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Lecture series on the History of the Jews in Poland at the Shomre Ha-Dat Congregation, London Hampstead

Lecture 1, 21 October 2012:

Emergence of the autonomous Jewish community and Golden Age, 12th-17th century

Background for eastward migration

Push factors:

devastations during the Crusades, persecutions of Jews during the Great Plague (14th cent.) and ensuing destruction of communities

Pull factors:

gradual individual settlement eastwards, establishment of communities on the basis of charters and privileges issued by princes and monarchs.

2 parallel processes of migration:

a) of Sephardi eastward migration, similar pattern of invitation through ruler(s), persistence of communal cohesion and language

b) of Christian townspeople, invited in the same period to eastern European commonwealths for the same reasons as Jews, but for different set of qualifications

The two shells

Jewish Law:

Establishment of communal by-laws in western Ashkenas (German lands) on halakhic basis, codification in the so-called *takanot sh'um*, going back to the communities in **S**peyer, **W**orms and **M**ainz: highly formalized and hierarchical community structure with elders and multiple other communal functions, election and administrative procedures, definition of the relationship of communal or civil leaders and rabbinate, formed after the template of medieval non-Jewish municipal charters.

Slow migration of communal by-laws to the east, parallel to the emergence of Jewish communities founded following the principles of the *takanot sh'um*. In the process of this eastwards migration increased prerogatives for the civil communal leaders.

Non-Jewish charters or privileges:

Based on the so-called *Fridericianum* issued in 1244, Jewish communities saw an increase in their prerogatives. The *Fridericianum* constituted an important shift from

the imperial privilege by Frederic II defining in 1236 the Jews as individual *servi camerae*

1244 Privilege by Duke Frederic II. of Austria -> stronger emphasis on protection (e.g. communal religious freedom, non-intervention in communal affairs)

1255 and 1265 Privileges by Przemyslav Otokar for Jews in Bohemia, Moravia, Austria (protection of Jewish communities against blood libel)

1264 Privilege by Duke Boleslav the Pious for Jews in Kalisz, the iconic 'model privilege' for later Polish and Lithuanian privileges based on Magdeburg Law: recognition of economic freedom, self-government; strict separation from Christian municipal control and jurisdiction

1388 Privilege by Vytautas Jagiello II for Jews settling in Lithuania

Constitutional and legal security through privileges:
royal jurisdiction last appeal, establishment of *iudex iudaeorum* in towns with the local representative of regal power, the *wojewod*; no court case involving Jews without Jewish judges or assessors

Contested by Christian townspeople, and by the Catholic clergy

1539 royal monopoly over constitutional control over Jews is successfully challenged by the *szlachta* (Polish aristocracy), which establishes legal control of Jewish communities on its territories

General privileges gave royal consent for the establishment of *jeshivot*

„Golden Age“

- advantageous position as business partners of kings and princes (*szlachta*)
- expansion of communities further to the east on the basis of the Union of Poland and Lithuania, with the consequence of rare scope of economic and administrative activities (also one of the reasons of the catastrophe of the Khmel'nitsky Uprising of 1648)
- considerable increase in the number of communities and the size of their population; diversification of their institutions
- establishment of dense network of communication, most importantly the establishment of the Council of Four Lands, ca 1580
- significant step in codification of Jewish law by Moses Isserles from Kraków (the 'Remu', ca 1520-1572): the *mapa* ('tablecloth') written ca 1570, consisting of amendments to the *Shulkhan aruh* by Josef Karo.

- the Union of Lublin (1559), establishing a political union between the Polish crown and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, lead to the eastward expansion of the Jewish-aristocratic alliance

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