

## 4 Townsmen

In 1772, over 2,000 localities within the *Rzeczpospolita* laid claim to chartered town status. Wielkopolska and Royal Prussia boasted the densest concentrations. The traveller was twice as likely to come across a town in the palatinates of Poznań and Kalisz – on average, 1 town for every 170 square kilometres – as he was in Lithuania – on average, 1 town for every 370 square kilometres. He was almost twice as likely to encounter a town in the Grand Duchy as in the deep Ukraine of the palatinates of Braclaw or Kiev, with 1 town for every 628 or 683 square kilometres. In more meaningful terms, the furthest a peasant could be expected to walk to market and back in a single day was 20 kilometres; with a horse and cart, he might manage a 30 kilometre round trip. A 10 kilometre radius covers 314 square kilometres, a 15 kilometre radius 707 square kilometres. Even in the obscurest corners of the Commonwealth, towns were never impossibly distant from one another.

### THE CHARACTER OF POLISH TOWNS

For all its many towns, Poland was scarcely urbanised. Very few could seriously claim to provide even in part the full range of traditional urban functions, as centres of industry, exchange and employment or of administrative, legal, cultural and recreational services. Most larger towns were found among the royal towns, which were themselves in the minority: some 270 out of over 1,000 in the Crown and about 160 out of 900 in Lithuania. The remainder belonged to lay or ecclesiastical seigneurs. In 1750, only Danzig ranked as an impressive, major European city, but its population of 46,000 needs to be set against 70,000 a century earlier. Warsaw, with 20,000, was veritably provincial, although it stood on the threshold of unprecedented growth: to 30,000 in 1760 and to a remarkable 115,000 in 1792, an almost six-fold increase in little more than a generation. Danzig and Warsaw were stark exceptions. The old capital, Kraków, numbered 5,000 in 1750, not quite 10,000 in 1791. Poznań, the

hub of Wielkopolska, which contained 20,000 inhabitants in 1600, had barely 5,000 in 1733 and under 12,000 in 1793. Wilno was the sole city of any size in Lithuania, with 21,000 people in 1777, followed by Mohylew (by then, belonging to Russia) with some 11,000. These were metropolises. More than half of all towns had fewer than 2,000 inhabitants; in 1760, around a dozen had over 10,000. In 1790, there were between 400 and 5,000 inhabitants in only 16 Lithuanian towns. In the parish of Wojstom, 2 towns and 33 villages could scrape together only 411 houses between them. Private towns were among the least substantial, albeit with important exceptions: the Sanguszkos' Brody, in the Ukraine, with 10,000, mainly Jews, in the 1760s; the Czartoryskis' Szklów, in Lithuania (8,200 in 1768); or Jan Klemens Branicki's Białystok (3-4,000 in 1770).

At no time in the eighteenth century did Poland's town-dwellers exceed 16 per cent of the population, whereas in the sixteenth, they had accounted for over 20 per cent. Almost two-thirds of this 'urban' populace followed agricultural callings. The 'typical' Polish town was not Warsaw, or Kraków, or Danzig, but Andrzej Zamoyski's Kutno, with 2,000 inhabitants in the 1760s. The members of the one craft guild, the shoemakers, like all of Kutno's inhabitants, had to pay the Zamoyskis an annual tribute in oats and, until 1767, to turn out for work on the Kutno demesne at harvest. In nearby Sieradz, the capital of a palatinate, but with a population below 1,500 as late as 1791, the wealthiest inhabitant, Andrzej Zwoliński, was little more than a prosperous peasant. He owned a farm, a brewery, a brickworks, ten houses and conducted what trade he could. Nearly all small-town householders owned some land and animals. All such towns owned communal meadows, pastures and woodlands, often vital to their finances and economy. Life followed the annual rhythms of peasant existence. Even in larger towns in Wielkopolska and Royal Prussia, the brewing and distilling that usually overshadowed cloth-making as the main industry underlined the close links with agriculture. Many towns were little more than villages inhabited by what was, in effect, a free peasantry. Seigneurs even in Wielkopolska tried to impose the same sorts of burdens on their 'townsmen' as on their serfs. The Lithuanian court treasurer, Antoni Tyzenhauz, was scornfully dismissive in 1774 of the protests of Lithuanian townsmen against the imposition of *pańszczyzna*: 'Yokels, not burghers, peasants who have come to town, they know nothing of trades or crafts, they are ignorance itself. If they do not do cartage duty, of what use are they?'<sup>1</sup> The following year all but 11 of some 150 royal towns in Lithuania were deprived of their municipal rights.

Poland's very backwardness explained its multiplicity of chartered townships. Few village communities were entirely self-sufficient. Peasants needed convenient centres at which they could exchange goods or services and sell a little produce to acquire the cash for their rents, dues and alcohol purchases. Where transport and communications were

primitive, where direct labour obligations denied peasants prolonged absences from home, or where seigneurs forbade them to leave the estate, it was inevitable that many, but small, centres of local exchange should arise in the shape of market towns. The same was true of much of east-central Europe: Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Hungary, as well as Poland-Lithuania. In eighteenth-century England's rapidly expanding economy, the number of provincial markets actually fell as improved access, transport and distribution rendered them superfluous.

The earliest towns founded by lay and ecclesiastical seigneurs dated from the thirteenth century. Until the sixteenth, municipal legislation issued by the king or Sejm applied to private, as much as to royal, settlements. Although even in the eighteenth century, individual seigneurs continued to apply for royal or Sejm confirmation of their private foundations, in practice, from the early 1500s, seigneurs increasingly set up towns without reference to the central government. No self-respecting noble *państwo* was complete without one or more towns. But very few nobles, even among those involved in the 'enlightened' municipal reforms of Stanisław August's reign, showed any understanding of, or interest in, the towns for their own sake. Towns existed to enhance the seigneur's prestige, to provide a commercial focus for those who lived on or near his estates, to provide him with revenues and with supplies and services at little or no cost to himself. To ensure custom, seigneurs conferred market, fair and even staple rights on their towns. The upshot was to dilute the resources of an already weak economy with too many market towns competing for too little trade. The 1767-8 Sejm banned (not very effectively) the establishment of new towns and commercial centres within a radius of two Polish miles (about fourteen kilometres) of existing ones. Not surprisingly, the great majority of urban settlements were *miasteczka* (little towns) rather than *miasta* (towns). Just as a majority of the *szlachta* differed from peasants in purely legal, rather than economic, terms, so a majority of the *Rzeczpospolita's* towns differed from villages in legal, rather than economic, status.

It was a great relief to James Harris to quit Prussia in 1767, 'such a despotic country', for Poland, where he 'found the air of a Republic refreshing'. Yet the first town he reached, Wschowa, by Polish standards an important textile centre with over 4,000 inhabitants 'bore . . . few marks of the blessings of liberty - bad houses, in ruins, great appearance of poverty, and crowds of Jews and beggars; and here, may I say, once and for all, that the few towns I passed through on the road [to Warsaw] are of the most pitiful sort'. Most observers, not least the Poles themselves, concurred. Warsaw might impress a backwoods provincial, such as Karl Heinrich von Heyking, from Courland, who in 1763 'was greatly struck by the impressive sight of this beautiful capital, whose royal palace majestically dominated the city, with its churches, palaces and residences' but the more sophisticated were less complimentary. The

English merchant, Joseph Wraxall, visiting in 1770, found Warsaw to be nothing out of the ordinary: 'The streets are many of them crooked and ill-paved, the buildings have little of elegance in them. . .'. Besides the royal palace, he found only the magnates' palaces to be respectably built and furnished. Hubert Vautrin and William Coxe both noted the lack of market gardens around Warsaw, so common around even small and middling towns in western Europe. Coxe, like almost all who passed through it, found Jan Klemens Branicki's Białystok, in the palatinate of Podlasie, to be neat and orderly, but he thought the nearby royal town of Bielsk (population 1,500) 'little better than a miserable village'. In fairness to Bielsk, a few years later, the German natural scientist, Georg Forster, found its church and town hall attractive and the town itself 'a well-enough constructed place'. Such positive reactions remained comparatively infrequent.

Most towns were built almost wholly of timber. Three-quarters of Warsaw's housing was wooden. In 1752, Grodno, the venue of the Sejm when it convened in Lithuania, had only two brick houses. In small towns, even the principal municipal buildings were of wood. The very necessary fortifications of Ukrainian towns consisted of wooden palisades. Magnates built palaces of wood. Since timber was the construction material most readily available, its widespread use was not surprising, but it did emphasise the rustic character of the towns. It also posed a constant fire hazard. Whole districts and settlements were ever at risk. The abundance of timber permitted rapid rebuilding, but, once more, only to underline their shoddy, makeshift appearance. The great brick-built towns of Royal Prussia presented an exceptionally impressive sight. Otherwise, where permanent materials were extensively used in the provincial cities, they conveyed, at best, an air of seedy grandeur, as in Kraków, or, more often, an air of dilapidation and neglect. In 1780, only four houses off the main square of the palatinate town of Lublin (population 10,000) were in good repair. The Crown's most important court of law, the Tribunal, given an extra venue in Kalisz (some 3,000 inhabitants) in 1775, was still unable to meet there four years later, because of the decrepit condition of the town hall.

Basic amenities were lacking, even by the none-too-exacting standards of the times. Streets were rarely paved. In Warsaw, only the central sections of the main thoroughfares were cobbled. The many empty spaces and abandoned sites in towns only partially alleviated the discomfort caused by using streets as tips and sewers. There was no street lighting, although householders in larger towns might be expected to hang a lantern outside their front door. Town councils regularly published bye-laws on waste disposal, public hygiene, fire precautions and street illumination in the sure knowledge that they would be ignored. Water supplies, usually from wells, were of dubious quality. There were fewer public bathhouses in the eighteenth century than in the sixteenth. Streets

were rarely cleaned. The overflowing contents of the cesspit of St Mary's school in Kraków, heroically cleaned out in 1745, filled 600 barrels. The memory of a privy in Grodno filled Georg Forster with horror and disgust for years afterwards. Warsaw had no bridge across the Vistula before 1776, when a pontoon structure was erected, which had to be taken down every winter and reassembled after the spring thaw (Warsaw was to acquire a permanent bridge only in 1864). Except at Danzig, Thorn and in the Ukraine, town walls were almost invariably tumbledown and neglected. Not permanent defences, but earthen and partly improvised ones enabled Warsaw to resist a prolonged siege by the Prussians and Russians in 1794.

## THE *SZLACHTA*'S HOSTILITY TO THE TOWNS

Although they founded towns by the hundred, the nobility looked down on townsmen as vastly inferior rivals for the exiguous resources of a primitive economy. The *szlachta*'s own industrial ventures, the purchases imposed on their impoverished peasantry, their predilection for luxury and consumer imports could only aggravate and perpetuate the inadequacies of Poland's own urban industries. In 1786, Nadal de Soubreville, manager of the great new textile enterprise on the estates of Michael Poniatowski, archbishop-primate of Gniezno, was horrified to discover that his hooks and nails had to be individually hand-crafted in Warsaw. In consequence, they cost twenty-five times as much as they did in Breslau, where they were mass-produced. 'The workmen of Warsaw', he sighed, 'are much dearer than those of London and Paris.' On site, at the towns of Łowicz and Skierniewice, Soubreville had to import almost all major items of equipment. The few and unsatisfactory local craftsmen got their own back for generations of seigneurial exploitation by forming a cartel to charge him the highest possible prices.

The *szlachta* did more than by-pass the urban economy – they took constitutional action to constrict it. In the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they passed laws forbidding most townsmen to purchase landed property and even obliging them to sell off their existing lands. Had matters stood there, this legislation, if it had been enforceable, might conceivably have benefited some towns by staunching the outflow of capital from trade and industry into land – a headache for governments all over Europe. Matters did not stop there. In 1501 and 1507, the *szlachta* secured exemption from customs duties on primary commodities exported from their demesnes and on all items imported for their personal use – a privilege massively exploited to undercut urban industry and trade. Until 1764, Polish merchants paid a 6 per cent duty on imports, 8 per cent on exports and 2 per cent on internal transactions. In

1565, not only did the nobility reserve to themselves the right of export down the Vistula, but they actually forbade native townsmen to export anything other than cattle and oxen. The *szlachta* believed that they would thus eliminate the competition of native, Polish merchants, in whose place they encouraged Jewish intermediaries who stood outside the corporate structures of town life. By restricting exports, the *szlachta* further believed they could keep domestic prices down, conserve their own wealth and encourage outsiders to come to them for the raw materials which the rest of Europe apparently needed from Poland. In 1643, in a much-repeated law, the nobility fixed the maximum profits that could be made on any commercial transaction at 5 per cent for foreign merchants, 7 per cent for Polish merchants and 3 per cent for Jews. It was as well that Poland's ramshackle state apparatus was incapable of enforcing such fantasies, otherwise the *szlachta* would have legislated their precious *Rzeczpospolita* out of existence as an economic entity.

The urban economy was an adjunct to the *szlachta*'s own, to be milked in the same way as the serfs. Merchants were expected to provide both cheap goods and easy credit which the nobility were never in any hurry to repay. Even the merchants of Warsaw and Danzig, among the most enterprising, had constant difficulties in reclaiming debts. An official contemplating the problems of Prussia's acquisitions under the Second and Third Partitions had the impression that merchant creditors recovered only some 10 per cent of their major debts from the nobility without resort to litigation. Little wonder that unofficial interest rates could exceed 20 per cent. The Polish nobility's attitude to their debts was scarcely unique, but the lack of any secure means of redress exacerbated the situation. A noble could be pursued only through the noble courts, well-known for their partiality to their own kind. As with much else, there seems to have been some improvement in the later eighteenth century and even a greater willingness, in the larger towns, for nobles to accept the adjudication of the municipal courts. On the other hand, in the more vulnerable lesser towns, nobles were known to take what goods they wanted, or to dictate their own prices.

Royal status was no safeguard for towns, exposed to the damaging attentions of their royal representative, the *starosta*. Like most other public offices, the *starostwo* was held for life. As early as the sixteenth century, it had largely shed its original, military responsibility of command of the *gród*, or citadel, and, like the *gród* itself, assumed a pre-eminently judicial and administrative character. Indeed, the *starosta* was a kind of viceroy and law unto himself. He remained responsible for the town's defence and security; he received the taxes it owed the state; he supervised its finances; he usually confirmed elections to the town council and even exercised some power of nomination to it. The town had its own, municipal, courts, as opposed to the *gród*, which was primarily a *szlachta* court, but it was ultimately the *starosta*'s job to ensure the

implementation of the judgements of municipal and other courts. The *starosta* judged the 'four criminal articles' of rape, arson, highway robbery and robbery with violence. After 1569, a category of *starostowie* without judicial powers came into being, mainly as the recipients of crown property tenures. These non-*gród* (*niegrodowi*) *starostowie* tried to assert the same powers over the towns as their colleagues. The office of *starosta* which, under a strong monarchy might have been a useful instrument of municipal supervision, degenerated into yet another implement of noble gain and self-aggrandisement. Active responsibilities could be hived off to a deputy, the *podstarości*, or to the *gród* judge, both appointed by the *starosta*, who concentrated on squeezing his office for what he could. It was possible, and common, with royal agreement, to transfer the office, minus its active duties, to a wife, or bequeath it to a widow or heir. None of this boded the towns any good. If anything, the *starosta* had even less cause for restraint than the private seigneur, since it was not his own property that he abused. No towns, large or small, could feel safe from the depredations of their *starostowie*, who regularly ignored municipal privileges to levy arbitrary imposts, to force labour services on townsmen, to appropriate the towns' alcohol monopolies. To the end of the Commonwealth, townsmen and noble reformers alike united in seeing in the *starosta* one of the chief causes of urban decay.

Towns could do little to defend themselves. Private ones had to make their own arrangements with their seigneurs. They had no possibility of redress from the state. Royal towns could appeal to the monarch, as represented by the Assessory Courts attached to the offices of the Grand Chancellors of the Crown and of Lithuania. The supreme courts for royal municipal matters, the Assessories could hear appeals not only from the towns' courts and grievances of townsmen in general, they could also receive complaints against the *starostowie*, if townsmen were determined, or desperate, enough to risk their reprisals. Even favourable Assessory judgements were often meaningless, since, if a *starosta* was the object of a grievance, it was he himself who had to enforce the verdict. In the vicious internal quarrels which divided urban communities, the townsmen themselves were all too ready to disregard Assessorial decisions which they disliked.

Towns had no general right of representation in the Sejm before 1791. A very few possessed honorary noble status, entitling them to return envoys: Kraków after 1492, Wilno after 1568, Poznań after 1581, Warsaw and Lwów after 1588 and Kamieniec Podolski after 1670. Such was the contempt with which the *szlachta* looked on urban envoys that only Kraków, Wilno and Lwów returned them with any regularity. They were charged only with the interests of their own towns, not of the urban sector as a whole. Their real role seems to have been restricted to informal lobbying, rather than active participation in the Sejm's proceedings. The three 'Great Towns' of Royal Prussia – Danzig, Thorn

and Elbing – were exceptional in having seats in the Senate, the upper chamber of their province's *sejmik*-general, but they, too, were concerned first and foremost with their own particular advantages. The decision, in 1768, formally to restrict membership of the Sejm to the king, senators and *szlachta* deprived the 'noble' towns of even their vestigial representative rights, but was otherwise only a recognition of reality. Prior to the Four Years Sejm, the only attempts at wider urban co-operation, to set up a league of the thirty-three 'lesser towns' of Royal Prussia, came to nothing amid their own apathy and particularism.

## SUCCESS STORIES

The urban picture was not one of unrelieved gloom. Danzig's prosperity had declined from its early seventeenth-century peak, as the flow of grain exports down the Vistula had ebbed, but it remained a vigorous urban organism until its well-being was finally undercut by the First Partition. The continuous complaints of the *sejmiki* at the city's abuse of its staple rights in order to 'cheat' the nobility of the proper profits of their trade bear eloquent witness to its immunity from *szlachta* aggression. Its prized staple privileges allowed its merchants and factors to take over the buying and selling of magnate grain to Dutch, French, English and Swedish customers and of European and colonial imports to the nobility. Danzig's commanding position at the mouth of the Vistula and the impregnability (to the *szlachta*) of its fortifications assured the inviolability of its commercial prerogatives. In 1736, 1764 and 1767 Danzig sought and secured guarantees of Russian protection. Much as the magnates and nobles hated Danzig, they could not do without it, in order to sell their grain and to obtain the credit to finance their imports. The readiness of magnate cereal exporters to pay the port's corn assessors bonuses to ensure honest appraisal of their cargoes was an even more telling compliment to its position than the chorus of *sejmiki* complaints.

The prosperity of the Vistula trade rubbed off on other towns of Polish Prussia, which was also buoyed up by a comparatively well-to-do peasantry. Likewise, in Wielkopolska the intensive recruitment of free peasant settlers and artisans was a stimulus to urban growth, further encouraged by the links of its textile industry with Silesia, Bohemia and Moravia. By the 1790s, some 12,000 persons were employed in the production of woollen and linen cloths in the region's towns, accounting, with their families, for 8–9 per cent of the population of the palatinates of Poznań and Kalisz. Hemp, flax, potash and vegetable oil exports encouraged a similarly vigorous small-town life on the other side of the Commonwealth, in the Dvina basin and the Byelorussian borderlands.

One city experienced a spectacular expansion which dwarfed all others: Warsaw. Small, compared with other capital cities for most of its history, it suffered from the lack of a continuously resident court, which in almost



all other countries served to attract people, goods and services. Warsaw only became established as the capital at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Zygmunt III found the attempt to govern his Polish-Lithuanian lands from Kraków, in the southwest, too great an inconvenience. At first, the decentralisation of the state's political power and the profusion of magnate courts depressed Warsaw's economic attractions. The wars of the 1650s and early eighteenth century interrupted its growth. Recovery was slow. The *magnateria* lived in the capital intermittently. Their palaces served as embassies, rather than as residences. Augustus II and Augustus III were reluctant to maintain a permanent court, preferring the delights of Dresden to the uncertainties of Poland, which they visited only when the exigencies of politics obliged them. It was no accident that Warsaw embarked on sustained physical and demographic growth only when the court's presence was definitely established. In 1756, Frederick the Great drove the hapless Augustus III from his Saxon electorate to more than six years' internal exile in his Polish capital. Between 1756 and 1762, the city's population grew by about 20 per cent, from 25,000 to 30,000, to the accompaniment of a boom in palace building. But only under Stanisław August Poniatowski did it finally become a true capital, the hub of social and cultural as well as court and political life. It was not until 1782 that permanent premises were secured for the government's offices and ministries in the Krasiński palace. By 1770, Warsaw's population stood at 40,000, by 1787 at 90,000 and by 1792 it reached 115,000, to rank briefly among the ten largest cities in Europe. This growth stemmed almost entirely from its new role as the focus of national life and was fuelled almost entirely by immigration from the provinces. Warsaw became an important centre of clothing and textile production. It contained 70 to 80 of the country's 300 manufactories by 1790. Most of its production was for its own consumption. A mass of well-developed luxury industries and a caucus of banking and importing merchants catered to the rich. Craftsmen and skilled and unskilled workers were attracted by wage rates which could be half as much again as those to be earned in other towns. Private charity and the money-making opportunities of even casual service to a spendthrift aristocracy and great bourgeoisie were an irresistible attraction to the indigent. In the 1780s, over 7 per cent of Warsaw's population enjoyed no visible means of support and over 21 per cent were in domestic service. Where the performance of even a minor service might earn a tip of 1 or 2 zloties, more than a skilled agricultural worker could command in a day (in 1784, Georg Forster recorded giving a tip of 2 ducats, or 36 zloties, for an errand), it was not surprising that many observers had reservations about the capital's growth. Warsaw's expansion did little to promote the economic development of its immediate hinterland. Its grain supplies came principally from the Ukraine, indirectly bolstering Ukrainian serfdom. Its high wages deprived local landowners of labour. Yet

Warsaw's growth was undeniable and was to be cut short only by the catastrophe of the Second and Third Partitions.

Much of Poland's urban growth stemmed from the natural demographic recovery after the Great Northern War. For all its constraints, serfdom was unable to prevent a constant flow of peasant migration to the towns. Municipal toll and customs books, almost without exception, point to a recovery gradual in the first half of the eighteenth century and gathering momentum after 1760. The economic constraints imposed by the First Partition may have hampered, but they did not reverse, the swelling volume of internal traffic and trade, driven by a growing population. It was the Second and Third Partitions which were to saddle the Polish-Lithuanian lands with economic difficulties of a wholly different order.

### SELF-INFLICTED PROBLEMS

There was little unity or community of purpose among the towns, or within them. In an economy of scarcity, individuals and groups could not avoid making the most of their own benefits at the expense of others. Municipal citizenship was essential for participation in civic assemblies and elections and for the enjoyment of the full range of personal and economic rights bestowed by the founding charter and by subsequent privileges. Citizen rights, the preserve of adult males, were rarely enjoyed by more than a quarter to a third of a town's inhabitants. Poverty disqualified most. Legitimate birth and good character were not enough. The would-be citizen normally had to own real property inside the town walls and to have been in residence for a set period. He would be expected to be in a definite occupation and perhaps belong to a specified ethnic or denominational group. Magdeburg law, on which the rights of most royal and private Polish towns were based, allowed a stay of a year and a day in a chartered town to confer personal freedom on the runaway serf. In the noble-dominated *Rzeczpospolita*, many towns and guilds would not extend citizenship or membership to those of unfree parentage. While the sons of established citizens normally received full civic rights as a matter of course, newcomers normally paid a registration fee to the town council – ranging from a few *groszy* in a small township to as much as 1,000 zloties in Kraków.

Most councils and most citizens favoured the exclusion of Jews, from residence as well as citizenship; the Jews, in turn, and their *szlachta* sponsors, were reluctant to accept the restrictive practices characteristic of municipal institutions. Until 1768, Protestants were legally excluded from the citizen body of Warsaw and only after 1776, under strong pressure from the government, were their ranks freely opened to them. The Protestant authorities of Danzig and Thorn much preferred to register German-speaking Protestants to Polish-speaking Catholics as

citizens. The Latin Catholic magistrates of Lwów, Sambor and Kamieniec Podolski tried to exclude Greek Catholics, despite royal admonitions. By contrast, the towns of Lithuania appear to have been so eager for any infusions of manpower and capital that they rarely raised similar objections. The ethos of municipal exclusivity was underpinned by the core institutions of the towns' economic life – the craft guilds and merchant confraternities. Originally founded to protect the livelihood and interests of their members and to maintain standards of craftsmanship and service, by the eighteenth century both had degenerated into restrictive welfare machines, where the fortunes of a few masters and wealthy traders were secured by a cheap labour force, the elimination of competition and indifference to market demand. Newcomers, unless marriage or family connection smoothed their path, were treated with suspicion. Masters and merchants exploited their towns' staple rights and bye-laws to eliminate competition, set up cosy cartels for supply and distribution and even suppressed any excessive industrial or commercial enthusiasm on the part of their own members. The effects of this hidebound complacency were telling. Well before the eighteenth century, German guilds were reluctant to receive Polish journeymen because of their low levels of accomplishment and foreign craftsmen shunned most Polish towns on their traditional 'journeys' to acquire practice and expertise. Polish merchants and masters complained that Jewish traders and craftsmen threatened their livelihoods by actively looking for customers and suppliers, instead of relying on ancient municipal privileges to secure them. These were the policies of fossilised groups incapable of conceiving active economic growth, seeking reassurance in the settled certainties of the past and clinging to what they had, rather than trying to create new wealth and fresh resources.

Discrimination could never be wholly effective. Its targets could not be prevented from settling in the suburbs or in the numerous enclaves within the town exempt from municipal jurisdiction. Nowhere was 'contraband' trade eradicated, whether by Jews or peasants, by nobles or clergy, or even by guildsmen and merchants poaching on each others' territory. The very rapid expansion of the Warsaw economy occurred in spite of its trade and craft associations, which increasingly assumed the character of policing organisations for the maintenance of social discipline among their unruly workforces.

## MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION

The guilds and confraternities of more substantial towns usually formed an integral part of their governing structures. Very small towns made do with the most rudimentary administration, perhaps in the shape or a handful of officials appointed directly by the seigneur or *starosta*. Otherwise, civic government followed the self-governing models of the

law of Magdeburg, or, a Polish variant, Chełmno. An executive council, the *rada*, chaired by a mayor (*burmistrz* or *prezydent*) and assisted by the *ława*, a bench of aldermen under an official called the *wójt*. In the Middle Ages, it was the *wójt* who had been commissioned to establish and govern the town. In the eighteenth century, the *wójt* and the *ława* lingered on as the core of the administration only in smaller centres, but, generally speaking, the *rada* had assumed the leadership of the towns. The competence of the *wójt* and the *ława* had largely been reduced to that of a municipal criminal and civil court of first instance, but even this role was circumscribed by the *rada*, which might also insist on the exercise of judicial powers.

In principle, only that minority of a town's inhabitants who, as citizens, constituted the commonalty, or *pospólstwo*, were entitled to participate in civic activity. In practice, its role was severely limited. Members of the council and the bench could well hold office for life. In larger towns, the *pospólstwo* had its own representative organ, the 'third order' (*trzeci ordynek*, *trzeci porządek*), but its control over that body tended to be weak and the third order's powers to be very narrow. Normally, its own members, named for life, filled vacancies by co-optation. The council often had more influence on the composition of the third order than the commonalty which it supposedly represented. In Thorn and Danzig, the *rada* named new members of the *trzeci ordynek* from candidates presented by the *pospólstwo*. In the municipality of New Warsaw, the *pospólstwo* submitted candidates for the *rada*'s approval from a list of persons presented by the council to the commonalty in the first place. The official civic role of the capital's citizens was confined to that of spectators at certain ceremonial assemblies, or *publiki*, although, if sufficiently roused, the *pospólstwo* could exercise considerable unofficial pressure on the magistracy. In whatever way members of the *trzeci ordynek* were appointed, they were almost invariably recruited from the wealthier guildmasters and merchants. If members of the third order were ready to defend the interests of the commonalty, this was all too often out of resentment at the powers of the patriciate or in defence of their own sectional interests. In political terms, the third orders' role was usually limited to the examination of town accounts, a right which the councils widely ignored.

The council, the *rada*, dominated civic life. Its membership usually ranged from four to twelve. The councillors (*rajcy*) and their families formed the patriciate, to which any socially and politically ambitious citizen aspired. The *rada* controlled the finances and made the day-to-day decisions of municipal government. It enjoyed great powers of patronage: it appointed all permanent civic officials from treasurers to night-watchmen; it influenced appointments to the *trzeci ordynek*, from which it filled vacancies on the *ława*; it co-opted *ława* members or scions of patriciate families to its own empty seats. In the great cities of Royal

Prussia, the councils were dominated by the *Gelehrten*, the 'men of learning', a distinct, partly hereditary patriciate, largely divorced from the guild and commercial structures and relying for its income on professional services, landed estates and the perquisites of office. In Danzig, in particular, the withdrawal of the *Gelehrten* from active economic life led to violent clashes with merchants and craftsmen who resented their own exclusion from higher municipal office and who felt their interests were being ignored. In Thorn, social tensions were aggravated by denominational frictions. In an unusual development, the Protestant patriciate of Thorn, rather than work with Catholics imposed on the town council by royal decree after 1724, formed an unofficial Evangelical Council (*Evangelischer Rat*), a Lutheran caucus which was to wrest real decision-making power from the council proper. Lwów and Kraków witnessed especially bitter arguments between patriciates and *pospólstwo* for most of the eighteenth century, centring on the distribution of offices and the administration of finances. The ruling oligarchies themselves were divided by factional struggles. The councillors of Lwów and Kraków sat for life, but active participation in the *rada* was rotated among groups of members for a year at a time. Clashes arose between incoming 'new' councils and outgoing 'old' councils, reluctant to resign themselves to even a temporary diminution of power. The growth of the original town sometimes produced two sets of municipal administration. Old Danzig's councillors and aldermen shared the reluctance of their colleagues in the Main Town to allow the commonalty a greater say in affairs but bitterly resented their superior wealth and perquisites. Warsaw's New Town accepted the Old's political ascendancy, but strenuously opposed its efforts to infringe its economic privileges and monopolies.

Towns derived their revenues from a bewildering array of sources: landed property, with which they were usually generously endowed (Warsaw was a notable exception); levies and taxes on businesses and professions, private householders, tolls on roads and bridges, the licensing of shops and stalls, fees from the administration of justice and the registration of new citizens; monies from breweries and distilleries. A single municipal brewery returned 11,000 zloties yearly to the councillors of Thorn. Danzig's *Gelehrten* waxed fat on port dues. Old Warsaw's recorded receipts in the 1780s fluctuated from 22,000 zloties in one year to 154,000 in another, overshadowed by a huge debt, 112,581 zloties in 1788. New Warsaw limped along with an average annual income of 5,000 zloties for most of the eighteenth century. In 1780, Lublin drew a revenue of 4,500 zloties against outgoings of 5,000. A decent-sized town might barely enjoy the income of a respectable landowner.

The share-out of benefits, monies and properties underlay many of the tensions and struggles within the towns. *Rady* appointed as few full-time, salaried officials as they could get away with, in order to preserve maximum financial control in their own hands. Municipal accounts point

to endemic mismanagement and corruption. Even in New Warsaw, illiterates could be found among councillors and administrators. The account-books of Kalisz reveal officials' ignorance of the arcana of simple arithmetic. Drunkenness was a regular feature of civic proceedings in small towns, even of judicial sessions of the *lawa*. Councillors, expected to help their towns' finances out of their own pockets in times of crisis, were all too ready to dip their hands in municipal tills. Councillors and aldermen, who did not normally receive a salary, were entitled to the receipts from new citizens' registration fees and judicial fines. Councillors especially could expect substantial allocations of food and drink at Christmas and Easter, as well as exemptions from municipal taxes, on preferential treatment in acquiring leases of municipal mills, breweries and other properties. Excluded members of the *lawa* and *trzeci ordynek* looked on such perquisites with envious eyes. After debt service, banqueting and entertaining were the biggest area of town expenditure, a much higher priority than the upkeep of building stock or amenities. Given Poland's perpetual military insecurity and the abuses of the *szlachta* themselves, it was a perfectly understandable attitude. Yet when, in the reign of Stanisław August, the reforming state finally imposed improvement commissions (the so-called commissions for good order, *komisje dobrego porządku*) on the major royal towns, the comparative ease with which they reduced the all-pervasive municipal debt or even converted it into surplus by sensible housekeeping was a most emphatic indictment of civic authorities' incompetence and abnegation of responsibility.

The main concern of those magistrates who took their duties seriously was the enforcement of their old civic privileges. The ruling urban oligarchies showed indifference or hostility to the need for new forms of economic enterprise such as manufactories or joint-stock companies, which cut across the guild and confraternity structures to which they were so closely bound. If the *Gelehrten* of Danzig condemned the restrictive practices and shoddy workmanship of the craft guilds, they were motivated, perhaps, less by concern for the communal good than by the prospect of enriching themselves from trading licences sold to independent peasant, Jewish and Dutch Mennonite businessmen. To the very end of the Commonwealth, town magistrates' own solutions to urban ills lay in the elimination of external, especially Jewish, competition. The disabilities foisted on the towns by the *szlachta* were real enough – yet, the most positive measures towards the restoration of the towns were also to come from the nobility. The guilds, confraternities and patriciates were accomplices to their own economic strangulation. It was as well that other outlets existed for commercial enterprise. Poland-Lithuania's 400 fairs offered a legitimate outlet for trade free of medieval particularism. When Stanisław August proposed revitalising Kraków's ailing economy by giving it its own fairs, the town magistrates actually refused, rather than

face the consequences of untrammelled trade. But the towns, too, harboured alternatives.

## **JURYDYKI**

Properties within the town which had acquired exemption from municipal jurisdiction were a perennial source of grievance to magistrates and citizens alike. *Serwitoriaty* were royal licences permitting individuals to conduct their businesses free of guild supervision. *Libertacje* exempted the properties of individuals in the royal service from municipal taxes and jurisdiction. *Jurydyki* were the most serious. These were larger enclaves, which might comprise a block of houses, a whole district, a suburb or just empty land, which had passed to the ownership of a nobleman, or the Church, or even a powerful and wealthy townsman, who then proceeded to withdraw them from municipal authority. The *jurydyka* was virtually a township in its own right, with its own *ława* and *wójt*, or even *rada*, confirmed by the seigneur. Its administration was managed without reference to the civic authorities, although it was normal to refer capital crimes to the main town's magistratures. Strictly speaking, *jurydyki* required a royal warrant to confirm their autonomous status. Few of their owners bothered. Most ignored the statute of 1550 which required those without a warrant to pay the normal municipal taxes and charges on their property. Virtually all royal towns of any size had such exempted enclaves. Kalisz, unusually, had no *jurydyki*, but was plagued with clerical and noble *libertacje*. Lublin was riddled with every conceivable type of exempted property, including at least twenty-five major *jurydyki*. Of the 100 *łany* of land outside the town walls conferred on Lublin at its foundation, only six remained under direct municipal control. Warsaw had fifteen *jurydyki* in 1790. Even private seigneurs were ready to set property apart to accommodate favoured colonies of craftsmen or Jews. In the Czartoryskis' Szklów, one in twenty of the inhabitants lived in *jurydyki* belonging to the Church or the seigneur.

To the regular urban institutions, the *jurydyki* were a menace. They broke up the administrative and legal unity of the town; they withheld taxes and services; worst of all, they provided bases of economic activity, not subject to guild or confraternity regulations, which could undercut the prices of regular guild production and outflank comfortable monopolies. The activities of the *partacze* (workers and traders *a parte*, on the side) occasioned constant complaint, to little avail. The Sejm of 1767–8 responded to Lublin's petitions of grievance by legalising several of its unauthorised *jurydyki*.

The *jurydyki* were a valuable source of fees and rents for their patrons. If they allowed guilds, it was usually on a more liberal basis than those in the municipality proper. Jews or Protestants were far more likely to be admitted to membership. Exemption from town imposts permitted lower

prices than those of incorporated craftsmen and traders. Once again, the *szlachta* benefited, the towns lost out. But the role of the *jurydyki* was far from negative. As the magistrates of Danzig in the 1750s were quick to admonish their *pospólstwo*, their livelihood was threatened not only by the lower prices but also by the superior quality of *partacze* production. Those unwilling to submit to the rigidities of the guilds and the merchant oligarchies drifted to the *jurydyki*. A town as permeated with exemptions as Lublin went through most of the eighteenth century in chronic decay. By contrast, its *zamek* (castle) *jurydyka* flourished. Was this entirely due to the protection of its patron, the *starosta* of Lublin, and his undoubted exploitation of his position *vis-à-vis* the town? Or did the indolence of Lublin's own magistrates and guilds, whose sole response was the ritual insistence on their ancient privileges, contribute to their plight? In the right conditions – a degree of prosperity and expansion – *jurydyki* and the main town could evolve in a complementary way, as in Warsaw. Without the *jurydyki*, the condition of many Polish-Lithuanian towns would certainly have been more parlous than it was. Without the Jews, it might have collapsed altogether.

## THE JEWS

The presence of the Jews was felt as strongly as the *szlachta*'s in every walk of Polish life. The heroic researches of Raphael Mahler into the very defective census returns of 1764–6 (carried out for poll-tax purposes) put their numbers in the region of 750,000, some 6 per cent of the total population, almost as many as the *szlachta*.<sup>2</sup> Poland's Jews were the most numerous in Europe. Roughly one-quarter lived in the countryside. They were overwhelmingly leaseholders of inns and mills, itinerant merchants, or administrators employed by the state and the nobility. A tiny proportion of this rural Jewish population, no more than 2 per cent, were craftsmen. A few even settled down to agriculture. According to William Coxe, in Lithuania, 'we frequently saw them [Jews] engaged in sowing, reaping, mowing and other works of husbandry'. Most, however, lived in towns, especially in the private towns of the *szlachta*. Polish law forbade them to own land (but not Lithuanian law; was this one reason why Jews were apparently more numerous in Lithuanian agriculture?). Most royal and ecclesiastical towns made use of their medieval *de non tolerandis Judaëis* privileges to bar them from residence, to little effect.

Jewish immigration to Poland, mainly of Ashkenazim from Germany and Bohemia, dated from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Polish and Lithuanian rulers encouraged them in order to increase prosperity and taxes and to acquire the services of skilled merchants, financiers and administrators. In these frontier states, the Jews saw both opportunity and escape from the persecution they suffered in western and central Europe. Jewish educational levels and commercial and professional



expertise dictated their gravitation to the towns, to the resentment of their Christian counterparts at their competitive presence. That resentment, which has so soured Polish-Jewish relations to the present day, might have been less if the Jews could have been assimilated in the same way that immigrant Italians, Scots, Greeks, Armenians and even many Germans were.

It was not to be. The Jews were too numerous and too attached to their own religion and way of life. They had their own customs and traditions, their own dress, their own feeling of cultural superiority. The crowds of Warsaw's Jewish poor who had become linguistically assimilated by the 1790s were an exception, albeit an important one. Most continued to speak Yiddish, often in ignorance of Polish. The so-called Third Lithuanian Statute of 1588 (also valid in the Crown) tried to encourage conversion by conferring hereditary noble status on Jewish apostates who adopted an appropriate lifestyle. The results appear to have been meagre and confined to well-off Jews with ample Christian business connections – although the *szlachta* were sufficiently alarmed in 1764 by the numbers involved to repeal the relevant parts of the Statute. The wave of mass conversions associated with the messianic Jacob Frank in the 1750s (hundreds, according to Jewish historians, thousands, according to Catholic ones) was quite exceptional.

For the most part, their Polish patrons neither expected nor wished the Jews to assimilate. After 1264, the Jews were placed under the direct authority of the monarch. Once more, the *szlachta* took over the role of the kings. From 1549, Jews resident on noble or ecclesiastical property were subjected to the jurisdiction of its immediate seigneur. Legally, they continued to remain free persons and not subject to the Christian magistrates of the towns in which they lived. They were thus exempt usually from municipal taxes and obligations, although they paid a poll-tax to the state, plus whatever levies the seigneur might impose specifically on them as inhabitants of his town or *jurydyka*. To the *szlachta*, the Jews were a channel for tapping directly into the profits of commerce, by-passing the restrictions (and higher prices) of the guilds and municipalities, a role which they could only discharge by remaining separate and distinct. Whether the Jews benefited from *szlachta* protection as much as Christian townsmen made out is another matter. Seigneurs and *starostowie* commonly imposed higher rents and levies on them than on Christians living within their jurisdictions. Jews derived their commercial advantages principally from greater enterprise and lower profit margins. Most were abysmally poor.

To all intents and purposes, the Jews formed a separate estate inside the Commonwealth. Their communities, the *cahals*, centred round the synagogue, to which might be attached a school, a communal bakery, printing-shop or bathhouse. In a narrower sense, the *cahal* was the council of elders and rabbis, who provided administration and justice.

They ran their own courts, they apportioned the state poll-tax and levied their own dues and taxes. They decided whether or not to confer the *chazaka*, citizenship, on newcomers, essential if they were to be accepted into the community. They could also expel and ruin fellow Jews by excommunication, *terem*. The Christian municipal authorities had no say in such matters. In a private town, a Jew and a Christian involved in litigation went before the *lawa* or the seigneur; in a royal town, before the *starosta* or the palatine in his capacity of *iudex Judaeorum*. The *cahal* conducted its official dealings with the municipality through its syndic, or *shtadlan*. Polish Jews were organised to a degree unmatched elsewhere. The *cahals* sent representatives to regional congresses in order to settle disputes, to distribute the poll-tax burden and to elect deputies to two great Jewish councils: the *Vaad Arbah Aratzot*, or Council of the Four Lands (that is, Małopolska, Wielkopolska, Ruś-Podole and Wołyń-Ukraine) and to the *Vaad Medinat Lita*, or Council of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Until their abolition in 1764, they represented Polish-Lithuanian Jewry to the state at the highest level. They translated any state enactments affecting the Jews into detailed regulation. The Jews were the only major grouping inside the Commonwealth to have any well-developed organisational structure, apart from the *szlachta* themselves, who even referred to the Jews' assemblies as Sejmy and *sejmiki*.

The Jews were especially numerous in the poorer, eastern regions of the Commonwealth. In part, this may have reflected the traditions of exclusion practised especially by the towns of Royal Prussia since the days of the Teutonic Knights. It may also have reflected the reluctance of the longer-established *cahals* in the west to take in newcomers. Most likely, it reflected the paucity of vigorous Christian town life in the east. In any case, Jews were present everywhere, not least in towns with *de non tolerandis Judaeis* privileges. The *szlachta* demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the services of the Christian community by allowing the Jews to reside and trade freely in Warsaw when the Sejm was in session. The Crown grand marshal, the capital's supreme police authority, boosted his income by selling them residential and trading licences. At the time of the 1764 census, in the Crown alone, Jewish communities were known to have existed in 823 towns, though only a dozen numbered Jewish populations above 2,000 and only about 130 above 800. The biggest single community, some 10,000 Jews, was in the Sanguszko family's town of Brody, in the palatinate of Ruś, on one of the chief overland trade routes from Europe to Asia. More typical was the Sanguszkos' Lutomiersk, in the western palatinate of Sieradz. In 1787, 410 of its 735 inhabitants were Jewish.

Free of corporate urban restrictions, encouraged by the monarchy and the *szlachta*, the Jews emerged as the principal middlemen between peasants, nobles and the wider national and European economy. They went into the villages to buy and sell, they bought from peasants bringing

their wares to town and then peddled them door-to-door. Before the arrival of the Jews in the 1650s, the county of Bielsk, in central Poland, was commercially isolated from much of the Commonwealth and maintained no known commercial links beyond it. One hundred years later, Bielsk's Jewish traders had developed active links with Königsberg, Frankfurt-an-der-Oder, Breslau and Leipzig. They brought in over 90 per cent of all goods entering the county. In 1793, Poznań's new Prussian authorities counted thirty-six Jewish factors, only six Polish. Two-thirds of the traders of the royal towns of the palatinate of Sieradz were Jewish. In little Lutomiersk, all twenty-two traders and shopkeepers were Jews.

Jews were more numerous still in the towns as craftsmen, to the bitter resentment of Christian artisans. Sometimes, there was no contest. In the six largest towns of the county of Bielsk, Jews accounted for 96 per cent of butchers, 87 per cent of alcohol retailers, 90 per cent of tailors, 70 per cent of haberdashers, 73 per cent of furriers, 83 per cent of bookbinders, all the beltmakers, all the hatters, etc., etc. Their religious rules on dress and diet made inevitable their penetration of the garment and victualling trades. Forbidden to eat the hind quarters of animals, they could use this surplus meat to undercut Christian competitors, while charging higher prices to Jewish customers for kosher meat. Surviving Christian butchers often preferred to specialise in pork.

The exclusion of Jews from a town could have unlooked-for consequences. In the palatinate of Lublin, the towns of Urzędów, Tarnogóra and Wąwolnica were reduced to the level of village backwaters, almost bereft of all commercial activity. The archbishops of Gniezno banned the Jews from their town of Piątek, in the palatinate of Łęczyca. The Jews, and Piątek's trade, moved to the nearby noble-owned village of Pokrzywnica. The magistrates of Wschowa were so alarmed in 1769 that the Jews might migrate to a separate township that they hastened to confer on them the same property and residential rights as on Christians and, in a unique gesture, recorded a formal vote of thanks in the town registers for the role of the Jews in Wschowa's recovery after the Great Northern War. No matter how vociferous the complaints, Jewish expulsion could be an economic kiss of death.

Jewish craftsmen and traders were formidable competitors because they were ready to accept low profit margins and to go out and seek custom. Many remained in business thanks only to precariously low standards of living: 56 per cent of Jewish families did not own their own home, 40 per cent of all Jews lacked any permanent, assured means of livelihood. There were Jewish millionaires, like Szmul Zbytkower, of the Warsaw suburb of Praga. During the reign of Stanisław August, who even dined in his house on occasion, Zbytkower largely monopolised Warsaw's meat supply. Hundreds of his factors bought up cattle in the Ukraine. The meat went to Warsaw, the hides, prepared in Zbytkower's own tanneries, went for export. He owned and leased land around

Warsaw for his herds; he leased one of the Warsaw toll-gates; he owned a brickworks; he leased breweries from the *magnateria*. His commercial and credit operations extended to Amsterdam, Leipzig and Breslau. He imported cloths and luxuries from all over Europe. He belonged to a tiny elite of exceptions.

The Jews were more involved in the cash economy than any other group in Poland. Through the financial machinery of their *cahals*, they provided the best credit terms available. They were bankers to everyone in the Commonwealth, from monarch to peasant. Officially, the Catholic Church tried to restrict contacts between Jews and Christians to the irreducible minimum. In fact, it had few qualms about placing its ample revenues with the Jews for assured, long-term, low interest returns. Christians bequeathing endowments to the Church frequently insisted that they be invested with the *cahals*. The monies were recycled among Christians. Not just the *cahal*, but individuals of every station were involved in these transactions, lending and borrowing a few zloties or a few thousands, over a few weeks at 15 to 25 per cent or over years at 6 to 10 per cent. The community bore collective responsibility for the default of its members – one reason why Christians were so ready to lend money to Jews – and after 1673, the *cahal's* permission was required before any individual could borrow from outsiders. Harsh sanctions preserved financial discipline: forfeiture of a defaulter's goods, even excommunication. The *cahal* serviced its debts from its own credit operations – which included higher interest charges to its own members than to Christians – and from financial levies and poll-tax surpluses. These powers greatly strengthened the position of the wealthy elders and rabbis who dominated the *cahals*.

All the evidence suggests that the number of Jews and the extent of their participation in Poland's economic life were increasing in the second half of the eighteenth century, but at a faster rate than the economy itself. Many *cahals* faced financial crisis as the degree of their indebtedness began to overtake their ability to service it. The debts of the Grodno *cahal* stood at 375,000 zloties as early as 1714. In 1755, the 1,000-strong Jewish community at Tykocin, in Podlasie, owed 100,000 zloties. So low was its credit rating that it had been unable to raise fresh loans since 1743. In the 1770s and 1780s, Warsaw's townsmen complained that the *szlachta* protected the Jews only to stave off bankruptcies which would drag down the nobles themselves. Many *cahals* slid into a spiral of impoverishment and dependency on their wealthier and less scrupulous members and on their seigneurs. The miseries which Jewish community leaders could inflict on their people became more acute as their overall economic position deteriorated. Messianic movements developed largely among the poor in reaction to the domination of the elders and rabbis: Frankism in the 1750s, which sought a *rapprochement* with Christianity; and, more importantly, Hassidism in the 1760s, which emphasised

personal religious experience at the expense of the Torah, the law associated with the Establishment. The dissatisfaction of many sectors inside the Jewish community with their leaders may even have been a contributory factor to the abolition of the *Vaadim* in 1764.

Nowhere in Europe did the Jews enjoy freedoms and opportunities on the scale offered by Poland. Yet they could never be unreservedly accepted by a gentile community into which they themselves had no intention of assimilating. Whatever the nature of individual relations, on the wider level the symbiosis remained uneasy, suspicious and hostile. Pogroms were rare. The mass slaughter of Ukrainian Jews during the 1768 *Koliszczyzna* rising had no precedent since the Chmielnicki rebellion over a century earlier. The horrific execution of fourteen Jews in Żytomierz, in the palatinate of Kiev, in 1753 for the alleged ritual murder of a petty nobleman's son, was an isolated event. The peasantry relied on the Jews for contacts with the commercial world. They also loathed them as the visible agents of *szlachta* exploitation: as innkeepers, administrators, merchants whose goods their seigneur made them buy and creditors whose loans he made them repay. Townsmen resented them as competitors and saw in them another instrument of the nobility for undermining their well-being. And the *szlachta*, who derived the biggest benefits from the Jews? They despised them as they despised all who were not *szlachta*. To the *sejmiki* they were *plugastwo* (vermin), or *niewierni* (infidels). A perusal of the *Volumina Legum* will show that they were, in law, subject to as much commercial restriction and discrimination as Christian townsmen – but the *magnateria* found it as convenient to ignore these laws as so many others. To the petty nobility, the Jews were also rivals. *Sejmiki* constantly demanded their removal from posts in the customs and financial administration and their exclusion from trade in cattle, grain and forestry products as 'commodities befitting the *szlachta* estate'. Even 'enlightened' opinion made them responsible for debauching the peasantry by pouring down their throats the alcohol so important to noble revenues. The legislation of the Great Sejm of 1788–92 did nothing for the Jews.

## THE HEGEMONY OF NOBLE CULTURE

Poland–Lithuania remained, until its demise, the *Rzeczpospolita szlachecka*, the nobles' Commonwealth. If Polish townsmen showed a lamentable lack of initiative, foresight and determination, this stemmed not only from their severe cultural and intellectual limitations, but also from the sheer sustained weight of the *szlachta* offensive. Townsmen looked not to their own kind, but to the nobility for models and leaders. Those who could afford to, dressed like nobles. They bought land and built *dworki*. They lived like nobles. Prints and portraits of wealthy burghers show a patriciate which outdid the *szlachta* in ornament and

appearance, to the rage of the *sejmiki*, which clamoured against townsmen's usurpations of *szlachectwo* and for the enforcement of moribund sumptuary laws. Outside the great Prussian cities and the Jewish communities, there was no truly autonomous urban culture. High culture centred on the great magnates' palaces – the Czartoryskis' Puławy, the Branickis' Białystok, the Rzewuskis' Podhorce or the Potockis' Tulczyn. Warsaw's Enlightenment was to be dominated by the nobility and clergy. Kraków, a brilliant centre of Renaissance learning, had become a cultural backwater. A successful periodical press, orientated towards the concerns of townsmen, flourished in Thorn, but was directed to a German-speaking audience. By eighteenth-century standards, Samuel Luther Geret's *Thornische Wochentliche Nachrichten und Anzeigen* enjoyed a long run, from 1760 to 1772, but it had only 200 subscribers. The sole Polish-language periodical aimed at an urban public, the *Patriota Polski*, published in Warsaw in 1763, folded after twenty-six issues for want of readers. Successful periodicals were geared to the *szlachta*. The most outstanding, the *Monitor*, patronised by Stanisław August's court circle, lasted from 1765 to 1785. Although, like so many European periodicals, it owed much to Addison and Steele's *Spectator*, no Polish merchant or townsman occupied the prominence of its 'Sir Andrew Freeport'. Only in one issue in 1772 did a merchant feature – none other than 'Sir Jędrzej Freeport' himself. A native merchant would have cut an absurd figure in the company of the *szlachta* intelligentsia.

## THE SZLACHTA IN THE TOWNS

The noble was lord of the countryside; the town was the reserved space of lesser beings. Yet nobles were also townsmen, although the law did its pitiful best to keep the two separate. The statutes of 1505, 1550, 1633, 1677 and 1685 warned 'the *szlachcic* must not occupy himself with urban crafts, or he forfeits his *szlachectwo*'. The 1633 law extended the ban to commercial and retailing activity, even to municipal office. Under the Wettins, Jan Kazimierz Rubinkowski, of suspect, possibly even Jewish ancestry, superintendent of customs, secretary to His Majesty, royal postmaster, panegyrist of king Jan Sobieski, was also well known to be a merchant and a councillor of Thorn. No one challenged his *szlachectwo*, not even the local nobility who hated him for his customs exactions.

The towns were the seats of institutions crucial to *szlachta* life: of the Sejmy, in Warsaw and Grodno; of the *sejmiki*; of the Tribunals and of the *gród* and land courts. The population of Piotrków, chief venue of the Crown Tribunal, could double from 5,000 to 10,000 when it was in session. The Four Years Sejm pushed Warsaw's population from 96,000 in 1787 to 115,000 in 1791. Obviously, this expansion was not wholly attributable to the nobility, but it was *szlachta*-led. Nobles, like the

clergy, could account for up to 10 per cent of a town's population. In Wilno, *szlachta*-owned *dworki* made up some 37 per cent of all buildings. In Warsaw, in 1790, the nobility owned about one fifth of all housing. The 'typical' Warsaw house was not the magnate's palace, nor the merchant's brick-built residence, nor the pauper's hovel, but the noble's *dworek*. Lesser nobles drew a substantial part of their income from letting their *dworki* as accommodation and from setting up breweries, distilleries, tap-rooms, bakeries, forges, chicken-farms and other small enterprises on their premises. Their gardens and orchards supplied the city markets (and helped depress demand for the produce of nearby villages). Prohibitions on occupations were meaningless. Warsaw's resident nobles were not above setting up as carters and hauliers. One of the most successful, Antoni Zarzycki, was a founder in 1777 of the capital's first public transport company, specialising in carriage-hire. The Convocation Sejm of 1764 permitted anyone to produce and sell all kinds of alcoholic beverages in Warsaw. The main beneficiaries, as was doubtless intended, were the petty nobility, who brewed a light 'gentleman's ale' (*piwo szlacheckie*) on their properties and then hawked it at 4-5 zloties a barrel, with the enthusiasm of any Jewish street-trader. Others sought employment as urban tax-collectors, toll-keepers, excise men, even as boatmen and ferrymen. If all else failed, Warsaw was a good place to beg.

Scarcely anywhere east of the Elbe, parts of Saxony and possibly Silesia excepted, was there a widely-flourishing urban sector. The effects of poor communications, weak internal markets and primitive technologies were aggravated by the ruling elites' contempt. In Prussia, the state milked the towns through excises, in Russia it crushed them with service obligations. In Poland, the *szlachta*, rather than the state, took the lead in squeezing the towns. Even the chief tax paid by the towns, the bung-and-shilling (*czopowe i szelężne*) 11 per cent excise on urban alcohol production, was, until 1766, earmarked for the needs of the local nobility. The *szlachta* could not, however, afford to condemn the towns to permanent stagnation. From the late 1730s, debates in the Sejm, inconclusive in themselves, betrayed growing alarm at the condition of the towns, even if not for unselfish motives. Kept in their place, flourishing towns would provide a market for the cereals of lesser noble producers who could not afford to ship them to Danzig or Riga or Königsberg. Wealthier towns could provide the taxes that the *szlachta* did not want to pay in order to finance an expanded army which would provide employment for a burgeoning noble population. Not that the debates went to the root of the problem, the insufferable straitjacket of the totality of noble privilege. At best, the parlous condition of Polish towns was ascribed to individual abuses: the exploitation of *starostowie*; illegal *jurydyki*; unscrupulous Jews.

Blinkered though such views were and grave as the *szlachta*'s

responsibility was for urban decay, it was also the *szlachta* who were to take the lead in trying to bring about revival. Not the magistrates of Warsaw, but Crown grand marshal Franciszek Bieliński set up a paving commission (*komisja brukowa*) in 1743 to maintain the capital's streets. Not the municipal authorities, but the *szlachta*-directed and *szlachta*-staffed improvement commissions were to restore order to urban finances in Stanisław August's reign. The repeal in 1775 of the old prohibitions on *szlachta* trade in towns was merely a recognition of their existing involvement in urban occupations. The legislation of 1791 was to complete the process by throwing open *szlachectwo* to wealthy and enterprising *mieszczanie* and all offices and occupations in the towns to the nobility, whose new leadership the towns meekly accepted. The year 1791 was to mark, in a sense, the final triumph of the nobility over the towns. But, because in their own interests the nobility were to destroy the restrictions which they had once imposed, the legislation of 1791 was also to provide the preconditions of a genuine urban revival and of a merging of the unequal forces of *szlachectwo* and *mieszczaństwo*.