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

Lecture 2, 18 November 2012:

**Internal diversification and political change: the rise of Hasidism and the  
Partitions of Poland, 18th and 19th century**

**1) Size matters**

- Dynamic demographic development of Jewish population in Poland-Lithuania and
- large number of communities
- Introduction of poll tax 1764: abolition of the Va'ad Arba Aratsot (Council of Four Lands)

**2) Growing centrifugal forces in an ever growing Polish-Lithuanian  
Jewish community**

- decrease of rabbinical authority: Jews deserting the bet din
- Growing disillusionment with oligarchic rule: the Vilnius community controversy, 1770s-1791
- involving several Lithuanian Jewish communities, two rival Lithuanian magnate houses, non-Jewish Lithuanian courts, the Polish king, the Sejm

**3) Religious diversification and emergence of the Hasidic movement**

- Sabbatean movement (1666 ff.) as crucial antecedent
- overlap of Sabbatean centers, emerging Hasidic movement, and Frankist

Movement (both mid-18th century)

Appeal of hasidut:

- Redefinition of the religious community
- Redefinition of religious authority: new concept of leadership (*tsadik*)
- Offer of 'enthusiastic' religiosity, or spirituality
- Linking esoteric traditions (*kabbalah*) with a redefinition of everyday practices (prayer)
- Inherent modernity of the movement through **individual decision making**

Failed attempts to contain the Hasidic movement:

- Ban 1772 against Hasidic practices by the Gaon of Vilna (Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, 1720-1797)
- Sustained activities to contain the growth of Hasidic communities
- Successful in Lithuanian territories, though not beyond
- Redefinition of talmudic learning through Hayim of Volozhin: emergence of the Lithuanian Yeshiva (new emphasis on studying, *mishmarot*)
- But also: no more rejection of Hasidut as blasphemous (1802)

#### 4) Partitions of Poland

Reasons:

- continued weakening of state/royal/central power
- liberum veto/pacta conventa
- Competition magnates
- Growing influence of neighbouring Russia
- efficient absolutist regimes in Prussia, Austria, Russia

Consequences for Jewish community:

- Exposure to new administrative structures

- Integration in new commonwealths
- Continued dismantling of Jewish autonomy

**Important weblinks:**

1) Fully searchable online version of the **YIVO Encyclopedia on Jews in Eastern Europe**:

<http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/>

2) **Shtetlseeker**, the most sophisticated tool to locate Jewish communities in Eastern Europe:

<http://www.jewishgen.org/Communities/>

3) **RAMBI**, the most comprehensive database to identify articles in Jewish Studies, maintained by the National and University Library in Jerusalem:

<http://jnul.huji.ac.il/rambi/>

Events ahead:

**1) Jews and non-Jews in Lithuania: Coexistence, Cooperation, Violence**

Conference on the occasion of the launch of *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry* Vol. 25

17 December 2012: 3 pm, Lithuanian Embassy

18 December 2012: 10 am – 6 pm: UCL

Tickets cost £12 adults, £6 concessions (plus booking fee)

Price includes refreshments and kosher buffet lunch

Details and registration on the eventbrite homepage:

<http://lithuaniaconference.eventbrite.co.uk/>

**2) And Europe will be Stunned: Poland and the Loss or Return Of The Jews**

A screening of Yael Bartana's videos, with discussion - UCL Dept of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, UCL History of Art, Polish Cultural Institute London

An event in the framework of Jewish Book Week, 27 February 2013

*Tickets available* through the homepage of **Jewish Book Week** Important weblinks:

Excerpt from a letter written ca in 1752 by Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov or Besht, founder of Hasidism (d. 1760), known as *Igeret hakodesh*:

On Rosh Hashana 5507 [September 1747], I performed an adjuration for the ascent of the soul that is known to you, and I saw wondrous things in a vision which I had not seen from the day that I became conscious until now. And what I saw and learned when ascending there is impossible to tell about and to speak of even face-to-face. But when I returned to lower paradise, I saw certain souls of the living and the dead, both familiar and unfamiliar to me, without measure or number, running back and forth to ascend from world to world via the pillar known to mystical initiates. The mouth could not describe the great joy that was there, nor could the physical ear ever hear it. Many sinners also repented and their sins were forgiven them, since it was a time of grace. In my eyes also it was most surprising that certain ones who are known to you were accepted as penitents. They too were exceedingly happy and were able to ascend. All of them as one asked me and pleaded with me saying "O exalted and honored teacher, God has granted you exceeding understanding to know about these matters. Go up with us to be a help and support us." And because of the great joy that I saw among them, I agreed to go up with them. And I saw in a vision: The Evil Side ascended to accuse with great, unparelled joy and executed his deeds - persecutions entailing forced conversion - on several souls so that they would meet violent deaths. I was horrified and I literally put my life in jeopardy and asked my teacher and rabbi to go with me because it is very dangerous to go and ascend to the upper worlds. For from the day I attained my position, I had not ascended to such lofty ascents.

I went ups step by step until I entered the messianic palace where the Messiah studies Torah with all of the Tanna'im and the righteous [tsaddikim] and also with the Seven Shepherds. And there i saw exceedingly great joy and I do not know the reason for this joy. I thought this joy was - God forbid - over my decease from this world, but they informed me afterward that I was not yet to die, because in the upper spheres they derive pleasure when I perform unifications down below by meditating on their holy teachings. The reason for the joy I still do no know. And I asked the Messiah, "When will the master come?" And he answered me, "ONce your teaching will have spread throughout the world."

Citation from Gershon Hundert: *Jews of Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century. A Genealogy of Modernity*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press 2004, p 168-9.

## Readings:

Yisrael Bartal: The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772-1881. Philadelphia 2005.

Glenn Dynner: Men of silk: the Hasidic conquest of Polish Jewish society. Oxford, New York 2006.

Immanuel Etkes: Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement. Seeking the Torah of Truth, Philadelphia 1993.

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David E. Fishman, Russia's First Modern Jews. The Jews of Shklov, New York u. a. 1995.

Gershon Hundert: Jews of Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century. A Genealogy of Modernity. Berkeley, Los Angeles 2004.

Lederhendler, Eli: The Road to Modern Jewish Politics: Political Tradition and Political Reconstruction in the Jewish Community of Tsarist Russia, New York 1989.

Isaak Levitats: The Jewish Community in Russia, 1772-1844, New York 1943, reprint New York 1973.

Pawel Maciejko: The Mixed Multitude. Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement, 1755-1816, Philadelphia 2010.

Antony Polonsky: The Jews in Poland and Russia. vol. 1: 1350-1881, Oxford, Portland 2009.

Moshe Rosman: Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov. Berkeley 1996.

Michael Stanislawski: Eastern European Jewry in the modern period, 1750-1939. In: The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies, (2002) 396-411.