

Jewish Life in Pre-World War II Poland

For centuries Jews from all over the world sought refuge in Poland, located in eastern Europe between Germany and the former Soviet Union. The first large migration of Jews began during the Crusades, in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Encouraged by the religious tolerance they found, Jewish families settled, established communities, and eventually became the cornerstone of the Polish economy.

The twelfth through twentieth centuries were punctuated by periods of anti-Semitism fueled by xenophobia and envy of the Jews' perceived control of the economy. Still, compared with much of Europe, Poland remained relatively tolerant. According to the 1931 census, more than three million Jews lived in Poland—Europe's largest Jewish population. Newspapers were printed in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish. Jewish schools—both religious and secular—promoted scholarship and intellectual debate that influenced the Jewish community worldwide.

Jewish life and culture especially thrived in Warsaw, the country's capital city. A beautiful metropolis bisected by the Vistula River, Warsaw housed the world's second-largest Jewish community after New York City. Before World War II began, Jews accounted for nearly thirty percent of the city's population. The largest and most beautiful synagogue in Warsaw was known as the "Great Synagogue" in Tlomackie Square. It held more than two thousand people and had meeting rooms, a library, an archive, and a *heder* (school).

Though some Jews maintained their own religious and cultural traditions, other families were highly assimilated. They identified themselves first as Polish citizens and only secondly by religion. They conducted their lives just as any other Polish citizen, and a person passing on the street would not have known they were Jewish.

Poland's central location and large Jewish population made it a target of the Nazi regime. German troops invaded Poland in September 1939. The Nazis immediately placed heavy restrictions on Jews. Jewish businesses were required to display the Star of David as a symbol of Jewish identity. Jews could not have bank accounts, hold large amounts of money, or work in the textile or leather trades. By November 1939, the Nazis required all Jews to wear a blue armband with the Star of David. The Nazi regime closed Jewish schools, confiscated Jewish property, and forced Jewish citizens into labor camps. Jews could not own radios, attend movies, enter a post office, or mail letters overseas. In October 1940, the Nazis decreed that all Jews in Warsaw must move to a sealed-off area that came to be known as the "Warsaw Ghetto."