

THE BEGINNINGS – JEWS IN POLAND AND POZNAŃ, FROM THE 11th CENTURY ONWARDS

According to early medieval accounts, the first Jews came to what would later become Poland already in the latter half of the 10th century, at the inception of the Polish state. Those were mainly Jewish merchants who came to Central Europe from the Iberian Peninsula or the Middle East. Since Greater Poland was the heart of the country, they were most likely to have reached Poznań. It was also in this area that the first Jews in Poland settled, having been driven out from Western Europe in the late 11th century by the crusaders. In the 12th century, the ducal fortified settlements were home to Jewish coiners, who would mint coins with Hebrew inscriptions for many a decade to follow. Compared with the rest of Europe at the




time, the scale of production of those coins in the then Poland was uniquely high.

By mid-13th century, Poland had had its first towns, and the first Jewish communities emerged along with them. When Poznań had been granted its municipal charter in 1254 and its urban plots and streets were being marked out, an area was designated to be inhabited by Jews, settlers from the territories of Germany. From that moment on, until World War II, the history of the local Jewish communities became an integral element of the town's own history.

The year 1264 marks an important date. The duke of Greater Poland, Bolesław the Pious, who ruled over the oldest towns where Jews were to be found, i.e. Kalisz, Gniezno and Poznań, granted Poland's first general charter for Jews in his dukedom. The charter stipulated the rights and obligations binding upon the followers of Judaism. Each community was entitled to have their synagogue, while Jews were allowed to build houses and es-





establish cemeteries, while their affairs fell under direct jurisdiction of the duke. The charter would later be confirmed by all Polish monarchs until the end of the 18th century.

The Jews of Poznań were fully entitled to enjoy those rights. It is likely that towards the end of the 13th century Poznań saw the creation of the first Jewish cemetery, located on the so-called Musza Góra (in the centre of the present-day city). The earliest written reference to the community in Poznań, which mentions a stone synagogue, dates from 1360; the name of Pekhno, the first well-known rabbi originating from Poznań, would appear in written sources not long thereafter.

In the 15th century, the so-called *Lamdei Pozna* which functioned in Poznań made a name for itself as an outstanding Jewish school, while the Jewish quarter had grown, now covering the area enclosed by Żydowska, Tkacka and Mała Żydowska streets. Jews owned 83 houses in the



area, and rented many others from Christians. By the end of the Middle Ages, Jewish community in Poznań had grown into a numerous and strong one.

DESCRIPTIONS:

1. Map showing Jewish migrations in Europe in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern era.
2. Statute of Kalisz, frontispiece, illustration by Arthur Szyk.

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