

The History of the Jewish Settlers in the City of Pultusk

Statistical and demographic data about the early settlement of Jews in the city of Pultusk dates back to the year of the creation of the Polish kingdom which is about the 9th. century. It is assumed that there were Jewish settlers in that vicinity as early as the 9th. century. First information about the Jews in the city of Pultusk, under the ruling of King Mieshko, was received from the Jewish-Arab traveling merchant and chronicler of that time, Abraham Ben Yakov.

It's a historical fact that already in the 966, because of the strategic importance of the place, a fortress was built around the city and a military unit was stationed there which served the rulers as a stronghold from where to impose their authority on rebellious subjects. King Zigmund I, because of the city's topographical situation, allowed a wall to be built around the city for its protection. It is a well known fact that Jews in Mazovia, as elsewhere, settled near fortified cities. We may assume the same for the settlers of the city of Pultusk.

The city of Pultusk is located in mostly level country, at the flatlands of the broad Narev River, where at its right shore it evolves into two main tributaries; one which flows through the city and the second around it.

Pultusk is mentioned the first time in the annals of the Privilege of Conrad the First, the Duke of Mazovia, in the year of 1227. The city was then called Pultavska and in the official documents, with the latin name Pultava.

The city of Pultusk served for ages as a cultural center. Among the cultural institutions established there was the well-known Collegiate; a place which served as a gathering place for Christian clergy and a training center for Catholic priests. Many notable scholars and learned men were educated in this place. Among them was the priest Wujek, who was the first one to translate the Volgata from Greek into Polish. Another one was the well-known stylist Piotr Scarga. It is worth noting that on one of the walls of the Collegiate, a marble plaque is installed with Hebrew inscriptions describing a passage from the Bible about the coming of the Messiah.

In the annals of the courthouse and in the court acts of the land of Mazovia, we find quite a bit of information about the first Jewish settlers in the district of Mazovia. In the acts for the years 1483-1486, there is a mentioning of a Jew, by the name of Rubin, who came from the city of Warsaw. The circumstances surrounding these first settlers in the vicinity of Pultusk however, remain nebulous.

According to the historical details reported by the city scribe of Pultusk; Pavel Wierzbitsky in 1884, Jews penetrated into the city of Pultusk in 1795; the year of the first division of Poland by its hostile neighboring countries; but were driven out from the city in 1798, in accordance with the act of Bialystok Council of Commerce.

Since the city of Pultusk was depicted as one of the nicest places in the district of Mazovia, it became exposed to hostile neighbors and suffered frequent attacks and harrasments. In the year 1337, the Litvins and the Russians plundered the city and turned into ruins.

Bishop Clemens Pierzchala restored the city from its ruins and, in order to stimulate its redevelopment, he granted the city the so called "Chelmno Rights". It was a document given at that time by King Boleslav the Pious, which declared equal right and protection to all citizens, including the Jews, who he held useful for the welfare of the city.

Years later, another Polish King, Kazimierz the Great, who is regarded with special sympathy in Jewish tradition, signed a similar charter called the "Status of Kalish", describing all sorts of privileges, commercial, and others given to the Jews of Poland. But these charters were constantly twisted and limited by the succeeding rulers and later totally abolished.

The period of development of the city of Pultusk started in the 14th. century. It was a period of tranquility and prosperity; thanks to the Bishop and Church rulers who strove to bolster their popularity and to show the world their potential power.

It was in this period that the city developed its uniqueness. Many precious municipal buildings and communal institutions sprang up. Castles and architectural palaces adorned with paintings were built; some of them exist to this day.

Dignitaries, as well as kings, visited the city and granted it all sorts of privileges. In the year 1416, the Dukes of Mazovia; Kazimir and Wlasislav, freed the city and all the inhabitants from all sorts of taxes.

Polish Swedish War

In the year 1656, Jewish settlers in the city of Pultusk were caught in the war between Jan Kazimierz of Poland and Carl Gustav of Sweden. The city was invaded by the Swedish army, which caused devastation and mass destruction.

During the second war with Sweden in the year 1703, a bloody battle took place in and around the city of Pultusk between King Gustav III, who suffered a terrible defeat by the army of the Sasen of Poland under the leadership of General Shtainau. In the year 1806, a battle took place between the army of the French Marshall Napoleon and the Russians in the vicinity of Pultusk. To commemorate the victory of the French army over the Russians, a triumphant arch was erected in the city of Paris, where Napoleon was decorated for valor for all the places he conquered. Among them and on the arch is listed the city of Pultusk.

The Start of the Jewish Influx Into the City

The land of the city of Pultusk, like many other places, belonged to the church. It was granted to them for some unknown reason. The Bishops of Plock imposed their authority over the region and were almost independent in their own territory. Under the existing rulers, the Bishop and the Christian Clergy, Jews were subject to restrictions. They were not allowed to settle in the city; not even on a temporary basis. Even those who came to find their bread in the city had to leave the city every day before sunset and return to their outskirts dwellings for the night. To avoid these restrictions, Jews made their way by settling in the immediate surroundings of the area, which was a broad strip of land on the city's border, dotted with villages that did not fall under these restrictions.

We learned, that in spite of the restrictions to keep Jews out of the city of Pultusk, the Bishops and the ruling class, troubled by the poor economy and the devastation of their domains by constant wars, were anxious to rebuild the city and develop its economy. So out of this vital necessity, they awarded permission, for commercial purposes, to Jewish merchants, traders, and craftsmen to enter the city. In reality, Jews now became a vital part of the city's development and landscape.

The First Jews

First to penetrate into the city of Pultusk were the people of the nearby village of Popova, which is located about 18 km. from the city. People also came from Poplavi; where most of the land belonged to Nathan Notkevitz. Nathan was a relative of the prominent and distinguished officer Herman Notkevitz; who served in the Napoleonic Army and also in the Dombrovsky Legion where he received

At this point it should be mentioned that a brief period of respite took place with the entry of the French Army into Poland and into the city of Pultusk in 1806. The Jews were prospering. They were permitted to settle everywhere without restrictions or interference. In the year 1815, they received permission to build a Synagogue out of wood complete with a gate that could be locked from the inside. The Synagogue was a simple place of worship built in a functional style. The Synagogue burned down in 1875, and in the same year a new one was built out of bricks and stone; a nice piece of architecture and beauty.

According to the article written by Marshak and published in the Hebrew Newspaper "Hamelitz", in the year 1895, no. 71, the first settler in the city got permission from a friendly Bishop who was sympathetic towards Jews. He was a ritual slaughterer by the name of Usher Anshel, the son of Aryah Friedman.

After him came a number of craftsmen, peddlers, and other middlemen, also tailors, cobblers and other artisans. Though they were small in numbers, they received permission to build a Synagogue and a ritual bath. A Jewish cemetery was erected on land given to them by a settler; Zalman Lubranitzer, who came from the city of Wlotzlavek. According to Hamelitz, Lubranitzer was the owner of a large estate in the vicinity of the city of Pultusk and he dedicated a piece of land for a Jewish Cemetery. Before that, the dead had to be carried to the neighboring city of Makov; which had an exclusive Jewish cemetery.

The wave of antisemitism over Eastern Europe in the 16th century did not escape the Jewish population of the city of Pultusk. Apart from the never-ceasing accusation of "Ritual Blood"; the allegation that Jews murdered Christians in order to obtain blood for Passover and other rituals, some Jews in Pultusk were accused of "desecrating Christian Hosts" by buying holy bread from a Christian who stole it from the Church. The accused were jailed, tortured, pleaded guilty, and burned.

Jews in Pultusk were also accused of Judaizing Christians and, for that crime, were sentenced to death. Here is something from the annals: In the year 1471, on the 9th. of September, a Christian by the name of Stanislaw Gaudel from Pultusk, was sentenced to death for denying his Christian belief and converting to Judiasm.

After permission was given to the Jews to inhabit the city of Pultusk, Jewish settlers went through a period of growth and development. There is not enough information to show the whole process of the Jewish penetration and growth but a list with statistical figures, obtained from the official "Russian Communal Biuro", yields some information; detailed figures about the ratio of growth of the Jewish population in the 19th. century.

The Polish Uprising of 1875 and After

Poland was an independant state. In the latter part of the 18th. century it suffered a political collapse and was divided between its neighbors.

The city of Pultusk, like many others in Poland during the years of the war, was faced with a number of difficulties. A number of shops and stores had been destroyed and plundered by the occupation army. There was an uncertain future at home.

After the war, the Jews of the city enjoyed a brief period of tranquility and even a certain prosperity. A railroad industry of considerable size sprang up linking the city with the outside world. The Pultusk railway was connected with the Warsaw-Kovno highway linking it with industrial centers of Western Europe. The adjacent Narev River was a waterway connecting the city with the Vistula of Warsaw and the rest of the Western World.

There were a few flourishing years for the Jews in Pultusk. Russia opened its market for the products of the Polish industry, which was to a considerable extent in Jewish hands. A Russian Army garrison was stationed in Pultusk which created a livelihood for many Jewish agents, commissioners, business men, etc., and for many artisans who produced clothing and other consumer goods for the Russian army.

a milling industry had developed in the city (11 mills) where many families earned their living. Others were engaged in hauling timber to the railroad depot. Some earned their living as cattle and horse traders.

Under Polish Rule - 1920

The First World War ended with the Bolshevik Revolution and after it came the rebirth of an independant Poland. The Polish victory, and the changes from military to civilian order in Poland, affected the whole political and economic life of the Jews in the country. Jews were caught in between these changes. Since the Polish industry, except for a few years when it flourished in the 1920's, could not absorb many Polish workers and merchants, they tried to force their way into the petty trades and handicrafts and other businesses, which were mainly in Jewish hands, and thus became competitors of the Jews.

In their struggle against the Jews, the non-Jews had the advantage of being supported directly and indirectly by discriminatory government practices against Jews. At the peak of the economic crisis in the 30's, and especially after the death of Josef Pilsudsky, the Polanization of commerce and industry became the official program of the government, the "OZON" party. Picketing of Jewish shops and stores; pressure of public opinion; terror and pogroms in the market places; beating of Jews in the schools, in parks, and in the streets; became an exercise of Polish antisemites tolerated (often supported) by the Government (Owshem, Grabsky, Pszytic, etc.).

Through a flood of official and unofficial restrictions of Jews, a partially successful attempt was made to create a non-Jewish middleman and take over the function of the Jewish trade, business and handicraft. Out of these later came the partial and/or complete elimination of Jews from a number of branches of industry and ? as a result of discriminatory laws; Artisan Law, Sunday Law, Anti Schitah Law, Numerous Calusis Law. These anti-Jewish laws were the reason that many lost the possibility of earning a livelihood; thus paving the way for Hilter Germany, and for the final solution, where Poles were active partners.

Poland broke down surrendering to the beastly Nazi Army. The city of Pultusk (in which the writer of these lines was caught on the way to Warsaw), at that time was occupied by the Nazis in the very beginning of the War. With their entry into the city, they massacred, plundered, and robbed Jews of their belongings and after a short period, all Jews were driven out of their homes, deprived of everything and expelled.

Providence wanted or by sheer luck, the expulsion of the Jews of Pultusk by the Nazis took place in the beginning of the Nazi tyranny before preparing for annihilation - the Hitler decree of the Final Solution. Miraculously, many Jews turned out of Pultusk saved their life by succeeding to escape to security in Russia. Russia, in that difficult period, opened its borders and many managed to flock to safety. That way, hundreds and perhaps thousands of Jews from Pultusk have been saved the doom of Nazi extermination.

It is worthwhile to mention the fact that throughout the centuries Jews from Pultusk, like from many many other places, like Jews everywhere, dreamed of leaving the bloody Polish land. Many of them left for Israel whenever there was an opportunity. Others uprooted themselves and left for the expanding horizons of the America's New World. By doing so, they were saved from Nazi annihilation.

This Yizkor Book

This book describes Jewish life in the city of Pultusk from its early days to the days of its destruction. It is a collection of facts and figures given by the various survivors and participants. It is a last document of a Jewish community vibrant and vital community that has been wiped out and ceased to exist. Jewish people lived there, worked diligently and created a livelihood, enriched the city and not at the expense of others. Thanks to their commercial aptitude and artisan skills, they helped to shape the character of the city. Their diligence has often aroused envy and in due course, antisemitic outbreaks. At no time, was diligence appreciated by those who benefitted by it.

To the people in this country, descendents of the city of Pultusk and its Jews depicted in this Yizkor Book, this book will contribute to their search for identity. It will at least, in part, answer the so often question asked, "Who am I?".

Another thing, this book should serve as a reminded that it is of the highest importance that men remember the cruelties of which they are capable and the power of distruction which is mans course.

This Yizkor Book is a grim reminder of the evil and ugly power. It tells us in words of the victims of our city, how they lived, worked, worshiped, hoped. They ask constantly, "what have we done to deserve all of this?". This book managed to tell us that the victims too should be remembered.