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The Shtetl in Context: The Spatial and Social Organization of Jewish Communities from the Small Towns of 18th Century Poland

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Patterns of Settlement

The town plans that will be analyzed were part of a greater, pre-nineteenth century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, including most of today's Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and western Ukraine. The overall organization and character of the Polish, eighteenth century, small Jewish town was primarily developed during the fourteenth-through-eighteenth century Polish colonization of its eastern provinces in what is now Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. Aristocratic magnates who sponsored and owned these private towns typically initiated these settlements. A critical component in the success of this colonization system in Eastern Europe was the importation of Western European town dwellers, including Germans, Armenians, Scots and Jews, who possessed commercial and artisans skills critical to the economic success of these small towns. It was within this framework of Western European colonization that, between 1350 and 1550, Ashkenazi Jews, often fleeing persecution and expulsion, were welcomed by the Polish ruling classes to settle their newly acquired eastern lands. Although the ruling Polish aristocracy did not provide full liberties and citizenship to their Jewish residents, they generally maintained an open economic and social milieu in which Jews were able to maximize their artisan and commercial skills, and in time, were able to develop a considerable degree of social and religious autonomy and meaningful self-government on both local and national scales.

The Spatial and Social Order of the Small Jewish Town

In the typical spatial pattern of eighteenth century small town settlement, such as in the town of Gwoździec, western Ukraine, separate ethnic and religious communities, typically Poles, local Ukrainians, Germans, and Jews would cluster themselves into loosely organized districts surrounding a town's major market square (fig. 1). In the most common pattern of settlement occurring throughout Eastern Europe, the Jewish community would be located in a small square or district adjacent to the town's major

market square or rynek. (fig. 2) In the second most common pattern of settlement, the Jewish community would be located adjacent to the town's outer defensive wall or boundary (fig. 3 , fig. 4, fig. 5). In another pattern of settlement, the Jewish community would be located and adjacent to a river or stream (fig. 6). The need for water for the mikveh, a ritual bath (for men and women), is frequently cited as one of the factors that motivated this selection that also coincided with the availability of low-lying, left-over, non-agricultural lands.

The organization of land within the Jewish district was frequently tightly congested often because of restrictions to Jewish land ownership and settlement. Site and building configuration in these crowded districts generally followed an incremental, non-Euclidean spatial order that often contrasted with the overall layout of the town frequently following geometric, Magdeburgian, or Enlightenment inspired town-planning models. These Polish, formal, town planning arrangements produced an elite versus vernacular distinction in which the highly pronounced irregularity of the tightly grouped Jewish districts contrasted with the geometric regularity and more unified visual order of the principal buildings of the small towns (fig. 7). This general planning/aesthetic distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish/ Christian environments reinforced a standard polemic where Polish elites criticized the Jewish community for seeming lack of care for visual (i.e. western, Baroque) spatial order. The spatial relationship between the various ethnic and religious groups was conceptually one of separation but the reality of land ownership and development practices resulted in considerable overlapping between groups, including the Jewish community (see fig. 8). These overlapping of boundaries are perhaps surprising to those familiar with the strict segregation of Jewish communities in the walled ghettos of medieval Europe, but there were no walled ghettos in the small-towns of Eastern Europe. While the medieval precedents for these towns featured dense urban streets behind fortified walls, the later Polish and Eastern- European towns on the Ukrainian frontiers were more spread out, less fortified, and more socially integrated.

Magnate Support of the Jewish Community

The small-town Jewish communities of eastern Poland lived in a world defined by several highly differentiated social classes, or, "estates"(fig. 9). These estates included: the nobility or ruling magnates, the clergy of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, the agricultural peasants or serfs who inhabited the surrounding countryside, and the burghers or town's people, including the Jewish community. For eighteenth century Jews of the small towns, the most powerful of these estates were the magnates who exercised an absolute rule over these small private towns. Generally, these magnates actively supported the Jewish residences of their private towns. Over long periods, they had come to depend on the entrepreneurial and artisan skills of their Jewish subjects that sustained the small town economies and the provided critical tax revenue that also sustained their manorial estates. Over time, many significant positions under the

magnate's control were held by Jews, including such important functions as tavern keeping, marketing, milling, forestry, tax collection, and general estate management.

Jewish Community District

Typically, a small town's Jewish district was centered about a courtyard or a side street, often called the "Jewish street." In the town of Gwoździec, the synagogue and Jewish District were located adjacent to the major town square (see fig. 10). At Gwoździec, the Rabbi's residence was located behind the synagogue near the community's mikves, the ritual bath houses on the eastern edge of the Jewish courtyard, close to a small stream. At Gwoździec other surrounding buildings of the Jewish community included schools, perhaps a yeshiva (Talmudic academy), stores catering to the Jewish community, and perhaps a poorhouse, or later, a hospital. The homes of the community's major religious and secular leaders were also frequently located on or near the Jewish courtyard. These houses may have included the rabbi, cantor, and shamash (beadle or synagogue caretaker) (synagogue). In a typical sequence of historic development, religious and community functions that had once been located within or next door to the synagogue in the earlier, late-medieval period, were moved to separate buildings at greater distances from the synagogue during later periods. By the late-nineteenth century, the earlier centralized pattern of life and worship focusing on the town's single synagogue was altered by several factors including the broad effects of modern social and reform movements, the enlargement and dispersal of the Jewish community functions in expanding communities, and by the decentralized traditions of Hasidic worship.

The Synagogue and Jewish District

At the spatial and spiritual center of the eighteenth century small-town Jewish community stood the synagogue (fig.11) The prayer hall of the Gwoździec Synagogue, similar to most synagogues, was surrounded by multiple sheds and additions containing various support functions for the synagogue and the Jewish community. At Gwoździec, a low shed containing the women's section stood along the northern wall of the prayer hall. It was connected to the prayer hall by a narrow viewing slit between horizontal logs. On the western, entrance wall stood a series of three additions, including a multi-purpose meeting room, a central entrance vestibule with an enclosed porch. At the southwest corner, a large masonry addition served in different periods as a school, a meeting room for religious study (beit midrash), and a kahal council meeting room (fig.12).

Conclusion

The geographic/contextual status of eighteenth century Jewish communities in the small towns or shtetls of eastern Poland can be summarized by the striking contrasts, between: 1) An extensive commercial and artisan participation in the local economy coexisting alongside internal social and religious traditions, 2) A dense, non-geometric spatial layout of the Jewish districts based on patterns of incremental growth and

restrictions placed upon the Jewish community which frequently contrasted sharply with the more open, regular, geometric spatial organization of Eastern European town planning, 3) Jewish religious and social traditions influencing many aspects of daily life which contrasted with the various Christian traditions of living and worship, and, 4) Intensely cosmopolitan patterns of commerce, education, and communications which contrasted with the small town, regional economies and social organization of the surrounding Christian cultures. These factors contributed to the simultaneous integration and separation of the Jewish community with other communities within their small towns.

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