The Jews in a Polish Private Town

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Jan Ptaśnik, in an influential work on Polish urban history published in the early 1930s, mentioned the demand of the Christian artisans in Opatów that Jews belong to the guilds. The Jews, he went on to say, did not observe the guilds' monopolies, leading to the ruin of the guilds. Thus "the Jew" (and here he shifted his discourse to the level of generalization about Poland) contributed "in significant measure . . . to the decline of the Polish town." In this destructive activity, the Polish szlachta supported the Jews. Given the evidence provided in the present study, it would seem likely that Ptaśnik's mean suggestion ought to be reversed. Without Jews, the Polish town might have declined much further than it did, the Polish economy might have collapsed, and urban life might have virtually disappeared except for Gdańsk, Warsaw, and German-dominated areas.

By the time of the events of the midseventeenth century, according to Simon Dubnow, Jews in Poland were made to realize, "that they would have to tread the same sorrowful path, strewn with the bodies of martyrs, that had been traversed by their Western European brethren in the Middle Ages." Writing more than fifty years later, Bernard Weinryb characterized the relations between Jews and Christians in Poland as "more human" than the relations between Jews and their neighbors in Christian lands in Western Europe. This led, he wrote, to a "more favorable development of the Jewish group in Poland." He ended a long consideration of Jewish attitudes with the judgment that the situation of Jews in historical Poland was neither "ideal nor intolerable."

The present examination of the Jewish experience in Opatów in the eighteenth century has shown that broad characterizations, even as diverse in their import as those of Dubnow and Weinryb, have little application. Jewish life in the town was distinguished by its vitality and energy, so much so that
Jewish predominance in commerce and industry exceeded in its weight the numerical preponderance of Jews. While Jews faced continuing enmity from the clergy, the priests were unable to influence events to the disadvantage of the Jewish population. The town owners protected Jews even though they themselves may have found Jews distasteful. The alliance of interests was stronger than prejudice and religious intolerance. Christian town dwellers played a progressively more passive role in the life of the town in the course of the eighteenth century, leaving center stage to Jews.

Within the town, certain features characterized the Jewish population. They tended to live in their own quarter in large, multifamily dwellings. Early marriage and the custom of living in the home of the bride's parents was confined to the wealthier stratum. Most Jews were poor, though not so poor as the peasants, and there was a wealthy group of merchants and arrendatators comprising about 10 percent of the adult male population, which dominated the affairs of the community. In the second half of the century, and particularly in its last third, Opatów Jews began to move to villages or to Warsaw and Brody, reflecting the economic decline of the region and the quest for gainful employment.

Through at least the first two-thirds of the century, the Jewish community in Opatów was dominated by the Landau family, which had influence not only in the town but also over a rather large region, particularly Little Poland and Ruthenia. The Landaus were typical of the Jewish aristocracy of eighteenth-century Poland. This aristocracy consisted of about fifteen or twenty families who held rabbinical and other leadership posts in most Jewish communities in Poland-Lithuania. The Landaus were neither the agents nor the lackeys of the magnate-aristocrats who owned the town. The town owners tended to defend the Landaus, but mainly because their wealth and influence in the Jewish community made them symbols of order, and because the town owners did not want such wealthy Jews to move elsewhere.

The town owners did not govern the town and its Jewish community on the basis of whim and caprice. They sought to promote the economic well-being of the town and, for this reason, defended the interests of Jews who contributed to that well-being and, therefore, to the income of the town owners. Though the alliance was hardly between equal partners, it was an alliance created on the basis of interests shared by Jews and magnates. The less influential side, the Jews, was not entirely without recourse when the unspoken terms were not being met. They appealed, they petitioned, and they threatened to leave. Finally, as the economic conditions of the region worsened, many did leave. And that movement, particularly to Warsaw, signaled the beginning of the beginning of a new historical epoch. For most of the eighteenth century, however, the ties between Jews and their magnate
protectors served the interests of both. Jews lived mainly in private towns and made up at least half of the total urban population of Poland-Lithuania. Thus, any review of the history of the cities and towns of the Polish Commonwealth must study the experience of Jews and other Poles.