

## Introduction

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THE POPULATION OF POLAND can be divided into the following six classes or estates : *high nobility, lower nobility, half nobility, burghers, peasants, and Jews.*<sup>1</sup>

The high nobility is made up of large landowners and the administrators who hold the high government office. The lower nobility have the right to own land and to occupy any government office, but their extreme poverty keeps them from acting on those rights. The half nobleman is permitted neither to own land independently nor to hold a high government office—this is what distinguishes him from the regular nobility. The half nobleman does occasionally possess an estate, but even so he remains, to some degree, a tenant of the high nobleman in whose territory his estate lies: The half nobleman [2] must pay the high nobleman a yearly tribute for his land.

It is actually the burghers who are the most miserable of all. Of course, the burgher is no serf. He has various privileges, and burghers can even enjoy juridical autonomy. But because the burgher has no profitable land, for the most part, and because he tends not to devote himself seriously to any profession, he lives in the most pitiful state of impoverishment.

The classes of most use to the country are the last two, namely, the peasants and the Jews. The peasants work at plowing fields, herding cattle, beekeeping, etc.—in short, tending to whatever the land produces. Members of the latter class are merchants, bakers, brewers, professionals, craftsmen; they sell beer, spirits, mead, and other such things. They are also the only ones who lease land in the villages and towns, except for on the monastery estates, where Their Reverences believe it is a sin to help a Jew make a living, and thus they let their estates out to peasants, even though they pay a price for doing so. Because the peasants lack the right skills to manage the estates well, the estates fall apart, [3] something Their Reverences opt to endure with Christian patience.

At the end of the last century, estates declined in value so much due to the landowners' ignorance, their oppressive treatment of their tenants, and a widespread absence of economic planning, that land which would yield a thousand Polish guilders today might have been leased to a Jew for ten guilders. Because of his even greater backwardness and indolence,

<sup>1</sup> This chapter was composed during what turned out to be the last years of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which dissolved in stages and had entirely ceased to exist by 1795.

the Jew, for his part, wouldn't even have been able to make a living from the land. It was a single development that turned this situation around. Using the name *Dersawzes*, or general leaseholder, two brothers from Galicia, where Jews are much shrewder than they are in Lithuania, managed to lease—and to rent out to others—all of Prince Radziwil's estates. By bringing about an extraordinarily high level of productivity, the brothers not only improved the estates' economic condition, but they also made themselves rich.<sup>2</sup>

Unfazed by the uproar they caused among their fellow Jews, the brothers raised rents and were as strict as can be in collecting money from their subleaseholders. In addition, they kept [4] a close eye on the lands under their control. Whenever they found a leaseholder who was not managing his estate diligently and industriously—not serving himself and the landowner well but instead idling away whole days atop a warm stove, drunk on spirits—they would summon that person and rid him of his lethargy with a whip. This practice earned the landlords the name of “Tyrants” among their people.

Yet they had a very positive effect. The leaseholder who had always wound up in chains, as a result of not having his ten guilders of lease money on time, now had so much incentive to work hard that he could not only feed his family from the land he leased, he could also pay much more than just ten guilders: four to five hundred guilders, even a thousand.

The Jews can be divided into three categories: uneducated working people, professional scholars, and those who devote themselves [5] to scholarship without concerning themselves with earning a living, relying instead on the first class of people to support them. Head rabbis, judges, school directors, and such types belong to the second category. The third one is made up of scholars whose superior talent and knowledge the uneducated admire so much that they take the scholars into their homes, give them their daughters to marry, and, for years and at their own great expense, provide for both the scholars and the scholars' wives and children. Later on, however, it falls to the wives to support both these sacred sloths and their offspring, who tend to be quite numerous. The wives, understandably, take great pride in this.

Poland may be the only country where you will find religious freedom and religious hatred coexisting in equal measure. Jews there are completely free to practice their religion and enjoy all other civic freedoms. They even have the right to administer their own laws. On the other hand, religious hatred runs so deep that the very name “Jew” elicits disgust. The roots of

<sup>2</sup> These brothers were Shmuel and Gedaliah Ickowicz. See *Gershon D. Hundert, Jews in Poland-Lithuania: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 43–44.

this disgust reach back to barbaric times, and [6] have continued to have practical effects down to my own days in Poland, just thirteen years ago.

This apparent contradiction is resolved when we realize that, first, the Jews' religious and civic freedom in Poland does not stem from *respect for the basic rights of all mankind*; second, religious hatred and persecution are not the results of a conscious policy of weeding out whatever might be detrimental to the nation's moral and material wellbeing. Rather, both things—the Jews' freedom and the animus toward them—are due to the political ignorance and backwardness prevailing in the country. For all the Jews' faults, hardly anyone else in Poland is at all industrious, so the Polish nation had to grant Jews every possible freedom as a matter of practical necessity. At the same time, Poland's moral ignorance and backwardness inevitably lead to religious hatred and persecution. [7]