



The Sociopolitical Foundations of Hasidism in Galicia in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

The Suppression of Galician Jewry

The period between 1815 and 1848, when the struggle between Haskalah and Hasidism in Galicia reached its most heated phase, was the most difficult in the history of the Jews in this province of the Austrian monarchy. The policy of brutal suppression of Galician Jewry, initiated in the era of so-called enlightened absolutism, was carried out in a more overt and shameless fashion by the Austrian government under the powerful Metternich. Not only did all previous restrictions of Jewish rights remain in effect but also new and highly oppressive edicts were issued.

As early as 1784–85, during the reign of Emperor Joseph II, Jews in the villages were forbidden to engage in trade, operate taverns or lease mills, and collect tolls; and the Edict of Toleration of 1789 banished Jews from the villages unless they were engaged in handicrafts or agriculture. Although this harsh edict was difficult to enforce, it did make life miserable for the village Jews, who lived in constant fear of being caught by the police. A Jew who was apprehended for selling liquor or for not having a special permit to reside in the village would, under this law, be returned under guard to his place of birth.¹ Jews were not allowed to reside in such towns as

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Żywiec, Kęty, Biała, Wadowice, Andrychów, Ciężkowice, Zakliczyn, Pilzno, Jasło, Bochnia, Wieliczka, and Mikołajów. Modern ghettos were introduced in the larger cities such as Lemberg (Lwów), Nowy Sącz, Tarnów, and Sambor, and even in the smaller ones, like Gródek Jagielloński and Jaryczów. Only individuals with an academic education or the vast fortune of thirty thousand gulden were permitted to settle outside these Jewish quarters. A Jew needed a special passport to travel from one city to another. Jews who came to Galicia had to pay the high poll tax which formerly they had paid in medieval Germany. Even for Jews involved in handicrafts there were difficulties because the Christian guilds did not admit Jews as members. Jews were forbidden to purchase either property in the cities or agricultural land from Christians, except for several hundred Jewish colonists whose number decreased from year to year due to harassment by Austrian officials.

The heaviest burden on the impoverished Jewish population in Galicia were the taxes specific to Jews which dated back to the time of Empress Maria Theresa and Emperor Joseph II. These were increased many times and new ones were frequently levied. For example, the special tax on *shehita* (ritually slaughtered meat), introduced in 1784, was so greatly increased in 1789, 1810, and 1816 that it came to three times the original levy and resulted in an increase in the price of kosher meat to twice that of nonkosher meat. Michael Stöger, a Christian scholar writing at that time, noted that "beef was either never or very seldom eaten by the poorer classes." The ignominious exploitation of the Jewish population by the pious Catholic Austrian monarchy was thus described by the well-known Viennese writer and Jewish communal leader Joseph von Wertheimer in his book, *Die Juden in Oesterreich* (On the condition of the Jews in Austria), which, due to censorship, was published in Leipzig:

Now this is not Shylock who, according to Shakespeare's slander, wanted to deprive a Christian of a pound of flesh but these are hundreds of thousands of Jews who are being deprived of substantial pounds of flesh on the ground of decrees of a Christian state.²

Still more invidious was the introduction in 1797 of the candle tax, which was trebled in the course of two decades. Every married Jewish woman was required to pay the candle tax of ten kreutzers on two candles to the tax lessee before the Sabbath began, whether or not she had any money to buy candles! The homes of those who could not pay promptly were raided by the tax collector on Friday night, and he was empowered to confiscate the household goods, including even the bedding. According to the reliable testimony of Wertheimer, one

would often meet impoverished people on the street on Fridays begging for a few kreutzers in order to pay the candle tax.

In addition to these two imposts, the Galician Jews were burdened with a special marriage tax, a heavy residence tax, and an annual tax on *battei keneset* (houses of worship) and *minyanim* (private religious assemblies). Jews suspected of avoiding payment of any of these taxes, especially the candle tax, were required to take an oath of purgation every year, sometimes twice a year, wearing a *talit* (prayer shawl) and *kittel* (white ritual robe), in the presence of the rabbi and the district commissioner. The Austrian government also assumed the role of guardian of Jewish piety in order to increase its financial exploitation of the Jews. Thus, the eating of nonkosher meat was punishable by fine or imprisonment, and any Jewish woman who did not light Sabbath candles was subject to arrest, forced labor, and even whipping.

The institution of the *kehillah*, the autonomous administration of the Jewish community, was deeply demoralized by its being in effect handed over arbitrarily to the lessees of the candle tax. The *kehillah* became a private domain of the Jewish plutocracy. In the smaller Jewish communities, only those who regularly paid the tax on three to four candles a week were enfranchised and in the larger communities the tax was on seven candles a week. And, to be a candidate for *parnas* (trustee of the *kehillah*) or for rabbi, one had to furnish certification of regularly paid taxes on four to seven candles in the smaller communities and on eight to ten candles in the larger communities. Moreover, the candle tax lessee often issued false tax receipts for those men, including himself, whom he wanted appointed trustees. Thus, for example, in Lemberg in 1817, the candle tax lessees held four out of the five trusteeships in the *kehillah*.

In an 1818 report of the imperial chancellery, the government cynically acknowledged its financial exploitation of the Jewish masses: "The higher taxation [of the Jewish population] was maintained because a reduction of this taxation would be possible only if [the tax burden] were transferred to the rest of the population and this would create an unfavorable impression."³

Parallel with this economic exploitation of Galician Jews was the Austrian government's concerted attempt to germanize its Jews by attempting to eradicate their national distinctiveness, by, among other measures, destroying the Yiddish language. Having failed to germanize the Polish and Ukrainian population, this policy was rigorously applied to the Jews, first out of sheer frustration and malice, and second in the hopes that the Jews, scattered as they were throughout the land, would serve as disseminators of the German

language among the Gentiles. The closing of the German-Jewish schools is an example of an even stronger attempt to germanize the Galician Jews by legislative means. In 1806, the year the German-Jewish schools were closed, a court decree was issued requiring all officials of the larger Jewish communities to have a command of German. In 1810 the scope of this decree was broadened to require that every Jewish voter in *kehillah* elections prove his literacy in German. In 1814 an edict was issued declaring Hebrew and Yiddish documents inadmissible as evidence in the courts and invalid in government bureaus. The decree that every Jewish couple, prior to their marriage, be examined in German on the *Bnei Zion* catechism (published by the notorious school inspector Herz Homberg in 1812), was especially oppressive. The extent of the government's intention to germanize Galician Jewry is indicated in the imperial decree of January 22, 1820, which stated that, after a specified time, all synagogue services must be conducted in German or at least in the official local language.

Thus, the Jewish population of Galicia was under the double yoke of extreme poverty and governmental exploitation. According to official estimates, at least one-third of the Jewish population consisted of *luftmentshn* (persons without a definite occupation), who subsisted on odd jobs or who had no trade and often no means of subsistence at all.⁴ However, even those directly engaged in trade, approximately one-third, were primarily petty tradesmen and shopkeepers.⁵ About one-fifth were engaged in crafts and small industry, of which one-half were employed in the garment industry as tailors, furriers, hatters, and shoemakers; the others were for the most part butchers, bakers, weavers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, and watchmakers.⁶ The mass of Galician Jewry lived in small towns, which at that time were still mostly the private property of the Polish nobility, as were several larger cities such as Tarnopol and Brody. Approximately one-fifth of the Jewish population lived in villages as innkeepers, tradesmen, and brokers,⁷ despite all the legal restrictions, and were therefore subject to the whims of the Polish landowners and the malevolence of Austrian officials.

The extraordinary impoverishment of the Jewish population in Galicia is clearly illustrated by the fact that the government was initially forced to exempt 4,000 Jewish families from the candle tax and to reduce the tax by half for 11,000 families.⁸ Since the entire Jewish population consisted of about 45,000 families (about 225,000 to 250,000 people),⁹ it appears that one-third of the Jews were in such an extreme state of poverty that even the ruthless, reactionary administration had to make allowances.

The grave economic and political situation also accounts for the fact that the number of Jews in Galicia increased very little during the first half of the nineteenth century, while the gentile population approximately doubled during the same period. In 1773 the gentile population of Galicia numbered just above 2 million. Galician Jewry numbered 224,981 in 1773, and about 246,000 in 1827. Since the natural rate of increase of the Jews was certainly no less than that of the Gentiles, owing to the tradition of early marriages, it is probable that many more Galician Jews than Gentiles migrated to the neighboring provinces of Poland, the Ukraine, and Hungary.¹⁰

Thus, to seek solace from their grievous needs and sufferings and to express their yearning for redemption, the enslaved Jewish multitude in the small towns and villages of Galicia turned to the Hasidic movement. The nature of Hasidism in Galicia in this era of reaction (1815–48) is reflected in the Hasidic literature of the time, in official government documents, and in some of the utterances of the enemies of Hasidism, the Maskilim.

Notes

Chapter I

1. S. A., Lemberg, *Acta Gubernialia Publ. Polit.* i/j 11. no. 8201.
2. J. Wertheimer, *Die Juden in Oesterreich* (Leipzig, 1842) 1:300–310.
3. A. F. Pribram, *Urkunden und Akten zur Geschichte der Juden in Wien* (Vienna, 1918), 2:279–306.
4. I. Schiper, “Die galizische Judenschaft in den Jahren 1772–1848 in wirtschaftsstatistischer Beleuchtung,” in *Judische Monatshefte* 9–10 (1918): 23; cf. F. Friedmann, *Die galizischen Juden im Kampfe um ihre Gleichberechtigung* (Frankfurt, 1929), p. 9.

5. M. Stöger, *Darstellung der gesetzlichen Verfassung der galizischen Judenschaft*, 1:263–66. According to Stöger, only 1,172 Jews had their own commercial firms in 1826.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 202–8.

7. Friedmann, *Die galizischen Juden*, p. 89.

8. Wertheimer, *Juden in Oesterreich*, p. 304.

9. Schiper, “Die galizische Judenschaft,” p. 23.

10. Schiper arrived at this conclusion on the basis of the figures cited (*ibid.*, p. 229); cf. Stöger, *Darstellung der gesetzlichen*, p. 15.

11. Piller, *Galizische Provinzialgesetzsammlung*, 1823, no. 42077.

12. *Chassiden* 18g, 1827; cf. document 16.

13. *Ibid.*, 4553/838; cf. appendix: document 9c.

14. Most of the Hasidim described in Perl’s satire *Megalleh Temirin* (Lemberg, 1879) are tavernkeepers, whereas the wealthy merchant appears as an exemplar of the worthy Maskil.

15. Solomon Judah Rapoport, “Ner Mizvah,” in *Nahalat Yehudah* (Cracow, 1868), p. 15.

16. This letter was published by Philip Friedman in his article “Di ershte Kamfn tsvishn haskole un khsidizm,” in *Fun Noentn Over* 4 (1938): 265.

17. Moses of Sambor, *Tefilah le-Moshe* (Lemberg, 1858), Torah portion *Lekh lekha*, p. 9a.

18. *Kerem Hemed* 2 (1836): 35.

19. Perl, *Megalleh Temirin*, p. 75a, letter 101.

20. Joseph Perl, *Bohen Zaddik* (Prague, 1838), p. 53.

21. Published by Letteris in *Mikhtavim* (1827), letter 5; *Zikkaron ba-Sefer* (Vienna, 1868), pp. 65 ff.; *Kerem Hemed* 1 (1833): 90 ff. (letter is signed “Peli”); *Moreh Nevukhei ha-Zeman* (Lemberg, 1863), p. 24, and in Rawidowicz, ed., *Kitvei Rabbi Nahman Krokhmal*, p. 417.

22. Perl revealed this geographical map in *Megalleh Temirin*, p. 22a, letter 16 (“Among residents of Poland, Wallachia, Moldavia and part of Hungary almost all are our people”).

23. Ephraim Fischl Fischelsohn, *Teyator fun Khsidim*, in *Historishe Shriftn fun YIVO* 1 (1929): 649–93.

24. Isaac Ber Levinsohn, *Emek Refa'im* (1867), pp. 3, 4, 9.

25. Isaac Ber Levinsohn, *Divrei Zaddikim* (1867), pp. 28, 31.

26. *Be'er Yizhak*, p. 127. A play on words in the Hebrew original: “bazal kenafei ha-hasidah.”

27. Naphtali of Ropczyce, when once advised that his *gematria* did not tally, replied that basically the zaddikim were worthy of hearing their teachings from heaven and the *gematriot* are no more than a hint and are subsequently sought out in the Torah; if the *gematria* did not tally, he explained, one only had to use another system of computation, such as comprehension or minor value; see his *Ohel Naftali* (Warsaw, 1911), p. 138.

28. See, for example, Menahem Mendel of Kosów, *Ahavat Shalom* (Czernowitz, 1883); the works of Hersh of Żydaczów; Simon of Dobromil, *Nahalat Shim'on*; Naphtali of Ropczyce, *Ayalah Sheluhah*; Abraham David of Buczacz, *Birkat David*. These works all appeared after 1848 because of the rigid Austrian censorship of Hasidic-kabbalistic books.

29. Hersh of Żydaczów, *Sur me-Ra va-Aseh Tov* (Munkacs, 1901), p. 71.

30. Moses of Sambor, *Tefilah le-Moshe, va-Yeze*, p. 18b.

31. Menahem Mendel of Kosów, *Ahavat Shalom*, p. 15b.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 88b; see also Simon of Dobromil, *Nahalat Shim'on*, on the portion *Korah*.

