


THE MAHARAL OF POZNAŃ – THE ERA OF THE POLISH LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH, 16th–18th CENTURY

The establishment of a powerful dualistic state of the kingdom of Poland and the grand duchy of Lithuania, which since 1569 bore the name of Rzeczypospolita Obojga Narodów (lit.: Republic of Two Nations), created new conditions for the community to thrive and develop. Given the amount of the coronation tax paid in 1507, the Jewish community in Poznań was the third largest in Poland, after Lvov and the Kazimierz quarter of Cracow. This state of affairs continued until the end of the 18th century, though the recurrent natural disasters and numerous wars of the latter half of the 17th century brought many hardships to be faced. For






instance, after the great fires which ravaged the city in 1590 and 1613, Jews had to relocate to the suburbs and live there for a number of years. Yet they returned soon, as by 1619 their quarter boasted 134 new dwellings and burgher houses, inhabited by around 1,500 people. The community had its synagogue, school and hospital. One of the prominent figures associated with Renaissance Poznań was rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, known as Maharal of Prague, alleged creator of the Golem. Born in 1520 and native of Poznań, the famed Talmudist, philosopher, Kabbalist, astrologer, and possibly alchemist twice assumed the leadership of the local community as a rabbi.

The Jews of Poznań and Greater Poland were represented in substantial numbers at the so-called Council of Four Lands (*Va'ad Arba' Aratzot*) formed around 1580. This body, modelled after the Polish assembly of the nobles, was a Jewish self-government which spanned the entire country and represented Polish Jews in their dealings with state au-





thority. For the two centuries to follow, it ensured legal, religious, cultural and economic autonomy of Polish Jews.

In the wake of the ruinous wars with Sweden, Russia and Turkey in the 17th century, Polish state and thus Poznań and its Jewish inhabitants were considerably impoverished. From 1658 to 1668 the community in Poznań was so destitute that they were even unable to afford to employ a rabbi. In 1676 there were barely over 900 Jews living in Poznań, though their numbers grew steadily as the Jewish quarter was being rebuilt. In spite of the difficulties, Poznań Jews actively contributed in the Council of Four Lands, while the town had its fair share of devout and eminent scholars, rabbis, printers and writers.

However, the city was troubled by further calamities, such as epidemics, the worst of which struck in 1709, plundering troops, especially in 1716-17, or the devastating flood of 1736, when the river Warta destroyed the synagogue and numer-



ous houses. Consequently, many Jews of Poznań sought refuge in other cities across Poland. To compound it all, a catastrophic fire broke out in 1764, destroying 76 Jewish dwellings along with three synagogues which existed at the time and taking many lives as well. For a long time thereafter, Poznań ceased to be the most important Jewish community in Greater Poland.

DESCRIPTIONS:

1. The Commonwealth of the Kingdom of Poland and Duchy of Lithuania (1569–1795), with the distribution of Jewish population in 1764–66.
2. Title page of a 16th-century book by Maharal.

