three Christian witnesses were needed and as many Jewish witnesses. If a Jewish person is deemed guilty, he should be punished by the regular penalty for the crime committed. If however the accused Jew was found innocent, then the Christian accuser must face the same punishment that the Jew would have received. Boleslav's extra conditions reflect the existing dangers to Jewish life as well as the duke's intention to provide maximum protection against them.

We saw that the German origins of Polish Jews are reflected in both its geographic development and its legal status. A third indication of the Polish Jewish community originating in Germany lies in its economic activity. As we saw before, the underdeveloped economy of Poland allowed for more diversified Jewish activity. We have noted in the Boleslav charter references to Jewish trade that sounded very much like the eleventh and twelfth-century rights granted to German Jews. At the same time, Boleslav's charter also reflects the thirteenth-century Jewish move into pawnbroking which had become so central to Jewish economic life in Germany.

Another indication of the German origins of the Polish Jewish community comes from the realm of Jewish cultural life. During our period, there are recurrent references to contacts between the leadership of Polish Jewry and the rabbis of Germany. During the Middle Ages, the Jews of Poland were not yet successful in establishing vibrant institutions and in flourishing culturally. These goals would be accomplished after the end of the fifteenth century. Overall, the connections with the rabbinic leadership of Germany, as well as the religious traditions and intellectual inquiries being rooted in prior German Jewry, as a further indication of the Germanic roots of Polish Jewry.

On that note, let us now discuss the emergence of Yiddish as the Jewish language in Poland. We have repeatedly seen how Jews would adopt the local language of their environment for everyday communication. In southern and northwestern Europe, it was a variety of the local Romance languages; in north-central Europe this language was a variety of Germanic dialects. Only very few sources about these Jewish vernaculars have survived. At times, these languages would be written using Hebrew characters, giving some evidence to the way these languages have developed. It is up for debate to what level these medieval languages as spoken by Jews were different from the way the majority populace spoke. What happened among the Jews of Poland constituted a new development. They did not take on the language of their new Polish environment but instead held on to the German language with which they arrived. There are two factors leading to this. The first is a simultaneous non-Jewish migration from Germany to Poland, which made especially the cities heavily German in language and culture. The emergence of Yiddish (a Jewish version of German) outside Germany is yet another indication of the German origins of Polish Jewry.

It has already been mentioned that the Jewish immigrants took advantage of Poland's economic backwardness by moving into more diverse activities. Jews were able to again move into trade, alongside the moneylending that had become such a central source of income in other northern-

European countries. In addition, the Polish nobles began to employ Jews to manage their estates. This would become a major Jewish occupation after the Middle Ages. As in Hungary, Jews in Poland also became employed as toll collectors and tax farmers, a practice that suggests a relatively primitive bureaucracy, but which therefore offered more opportunities than further west.

The several disasters during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries seem to have improved the Jews' condition rather than worsen it. The Mongol Invasion of the 1240s led Duke Boleslav of Kalisch to support immigration from Germany to enable a revitalization of his devastated urban areas. In order to facilitate this, he issued his previously discussed charter with its protective stipulations for the Jews.

The crisis caused in the mid-fourteenth century by the Black Death, and its reaction to it by the Polish authorities was even more striking. The Black Death resulted in a weakening of Jewish life in the more developed Christian lands to the west. In Poland, however, the devastation led to greater support for the Jews by the Polish authorities. The Black Death took place during the reign of Casimir the Great (1333-1370) when the Polish monarchy was regaining its previous, powerful position (be it limited by the nobles). During his reign, Casimir the Great reenacted twice the charter of Boleslav of Kalisch. This was clearly to reassure the Jews of the support of the monarchy and thereby to attract additional Jewish settlers to his lands. This unwavering support of Jews by Casimir the Great set an invaluable precedent in the history of the Polish monarchy.

The relative economic and social freedom of Jews, together with the strong support of the Polish rulers, in combination with Poland's uneasy location at the eastern extremity of Latin Christendom led the leaders of the Church to regularly criticize the position of the Jews in Polish society. Religious leaders from the top (Pope, archbishops, bishops), all the way to the bottom (common preachers) complained about many aspects of the Jews' presence in society. They claimed that Poland and its Christian identity were fragile, and that the Jews posed a threat to Christian society and faith. Here too, the backwardness of Polish society and its needs, resulting in an openness to Jewish presence, counterbalanced this ongoing pressure from the Church.

Jewish immigration to Poland brought economic, political, and cultural achievements. It also brought negative stereotypes rooted in Christian anti-Jewish motifs that had emerged in the western areas of northern Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Crusading agitation occasionally triggered anti-Jewish sentiments leading to violence against the Jewish people. Newer claims of blood libel and host profanation surfaced in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and triggered anti-Jewish hatred and mob violence. By-and-large, such anti-Jewish violence was limited, and the authorities were mostly able to suppress it. In a few cases, the agitation resulted in temporary expulsion of Jews from certain municipalities. Overall, the safety of Polish Jewry during the latter centuries of our period was considerably better than the situation in Germany.

As noted, the organization of Polish Jewry historically followed the patterns of Ashkenazic Jewish communities, where local Jewish communities held significant power. However, there is limited evidence from this period about how the organization worked in practice. The rapid changes in the structure of Jewish communities that occurred after this period, indicate that foundational structures were likely being established quietly during the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. This would both clarify the power structure at the local level and explain the development of a broader framework within which the various Jewish communities in Poland could cooperate.

The same applies to Jewish cultural life. We saw before how in the western regions of northern Europe, specifically in northern France, Jewish culture evolved rapidly, and we suggested that this was partially due to the stimulating influence of a dynamically developing general culture and society. During our period in Poland, both this stimulation from the general society and a Jewish creativity as seen before in northern France were absent. What we do see is a more common pattern of a slow development with cultural flourishing realized only after centuries of Jewish settlement. Nonetheless, we can recognize the establishment of a stable foundation upon which, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Polish Jewry was able to build a significant framework and achieve important cultural creativity.

Polish and Hungarian Jewish communities grew as Jews moved from developed areas of Northern Europe to these more peripheral nations that welcomed Jewish immigrants in anticipation that these would bring with them some of the progress that was achieved further westward. New Jewish communities were established, and the immigrants received access to extended economic opportunities and governmental support. However, religious pressure and prejudices that had formed in western Europe were not absent. In the centuries that followed 1500, these new communities would develop into important centers of Jewish life, which eventually would serve as the foundation for the reconstruction of Jewish life in places like Germany, France, and England.