

Maria Bogucka

JEWISH MERCHANTS IN GDAŃSK IN THE 16TH - 17TH
CENTURIES : A POLICY OF TOLERATION OR
DISCRIMINATION ?

Polish lands attracted Jewish settlers already in the Middle Ages. The tolerant policy of the Polish rulers resulted in several privileges and charters of rights, granted to the Jews who settled in Poland.¹ The first written grant of rights to be issued in Poland for the Jews, was the privilege conferred to the Jews of Great Poland by Boleslaus the Pious, duke of Kalisz, on 16 August, 1264. In the 16th - 17th centuries the Jewish immigration was growing rapidly in number. The Jews were attracted to Poland because of the tolerant attitude of the Polish rulers, magnates and gentry, who were interested in the increasing profits originating from trade and handicrafts. The attitude of the burghers towards the Jewish immigrants was, however, less favourable ; the settlement movement was strongly opposed by many towns, inhabitants of which objected to the competition of Jewish traders, bankers and craftsmen.

The situation of Gdańsk was extremely complicated. Gdańsk, the biggest and most powerful city in the whole Polish Commonwealth, became in the 16th - 17th centuries the most important centre of the economic life of the country. To the harbour of this city hundreds of tradesmen came swarming every year—among them many Jewish merchants. In Gdańsk, however, since the Middle Ages, existed the tradition *de non tolerandis Judeis* ; Jews had had no access to the Teutonic Knight's state. Was the policy

¹ See J. Goldberg, *Jewish Privileges in the Polish Commonwealth*, Jerusalem 1985, *passim*.

of total discrimination continued in the following centuries and to what extent?

Only a few studies are dealing with the Jewish trade in the city of Gdańsk. Some mentions are to be found in the works of the German scholar Paul Simson as well as of the Polish scholar Jan M. Małecki. The works on the history of the Jews in Gdańsk published by S. Echt and A. Stein are rather laconic on this subject.² New researches in the archives are therefore urgently needed.

The quick development of the Jewish trade in Gdańsk can be traced since the middle of the 15th century, when the town became again a part of the Polish state. The *Privilegium Casimirianum* issued in 1454 and confirmed in 1457 forbade all foreigners to trade in the city without a special permission of the Town's Council, but this rule was to be broken very soon. Already in 1476 the Polish King Casimir Jagiellon granted two Jewish merchants a safe conduct to trade in Royal Prussia.¹ In the 16th century the struggle for free access of the Jewish merchants to this region became acute. In 1530 the Prussian Diet forbade Jews to travel in Royal Prussia; all transactions with them were interdicted to the inhabitants of Gdańsk by the municipal authorities. Such strict discrimination, however, could not last very long. In 1551 the Prussian Diet allowed Jewish merchants to attend Prussian fairs; the permission was later confirmed by the King Sigismundus Augustus in 1552.⁴

In the second half of the 16th century many Jews began to settle in the proximity of Gdańsk, especially in some places owned by the bishop of Kujavia and the abbot of Pelplin; such places as e.g. Old Scotland had developed as important trading centres. The inhabitants of Gdańsk regarded those extensive

² P. Simson, *Geschichte der Stadt Danzig*, Bd. II, Danzig 1918, pp. 161, 436-439, 516, 520; J. M. Małecki, *Związki handlowe miast polskich z Gdańskiem w XVI i pierwszej połowie XVII w.*, [Commercial Links of Polish Towns with Gdańsk in the 16th Century and the First Half of the 17th Century], Wrocław 1968, pp. 53-54, 170; A. Stein, *Die Geschichte der Juden in Danzig*, Danzig 1933; S. Echt, *Die Geschichte der Juden in Danzig*, Leer/Ostfriesland 1972.

¹ S. Echt, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁴ P. Simson, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-162.

activities as a very troublesome competition with own business. They played nevertheless every year a more important role in the big commerce. With it rose also the role of the Jewish tradesmen.

In Gdańsk too, the policy of an absolute discrimination of the Jewish merchants came soon to an end. The town's Council was more and more interested in the increasing profits originating from the Jewish trade. At the end of the 16th century, in spite of the fact that the formal interdiction of staying in the city for all Jews was repeated in 1594, many Jewish merchants settled in the suburb of Gdańsk, called Long Garden ; the city's authorities seemed not to notice them, and even silently allowed to perform Jewish religious ceremonies. In the beginning of the 17th century there were already 400 - 500 Jews settled in Gdańsk, forming with their families a very substantial community. The fact was commented in the neighbouring city of Toruń, the authorities of which tried in 1605 to interfere in this matter, but the Council of Gdańsk supported its previous attitude, being against any discrimination of the Jews. The patriciate of Gdańsk believed that to banish Jews from the city would mean a great economic loss for its trade.⁵

Since the end of the 16th century the role of Jewish merchants in the commerce with the hinterland of Gdańsk was enormous. The Jews imported to Gdańsk many items such as furs and hides, ashes and other forest products, grains, wool, feathers, wax, saltpeter, lead, linen;⁶ they were buying in Gdańsk cloth, silk, wine, fruits, spices, herrings and other fish.⁷ They were acting mostly as factors and servants of Polish magnates and rich gentry ; this was linked with a special protection, giving them a most favoured position. Besides those Polish Jews there were coming to Gdańsk the Jewish merchants from foreign countries, mainly from the Netherlands (Antwerp, Amsterdam) ; they were called "Portuguese Jews," because their place of origin was Portugal, and they were dealing with Iberian goods. They were big

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 436 - 37.

⁶ See Archives of Gdańsk, later AG, 300,5/24 p. 23b, 388a ; 47 p. 142 ; 60 p. 602b - 604 ; 73 p. 125 - 126, 320 - 321, 345, 370 ; 78 p. 241b, 247b ; 81 p. 319, 410, 904 - 906 ; 87 p. 80 - 81a, 148a - 148b ; 90 p. 110b.

⁷ AG 300,5/47 p. 142a ; 73 p. 318b - 319b ; 81 p. 904 - 905 ; 87 p. 80 - 81a.

importers, shipping to Gdańsk spices and wines, articles distributed later all over the whole Polish territories. Portuguese Jews had had no powerful patrons, but they were welcomed in Gdańsk as suppliers of luxury goods, for which there was a big demand on the town's market.⁸

The constant development of the Jewish trade led to strong anti-Jewish feelings among the middle class of the urban society of Gdańsk. This middle class was in the 17th century the most active group in the economic life of the city, as the patriciate began to loose his interest in trade and urban activities. The members of the city's Council and their families were just adopting the new style of life as landlords, scholars and sophisticated patrons of arts. In 1616 the representatives of the common burghers, the so-called Third Order (*Centumviri*) claimed the ban on the Jews as dangerous competitors for the merchants of Gdańsk. The members of the Bench, being closer to the patriciate (a place in the Bench constituted the first step in the political career in the city), appeared to be more moderate; they claimed to restrict for Jews the stay in Gdańsk to one month only. The Council, however, objected to both projects. It proposed to limit the Jews' right to reside in Gdańsk only to the suburb called Long Garden. For their residence they were to pay substantial charges to the city; the burghers who were letting them their lodgings would also be obliged to pay large duties. The performance of religious ceremonies was to be strictly forbidden and any burgher, who would allow them in his home, should be deprived of his civic rights.⁹

The Third Order started, however, such a fierce action (feeling the support of the Prussian Diet, which in the autumn of 1616 decided again to close Royal Prussia to Jews), that the city's Council capitulated: on 18 November, 1616 an order for all Jews to leave Gdańsk within one month was issued. Their request to be allowed to stay until spring to finish their transactions was rejected. Only one exception was made: a Jewish merchant Eduardo de Pellice who just came to Gdańsk with the cargo of

⁸ P. Simson, *op. cit.*, p. 437.

⁹ S. E c h t, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

expensive Iberian goods and could not return home because of the winter break in the shipping on the Baltic, was allowed to stay in the city until April.¹⁰

The ban resulted in a legal action of four rich Jewish merchants against Gdańsk at the Royal Court. Isaac Joenbower from Cracow, Abraham Salomon from Poznań, Jeleń from Lublin and Wolf from Lvov claimed damages of 100 thousand guldens for the losses caused by the edict of the Council. This assess, although possibly overestimated, shows us the scale of Jewish activities in Gdańsk.¹¹

The Royal Court declared the edict illegal and ordered to restore to the Jews full rights in Gdańsk (22 4 1617). The powerful city did not accept this sentence. In the spring of 1617 some rich Jewish merchants met in the city of Lublin to discuss the case ; they decided to negotiate with the Council of Gdańsk. In July 1617 a petition was sent to Gdańsk asking for the right to come to the city 8 days before the big fair of St. Dominic (in August) and to stay 8 days after its closure. A second petition followed the first one soon, asking for general freedom of trade for Jews in Gdańsk.¹²

The middle class reacted to those petitions with towering rage, as the Jewish trade threatened its business interests. The dispute in the Third Order broke out with an exceptional vehemence. Besides economic arguments, religious and ethical ones were used. Members of the Third Order were screaming, that where Jews only appear, "*nur allerlei unglück, kindermordt und vergiessung christliches blutt verfare.*" Evidently an unfavourable stereotype of a Jew was well-spread among the town-dwellers. Before any conclusions were reached, the fair of St. Dominic was opened (4 August) and immediately after its closing all Jewish merchants were forced to leave the town (11 August). Some of them, however, stayed in Old Scotland, close enough to Gdańsk to carry on their business.¹³

In December 1617 the Council, pushed by the King and some Polish magnates who were supporting the Jews, opened a new discussion on the Jewish trade. But the Third Order refused even

¹⁰ P. Simson, *op. cit.*, p. 437 note 5.

¹¹ A. Stein, *op. cit.*, pp. 14 - 15.

¹² P. Simson, *op. cit.*, p. 438.

¹³ AG 300,10/21, discussion on 28 7 1617.

to debate on it ; its members postulated to ask the opinion of the other cities, such as Toruń and Elbląg, well-known as great enemies of Jews.¹⁴

But exactly at this time the general situation of the Jews in Royal Prussia had changed for the better. The royal pressure on the Prussian Diet resulted in the cancellation of the restrictions made in 1616. The authorities of Elbląg gave the Jewish merchants free access to this town. Only in Gdańsk and in Toruń the policy of discrimination persisted.¹⁵

In July 1618, shortly before the Dominican fair, it came to a new dispute. Some Jewish merchants sent a petition asking for the right to stay in the city 8 days before the fair and 8 days after its closure, explaining that during the fair they are not able to finish their business and to collect the money for their goods. The Bench was ready to compromise, allowing the Jews to come 5 days before the fair and to stay 5 days after its closure, not for trading, but in order to unload their goods and to carry away the unsold ones. The Third Order, however, obstinately refused any adjustments. The next year (1619) Jews were allowed to stay in Gdańsk 3 days before and 3 days after the fair ; the Town's Council simply did not ask the Third Order before granting this privilege.¹⁶

In the following year (1620) despite the vehement opposition of the Third Order, the Council extended this right to 4 days before and 4 days after the fair. In response the Third Order claimed to close the city to all Jews and even to forbid them to use the roads on the territories under the jurisdiction of Gdańsk.¹⁷

In March 1621 Jews from Poznań made another application to the city's Council, asking for extending their stay in the town on occasion of the fair of St. Dominic. In February 1622 the Council stated (in order to pacify the public opinion), that Jewish merchants were not to be allowed to sell their merchandise in the countryside belonging to Gdańsk, except the time of fairs. It underlined, however, simultaneously, that it would be impossible to banish

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, discussion on 22 12 1617.

¹⁵ P. S i m s o n, *op. cit.*, p. 438.

¹⁶ AG 300,10/21 pp. 107ab, 109a, 113a, 148a.

¹⁷ P. S i m s o n, *op. cit.*, p. 438 - 439.

Jews entirely from the neighbourhood of Gdańsk, and especially from Old Scotland, this place being the property of the bishop of Kujavia.¹⁸

In the thirties and forties of the 17th century, more and more Jews every year were granted personal safe-conducts allowing them to stay and to do their business in Gdańsk, mostly because they were factors and servants of the Polish magnates and the gentry.¹⁹ On 14 May 1630, e.g., the Third Order complained, that two Jewish merchants were trading in Gdańsk against the law. The Council answered, that they had letters of introduction issued by some Polish lords. They would conclude their business and then quickly leave the town. In May 1631 the Third Order complained again, pointing out, that the Council allowed some Jews to trade in Gdańsk. In October 1632 the Third Order asked "*ganz umstendigt*" not to give Jews free hand to carry their business in Gdańsk except during the fair. The request was repeated on January 17, 1633. In December 1633 the question was raised again. The Third Order declared in a very aggressive tone that constantly increasing number of Jewish merchants intrude into the city and everyone of them has some letters of introduction issued by a Polish lord, stating that he is his servant and factor. This was true : as a rule Jews were acting in Gdańsk on behalf or under the cover of Polish lords and were selling their grains, buying luxury goods for them, arranging credit, etc.²⁰

In 1640 the Prussian Diet, pushed by the towns' delegates, tried again to limit Jewish activities in Royal Prussia. The Third Order in Gdańsk belived it to be a good backing for its own action. In December 1640 its members asked once more to exclude Jews from the city, except for the time of the fair in August. On January 3, 1641 the Council issued a large statement on this matter. The Council reminded the middle class, that the Prussian Diet had to revoke its resolutions directed against the Jews, because of the big pressure exerted by the Polish gentry and some powerful persons from the Polish government. The Council sees

¹⁸ AG 300,10/21 p. 321 ; 22 p. 23ab.

¹⁹ AG 300,1/234.

²⁰ AG 300,10/24 pp. 63a, 67a, 90b, 298a, 319b, 391a.

no real possibility to exclude Jews from the city, the more so that they are living and carrying on their business freely in Old Scotland, in the vicinity of Gdańsk. They are also conducting their trade with Toruń and Elbląg. To banish them from Gdańsk's commerce could mean a serious economic harm for the inhabitants of the city ; moreover, the patrons of Jews, Polish magnates, could in revenge act to the detriment of Gdańsk in the Polish General Diet. The same day the Bench repeated its motion from May 27, 1639, which could resolve the problem to everybody's content. Except the fairs, free access to Gdańsk should be given to Jewish merchants delivering important goods ; they should sell them in Gdańsk wholesale and only to the citizens of the city, not to factors or to any foreign tradesmen. For such purpose Jewish merchant should be allowed to stay 4 - 5 days in the city. The brokerage and money-dealing should be forbidden to Jews. The Third Order persisted, however, in repeating its old opinion, that the Jews should not be allowed to come to Gdańsk except for fairs (March 3, 1641). The Council concluded the discussion on March 5, 1641, stating that the Jewish brokers and money-dealers would not be allowed to conduct their business in Gdańsk ; but Jewish merchants who bring goods to the city, who are servants of Polish lords, who are endowed with letters of introduction, have to be welcomed in Gdańsk ; it is to the advantage of the city itself.²¹ The patriciate of Gdańsk took also openly the side of those Jews, who were linked to the Polish gentry. The Third Order, representing Gdańsk's middle trading class, tried in vain to limit the competition of Jewish merchants. On December 18, 1642, the Third Order attacked again the Jews, both from Poland as well as from abroad (" Portuguese Jews ") accusing them of taking every day a bigger share of profits in the commerce of Gdańsk. The *Centumviri* unanimously voted to close the city to Jews.²²

In the next years the middle class concentrated on the struggle against the Portuguese Jews, feeling that it would be too difficult to fight the Polish Jews. In the beginning of February 1645 the question was raised again. The Council tried to reassure the Third

²¹ AG 300,10/26 pp. 127, 138, 141, 170, 174.

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 174, 284, 291.

Order affirming that actually was staying in the city only one Jewish tradesman from Portugal (or rather from the Netherlands), with some servants however. If the number of Jews would grow and in the case they would really penetrate the hinterland of Gdańsk, as they were accused to do, proper measures would be taken immediately. Perhaps the Portuguese Jews after all were really trading too far, because on September 7, 1646, the Council issued an official warning, forbidding them to travel into Poland. The impossibility to limit the trade conducted by Polish Jews was at the same time once more stressed. The Bench backed up the Council; after some weeks the Third Order also admitted, that Polish Jews should be treated better than the foreign ones. But in the next years (1648, 1649) the old demand to limit the Jewish trade to the fairs was many times repeated.²³

As we have seen, the impossibility to exclude Jews from the commerce of Gdańsk resulted from their close links to the gentry. Research in the books of Gdańsk's vice-mayor in the first half of the 17th century shows on the basis of more than 160 entries that ca 75% of the Jewish merchants were servants of Polish magnates and noblemen. In the years 1606/1607 a Jewish merchant Abraham Beer was selling grains in Gdańsk; he was a leaseholder of the starosta of Uszpol, Peter Gorajski. In 1633 a Jewish tradesman Samuel Chlebowicz came to Gdańsk to arrange the contracts for supplying grains and saltpeter on behalf of the cupbearer of Volhynia, Wawrzyniec Drewiński. Many entries from the forties of the 17th century concern the sale of grains by Jews on behalf of Polish noblemen: in 1641 active in Gdańsk was, e.g., a Jew from the city of Piła, Lewek, servant of a nobleman Michał Kurecki from Great Poland; another Jew, Jacob from the city of Brześć acted as a servant of a nobleman Jan Sadurski from Kujavia; in 1645 a Jew Pinkas Samalovis was selling grains on behalf of several Polish noblemen. Jewish merchants were not only selling products of Polish manors, they were also buying imported goods and industrial articles as well as arranging loans for their lords. In autumn 1612 two Jews from Lithuanian Brześć bought in Gdańsk some armaments (among others 100 helmets)

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 448, 553, 561, 564; 300,10/27 p. 9 - 10, 89b.

for a Polish lord, whose name was not mentioned. In September 1647 a Jew from Cracow, Josef Bensicki, pawned in Gdańsk jewels belonging to Łukasz Opaliński, a magnate from Great Poland.²⁴

An important role was played by the Jewish merchants in the trade with money and in the monetary speculation. Gdańsk was a major centre of such activities and supplied the whole country with precious metals as well as with bullion.²⁵ At the beginning of the 17th century several money trading companies operated in Gdańsk, buying good old coins and exporting them to the Low Countries as well as to Silesia and Turkey. At the head of one of those companies were two Jews: Jacob Salomon and Aron Vogel, as well as two citizens of Gdańsk: Christopher Kanter and Hans von Coldun. This partnership draws our attention to the fact of collaboration between the Jews and Gdańsk's burghers. The partnership with Jewish businessmen was very attractive for the citizens of Gdańsk: Jewish merchants and money-dealers had many connections in Poland as well as in foreign countries and could be used as perfect middlemen in business. The members of the middle class who with such vehemence demanded to close the city for Jews, were in the same time eager to join them in order to carry some profitable business. Such co-operation is the best proof, that the anti-Jewish actions of the Third Order resulted mostly from economic reasons, and not from religious or ethnic prejudices.²⁶

My observations on the geography of the Jewish trade with Gdańsk correspond with the data in J. Małecki's book on Gdańsk's trade: the most numerous group were the Jews from Great Poland, especially from the cities of Poznań and Kalisz. In the second place there were Jews from Red Ruthenia (saltpeter and ashtrade), then the Jews from Little Poland (Lublin, Cracow, Sandomierz, etc.) trading with grains, lead, forest products. Rather

²⁴ AG 300,5/24 p. 388a; 37 p. 125 - 126; 39 p. 66ab; 81 pp. 319, 351, 410; 86 p. 58; 89 p. 489b.

²⁵ See A. Attman, *The Bullion Flow between Europe and the East, 1000 - 1750*, Göteborg 1981, pp. 61 ff.

²⁶ See M. Bogucka, *The Monetary Crisis of the 17th Century and Its Social and Psychological Consequences in Poland*, "The Journal of European Economic History," vol. 4, 1975, No. 1, p. 143.

few were coming from Masovia and Lithuania. It is possible, however, that further research will change this picture.²⁷

To sum up: since the end of the 16th century Jewish merchants played an important role in the trade of Gdańsk. The policy of discrimination was claimed by the middle class in Gdańsk, as the development of the Jewish trade meant for it a strong competition. The upper stratas of urban society were rather for toleration, as they were no more directly interested in trade. They also feared to bring the anger of the King and of Polish magnates upon the city. Jews as factors and servants of the Polish lords enjoyed their high patronage. Gdańsk's attitude towards Jews was much more determined by social and economic factors than by the religious and ethnic feelings. But the cultural gap between the burghers and Jewish visitors existed, and the unfavourable stereotype of a Jew was used during discussions by the representatives of the middle class, even if only to support the economic arguments.

It was, however, impossible, to banish the Jewish trade from the city. The Council warned many times that attempts to discriminate Jews would harm the business and cause serious losses to Gdańsk. The failure of the endeavours to close Gdańsk to the Jewish merchants was essentially due to the fact, that they were acting on behalf of the Polish gentry. This fact resulted in the policy of toleration towards the Jews in spite of some attempts to avoid their economic competition by the way of administrative measures.

²⁷ AG 300,10/21 p. 316ab; 300,5/24 p. 23b; 32 p. 34b; 35 p. 12ab; 46 p. 604ab; 47 p. 127, 142a; 73 p. 318b - 319b, 320a, 345a, 370a; 78 p. 247b; 81 p. 410, 1013 - 1014, 1207 - 1208; 87 p. 80b - 81a, 148a - 149a; 89 p. 489b.