



ON THE HISTORY OF ŁĘCZYCA

by the Rabbi Yitzhak Yedidia FRENKEL, Tel Aviv
translated from the Yiddish by Leon Zamosc

Excerpts from the larger historical work "Łęczyca (970-1939)", which originally appeared in the "Memorial Book of Łęczyca", edited by the author and published in 1953 by the Association of Former Residents of Łęczyca in Israel, translated from Hebrew.

First chapter

Łęczyca in Ancient Times – Seat of Polish Kings – The Legend Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim, Author of "Klei Yakar" – The Plot of the Blood Trial – Jewish Life in the Sixteenth Century – The Maharal of Prague in Łęczyca – The Swedish War – The Council of the Four Lands – The years 1647-1649¹.

In the years 970--980 of the Christian era, when King Mieszko I established the Polish monarchy, Łęczyca was already mentioned as one of the first cities of the country. The ancient church in the village of Tum, where the first Catholics in Poland adopted their new faith, can be seen from hundreds of meters away. The thousand-year-old church stands to this day. According to Polish history books, King Bolesław the Brave convened national meetings in Łęczyca, and in 1181 "King Stanisław² was the first to convene the National Assembly in Łęczyca, although he ruled from the capital". Throughout history, Łęczyca has occupied a place, with Cracow and Gniezno, among the oldest cities in Poland. In Łęczyca there is an ancient fortress (*Zamek*), which served as a seat for the kings and under its foundations, there is a cave that stretches underground to the village of Tum. Many legends have been woven around the fortress and its cave,

whose pictures are distributed in colorful tourist cards. According to legend, the fortress was the palace of King Jan Leszczyński, whose legendary figure hovers over this ancient building. Near the fortress is a magnificent park with venerable trees that block the sunlight. Between the cypresses and pines slowly flows the famous river Bzura, shaded by trees on both sides. The ancient garden was called "Royal Park" in memory of that Polish king, who had planted it near his palace as a place for physical and spiritual relaxation, where he was transported to another world full of legend and poetry. These sites were lovely remnants of an era in which Łęczyca had occupied an important place in the country, during the heyday of the Polish empire.

But what interests us most is the history of the city's Jewish community, which is also steeped in legends. Ancient splendor shines over the geniuses, people and

The Rabbi and the community leaders of Łęczyca (1939): from left, Yeshayahu Kohen, Kuszniir, Shlomo Kohen, Rabbi Eliezer Auerbach, Yaakov Elchanan Herman, Michael Landau, Rogozinski.



¹ TN: the years of the Chmielnicki massacres.

² TN: in 1180, the 'king' was in fact High Duke Kazimierz II Sprawiedliwy ("Casimir II the Just").

princes of Łęczyca, who transformed it into a *voeym ir*³ in Israel that was famous beyond the borders of Poland and filled its people with pride of their Łęczyca origins. Among them was the great *Gaon* Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Łęczyca, author of "*Olelot Ephraim*"⁴ and "*Klei Yakar*", and presiding rabbi of the *Beit Din* of Prague.

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim, son of Aharon of Łęczyca, was born in 1545 and died in 4 Adar II in 1620⁵. In his youth he lived in the city of Jarosław and wrote his first book, "*Ir Giborim*"⁶, which is full of admonishment and morality. In the introduction to "*Olelot Ephraim*" he writes that all his references to the Torah and Talmud are based on memory, without the help of books. In 1581 he lived in Lviv and was one of the greatest preachers. He also gave his sermons in Lublin. In 1603, when he was appointed head of *yeshiva* and preacher in Prague, the *Maharal* Rabbi Yehuda ben Betzalel Loew was at the head of the city's *Beit Din*. After the *Maharal's* death in 1609, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim became the new presiding rabbi of Prague's *Beit Din*.

... Rabbi Yeshayahu Halevi Horowitz, also known as *Baal HaShelah*, was a member of Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim's *Beit Din* at the end of his life. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim's books "*Olelot Ephraim*" and "*Klei Yakar*" made him a world-famous scholar. He also authored the books "*Siftei Daat*,"⁷ "*Orach l'Chaim*"⁸ and "*Amudei Shash*"⁹. His students included: Rabbi Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller, author of "*Tosefet Yom-Tov*"; Rabbi Shabtai Sheftel HaLevi Horowitz, son¹⁰ of *Baal HaShelah*, author of the book "*Vavei Amudim*", head of *Beit Din* and *yeshiva* teacher in Fürth and rabbi in Frankfurt, Poznań and Vienna as well as the son of Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim, Rabbi Zvi Hirsh of Łęczyca (died on 19 Tammuz 5384 [6 July 1624] in Prague). R' Shlomo Ephraim was head of *yeshiva* and *Beit Din* in several communities and, for many years, was

rabbinical judge and preacher in Prague. The inscription on his *matzeva* reads "He was called the head of the preachers and he wished only good to his people." In the year 5376 [1616] he signed his *haskama* to the book "*Yesh Nochlin*" by Abraham ben Sheftel, father of *Baal HaShelah*, together with Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Eidels Halevi, the *maharsha*, Rabbi Yehoshua Falk-Kac, author of "*Sefer Me'irat Einaim*" (*sam"e*) and Rabbi Yoel Sirkis, author of "*Beit Chadash*" (*ba"ch*).

This is a short biography according to reliable sources, but there are many legends about Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim's birth and childhood, as in the book "*Sipurei HaKedoshim*"¹¹ published in 1837 in Leipzig (see also "*Sefer HaMaasiot*" by Mordechai Ben Yechezkel).

... Such is the image of one of the great Łęczyca personalities, shrouded in miracles and mysteries. The atmosphere in Łęczyca has been steeped in many legends about the righteous, such as the author of "*Kav v'Naki*", author of "*Kol Yehuda*", Rabbi Chaim Auerbach, author of "*Divrei Mishpat*", his son R' Itzik Auerbach, author of "*Divrei Chaim*", his son R' Meir Auerbach, author of "*Imrei Bina*", head of *Beit Din* in Kalisz and Jerusalem. And finally, the late Rabbi Leibush *Malbim*, who wrote most of his books and commentaries in Łęczyca, as he emphasizes in his commentary on the Book of Yehoshua. The geniuses of Israel, whose life stories we present in this book, have left their mark on this city and its Jewish inhabitants.

There is historical evidence that the Jewish settlement in Łęczyca dates back to the time of the Spanish Expulsion at the end of the fifteenth century (see "*Monumenta Polonia Historica*", Lviv 1888, p. 837; Hermann Sternberg's "*Geschichte der Juden in Polen*"¹², p. 109; and the "Archive of the state of Warsaw", section "Province of Poznań", p. 250). However, it is difficult to



The Bzura River near Łęczyca

³ TN: lit. "Mother city", meaning an "important Jewish settlement".

⁴ TN: Hebrew, "Gleanings of Ephraim".

⁵ TN: 1619 in the text but it is not possible because there was no Adar II in 1619. His usual dates of death mentioned are 3 March or 21 April 1619, in Prague. Here, 18 February 1620.

⁶ TN: Hebrew, "A City of Heroes".

⁷ TN: Hebrew, "Words of Wisdom".

⁸ TN: Hebrew, "A Path for Life".

⁹ TN: Hebrew, "Pillars of Joy".

¹⁰ TN: in fact, he was the son of Akiva and grandson of Abraham, the latter being a brother of *Baal HaShela*.

¹¹ TN: Hebrew, "Stories of the Saints".

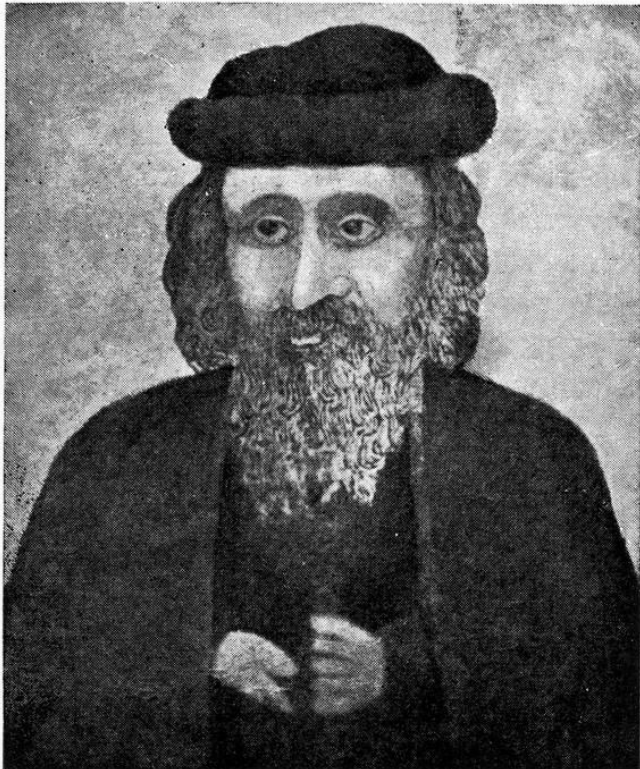
¹² TN: German, "History of the Jews in Poland".

determine when exactly the Jews began to settle the city. The ancient cemetery contains remains from 1503, but other sources suggest that the Jewish settlement is much older.

Malbim – Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michael Wisser

The wonderful Bible commentator Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michael Wisser, known by his acronym *Malbim*, lived in the nineteenth century. He held rabbinical posts in Kempen, Wreschen, Königsberg, Kherson, Mohilev and Bucharest. But his period in Łęczyca, as he himself writes, was the most beautiful, because in this city he was able to sit quietly with the Torah and work on his commentaries. He wrote his introduction to the book "Yehoshua" in Łęczyca in 1860. We can also find in most of his books the remark: "I wrote about this in Łęczyca". At the end of the book "*Mi Noach*", he signs: "Meir Leibush Malbim – formerly Chief Rabbi in Bucharest and now Chief Rabbi of the community of Łęczyca."

Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michael was born in the year 1809 in the city of Volochysk. As a child, he

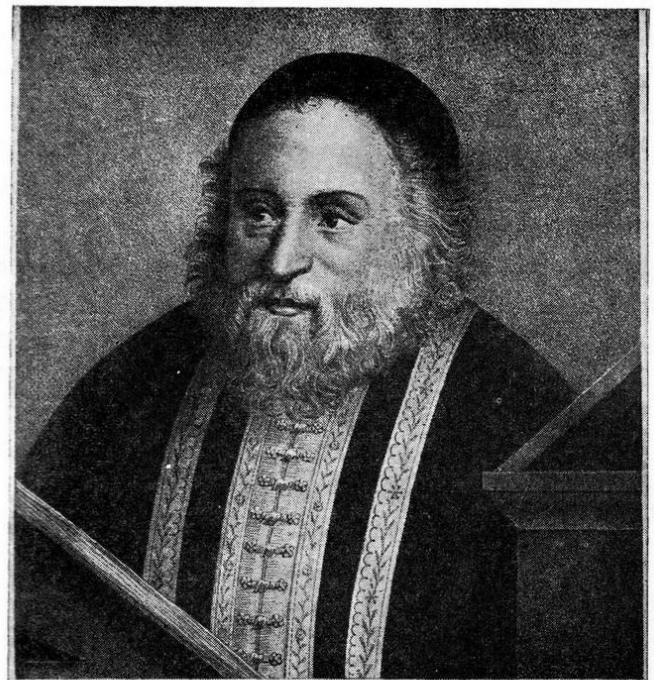


Rabbi Chaim Auerbach ztz"l, author of "*Dibrei Mishpat*" was called "the Volhynian prodigy". At the age of twenty, he received *haskama* from the *Gaonim*: Moshe "*Chatam Sofer*", the *Gaon* of Nickelsberg, the *Gaon* of Tykocin, the Chief Rabbi of Breslau and the *Gaon* of Amsterdam for his important book "*Artzot Chaim*" which he began writing, as he explains in the introduction, when he was nineteen years old. In 1838 he was accepted as rabbi in Wreschen, in 1845 in Kempen, and then in Bucharest, where he was severely persecuted by the *maskilim*¹³, arrested, sentenced to death, and finally released thanks to

Montefiore's efforts. Later on, he served as rabbi in Łęczyca, Kherson, Mohilev, and Königsberg. He died in Kiev while traveling to Kremenchuk, where he had been appointed as rabbi, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah 5640¹⁴. He had studied Kabbalah with the holy Rabbi Zvi Hirsh Eichenstein of Zidichov. In addition to "*Artzot Chaim*", he authored many other books including "*Artzot Shalom*", "*Torah veMitzvah*", "*Midrash Halacha*" (a detailed commentary on *Safra*), "*Megilat Starim*" (on *Kabbalah*), "*Yair Or*", "*Eilat HaShachar*" (on grammar), "*Mikre Kodesh*" (a commentary of the Bible), "Parable and Proverbs" (poems), and "*Eretz Hemdah*" (sermons).

The authoritative Brockhaus Russian-Jewish Encyclopedia reports the following about Łęczyca:

"In the times of the Polish monarchy, Łęczyca was the most important district capital. The Jewish community of Łęczyca was one of the oldest in Poland. In 1453, Jewish representatives of Łęczyca and other communities received special privileges from King Kazimierz IV Jagiellończyk. The census of 1564 shows seven houses belonging to Jews. For the right to buy them, the government charged one pound of pepper for each house. In addition, Jews occupied three houses of Christians. The celebrated Maggid Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Łęczyca was born in the town at that time. The famous blood-libel trial of Łęczyca took place there in 1639. In 1652, after the abolition of the old Jewish privileges, a fire destroyed the



תמונת פני הרב הגדול בישראל נודע לשם ולתהלה בעדית נבונים עשה חיל בתורת אל חי יקרה מפנינים במעלות ומדות אין כמוהו שומר אמונים וממעיני החכמה שאב מימי נאמנים כי ירד לים התלמוד העלה פנינים ספר פתח הבית ושאר חבויי היקרים הנה מוריש ורבינו נודע ביהודה מזה אברהם טיקטין אבד בקק ברעסלויא מושב חכמים נשמרת השחרה עלתה למעון העליונים

ABRAHAM TIKTIN,
Haudes Ober-Rabbiner in Breslau.

Rabbi Abraham Tiktin, author of "*Petach HaBeiit*"

¹³ TN: followers of the Jewish Enlightenment movement.

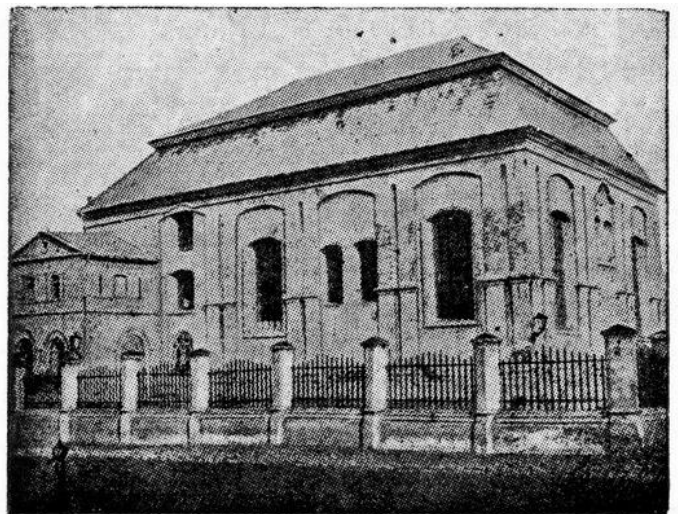
¹⁴ TN: 19 September 1879.

synagogue and Jewish houses. King Jan Kazimierz ordered the local authorities not to hinder the Jews from rebuilding the school, engaging in trade, and exercising their old privileges, which were confirmed during the city fire. Four years later, a great disaster befell the Łęczyca Jews, when the city was in the hands of the Brandenburg Army and Polish insurgents. King Jan Kazimierz, who besieged the city, met courageous resistance from the enemy. The Jews foresaw the terrible results, especially after the lights in the synagogue suddenly went out during Yom Kippur. On October 4, 1656, the second day of Sukkot, the city was captured by the King's army. The King wanted to spare the population, but the Poles killed in a barbaric and completely unchristian way all those who were still alive, especially the Jews, thousands of whom, regardless of age and race, were massacred (see "*Theatrum Europaeum*", Volume 7, p. 88). One priest gathered the Jewish children and slaughtered them. Jewish sources mention three thousand victims or five hundred families, and describe the destruction of city. Six hundred Torah scrolls were burned. The names of some of the martyrs are preserved in various memorial books. According to a description of the year 1661, the city began to rebuild, but the number of Jewish houses was insignificant (only five). During the Swedish War, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Łęczyca suffered again. After the end of the war, Jews began to resettle in Łęczyca in larger numbers. In 1724 they were allowed to trade, slaughter animals, make wine and set up inns and taverns, and in 1728 they were allowed to build a synagogue. There are interesting details corresponding to the year 1765. At the time, there were more than twenty tailors in the town, but only one of them was not Jewish. The number of Jews in Łęczyca, together with the tax collectors and customs officials in the area, reached 1067 that year. To the community of Łęczyca belonged the Jews of neighboring towns: Stryków – 624 Jews, Brzeziny – 243, Ujazd – 212, Sobota – 114, Bielany – 8, Parzęczew – 267, Piątek Pokrzywnica – 139, Krośniewice – 79, Katowa – 69. The total number of Jews in the whole district was 2905. According to a description from 1789, the Jews of Łęczyca worked in other occupations, besides tailoring. In that year the number of houses was 47. In 1856, there were 2903 Christians and 2496 Jews in Łęczyca. According to the population census of 1897, the city had 8863 inhabitants, of which 3471 were Jews. In the entire district of Łęczyca the number of inhabitants reached 100,000. The towns with the highest percentage of Jews were Grabów (1054 inhabitants, of whom 640 were Jews), Ozorków (11533 total, 5838 Jews), Parzęczew (984 total, 254 Jews), Piątek (2325 total, 1090 Jews), and Poddębice (2724 total, 1266 Jews)". So tells the Russian-Hebrew encyclopedia, which is not the only source for the history of Jews in this city.

In 1924 excavations were carried out near the walls of the synagogue and it turned out that in ancient times Łęczyca was a fortress town, surrounded by a strong wall three meters thick. The synagogue, which was also built in the shape of a medieval fortress, was erected near the city

wall in such a way that it served as a wall in front of the synagogue's corridor and an entire family could live in its arcades. To close the shutters of the windows, you had to walk 3 meters into the thick wall. During the same excavations, items were discovered that left a strong impression on the archaeologists. After digging two meters deep into the ground, a hole appeared in the wall revealing that the wall was hollow. When the diggers went through the hole in the wall, they found themselves in a space the size of a room where there were broken bones and various Jewish names engraved on the stones of the walls. Various explanations were suggested for the finding. According to one of them, proposed by Polish scientists, the finding had to do with events related to the Swedish invasion of Poland. As they marched victoriously across countries and peoples, the Swedes encountered stiff and bitter resistance in Poland. In 1656 they reached the heart of the country and captured it completely. This is what the historian Simon Dubnov wrote in his "History of the Jewish People":

"... Łęczyca, which had been occupied by the Germans and Swedes, was besieged by a regiment of Polish troops led by King Jan Kazimierz himself. This happened during the Days of Awe. During the Yom Kippur prayer service in the synagogue, the wax candles went out and the Jews saw a bad sign in it. A few days later, on the second day of Sukkot, the city was captured from the enemy. The king wanted to spare the inhabitants of the city, but the Poles attacked all those who had survived the fires, especially the Jews. According to a "German" description of those days, they killed in a barbaric and not Christian manner over a thousand men, women, old and young people. A Polish source said: "We have a special case against the Jews, because they helped the enemy defend the city. With frenzied anger we also killed the women of the Jews and their children, and many of them perished in the flames. Wolf, one of the royal knights, gathered all the remaining Jewish children, who



The great synagogue in Łęczyca

were half-burned, saved from the flames, and then slaughtered in order to save their souls. According to many Jewish sources, about 500 families (3,000 persons) were

killed in Łęczyca. Many threw themselves into the fire or the water to avoid the horrors of the enemy."

The old people of Łęczyca tell the story as they heard it from their ancestors, passed down from generation to generation. The Swedes, dressed in long clothes and fur hats that were similar to the Jewish *shtreimels*, stood on the wall pouring boiling water and oil on the Polish soldiers. When the Poles occupied the city, they claimed that those who had poured the boiling stuff from the walls were Jews because they were Jewish-dressed. That was their excuse to justify the horrific murders and destruction. It turns out that a number of Jews hid in the sanctuary behind the wall because they knew the secret of the existing "bunker", and somebody inscribed their names on the stones of the walls.

Even before that, there had been a lot of troubles in Łęczyca. In the year 1633 the two wardens of the synagogue, Meir and Eliezer, were charged with murdering a Christian child from Komaszycze and were taken to a city court, and then to the Supreme Court. The false witness in the trial was an old Polish beggar, Tomasz, who testified after torture that he himself had stolen the child and sold it to Jews. In vain did the mayor of Łęczyca argue that the trial was against the law, because only the provincial court, appointed by the judiciary, had jurisdiction on the Jews. The case was eventually brought before the Supreme Court, which ruled: "Despite the fact that the accused Jews claim after torture that they are innocent, and also because of the fact that there are more than a hundred wounds and stab wounds in the body, it is probable, although not with absolute certainty, that the Jews are the murderers." Notwithstanding the reservation of the Supreme Court, a death sentence was imposed on the wardens and immediately carried out. Both martyrs were torn to pieces and hung on crossroads.

In time, the real causes of the muddle were discovered. A glass coffin with the bones of the sacred child was put on display at the Bernardine Monastery in Łęczyca, with a metal plaque containing a written description of the whole episode. On the wall, there was also a painting showing Jews sucking the blood of a child. From then on, the church of Łęczyca became famous, and until recently, masses of people flocked there," says Prof. Dubnov and other researchers of Jewish history. However, the Russian-Hebrew encyclopedia, under the letter "L", provides more details about this blood libel story:

"In June 1633, the royal tribunal in Łęczyca prosecuted Meir and Eliezer, accused of killing a child from the village of Komaszycze. The child disappeared on April 20, four days before Passover. The parents left him at home and, when they came back, they found him dead. The child's body was covered with wounds in many places. Suspicion fell on the wandering Christian beggar Tomasz who confessed that he had abducted the child and sold it to the Jews in Łęczyca. Following an investigation, the court allowed the Jews to file an appeal to the court in accordance with their separate royal privileges. The tribunal recognized the Staroste's action as arbitrary and illegitimate, because the Jews accused of the murder were

under the jurisdiction of the city court, ruling that the Staroste's decisions could be appealed to the tribunal. During the interrogation, the beggar confessed that he had sold the child to Meir and Eliezer for half-złoty and that, next morning, he found the dead child and hid it in the bushes of the forest according to the Jews' instructions. The beggar repeated the confession in the presence of the Jews, following torture and interrogation.

Before being sentenced, Meir and Eliezer pleaded not guilty, despite the fact that they were severely tortured. They were condemned to death and quartering. Ten other Jews were accused of 'intellectual' complicity. Among them was the head of the community, the rabbi, and the elders of the congregation, who were questioned after they swore that they knew nothing. The local Bernardine clergymen were very pleased with the whole thing for a simple reason: in 1632, they had erected a monastery in Łęczyca and wanted to attract believers to the new temple. The death of the child was a bargain for the monks. The bones of the slain child were placed in a glass coffin in the church, and to this day the oil painting that depicts Jews sucking the blood of a child, is preserved there. A metal plaque describing the event is attached to the coffin..."

A memorial to the martyrs is kept in a Siddur of prayers manuscript from the synagogue of Pinczow. It briefly refers to "The torture in the town of Łęczyca, in the month of Shevat 5399 (1639), of our teacher Rabbi Meir son of Rabbi Mordechai HaCohen, and Rabbi Eliezer son of Rabbi Avigdor." In a different section of the same Siddur, the prayers of remembrance for those who perished on *Kiddush HaShem*, their names are mentioned again as victims of an innocent confusion.

Rabbi Shlomo Cohen (one of the founders of the Mekor Chaim neighborhood near Jerusalem, who immigrated to Israel more than thirty years ago) recounts that in 1915 there was a bookshop called "Krejwa" in Łęczyca. The owners of the bookshop printed a card with the image from the wall of the church, which depicts Jews standing around a child lying on a table, with *shtreimels* on their heads and holding silver cups being filled with the child's blood. They included the card as a bonus in every book they sold. This was on the eve of Passover and the card could provoke a pogrom in the city. Rabbi Shlomo Cohen saw two men arriving in a carriage to the office of the local magistrate. One of them was a uniformed general and the other man was Professor Bodenheimer, an important personality whom he recognized from seeing his picture in the newspapers. Rabbi Shlomo went straight to him with the story of the card distributed by the bookstore. To make sure that the story was true, Professor Bodenheimer asked Rabbi Shlomo to see someone who had actually purchased one of those books. Rabbi Shlomo's sister-in-law, Ryvka Rachel Leibzon, brought the book with the card. Professor Bodenheimer immediately told the story to the general, who gave an order to close the bookstore.

Even in our times, we used to avoid walking along Poznań Street, where the Bernardine monastery is located, when the Polish crowd came out after prayers. It was not

until twenty years ago that an order was issued by the Pope to remove the coffin, but the image on the church wall is still there to this day.

These are individual chapters of the tears and pain of Polish Jewry in general and of the Jews in Łęczyca in particular, because in this city not only the fate of the Jews of Łęczyca was decided, but also the fate of all Polish Jewry. Here is an excerpt from the *pinkas* of the Council of the Four Lands of the year 1656: "On February 27, 1656 (2 Adar 5416), the King of Poland, Jan Kazimierz, ordered that the leaders of the Jews of Poland must immediately introduce the tax for the entire Jewish population in Poland, because everyone is responsible for one and one for all." The principal, amounting to 70,000 złotych, had to be paid in the following manner: The Lwów Jews paid 10,000 złotych to the ruler of Łęczyca, for the office of land registry they paid 3,000 złotych, for the Cossack regiment 2,600 złotych, for Jan Zamoyski's infantry regiment 4,000 złotych, for the commander of the military camp 1,600 złotych and various sums for the Polish infantry, the company of Andrzej Potocki and so on ("Zemsky Archives", Lwów, Vol. 405, p.142).

The *pinkasim* of the Council of the Four Lands contain judgements that are often signed by great Jewish personalities who stood at the head of the council. Among them... R' Naftali, son of beloved father, our teacher and rabbi R' Shraga ztzl'h Bloch of Łęczyca.

In the book "History of the Jews of Leszno", written in German by Dr. Louis Lewin, it is told that in 1628 the first head of the congregation in Leszno was someone called Eliezer from the city of Łęczyca, and that he received the privileges recognized to the Jews of Leszno.

There is an entire bibliography of the history of the Jews of Łęczyca, published in various collections by well-known historians Prof. Meir Balaban and Dr. Y. Sziper hy"d, as well as of Dr. Emmanuel Ringelblum. A special brochure on the history of the Jews of Łęczyca by Dr. Philip Friedman has been published by YIVO.

The history of Łęczyca is very rich and it is surrounded by many legends. The books of the dead tell us more than the books of the living. In my youth, I did some research on the *pinkasim* of Łęczyca. I learned a lot

from them about the city's past, including facts that are unknown to the historians.

... On one occasion, the rabbi of Prague, the *Maharal*, received a pamphlet with Torah commentary from a student who belonged to the rabbis of Łęczyca. As soon as the *Maharal* touched the pamphlet with his hands, he fell down and there was a foul smell of uncleanness in the room. The *Maharal* was shocked and said: "The words of the Torah do not admit impurity." Impurity has no place in the Torah – so where does this bad smell come from, that one cannot not stand it? Praise and remember God's name in such a place – certainly not! The *Maharal* was discouraged. Has impurity contaminated the Torah? The danger is great and one has to muster strength and she will recover.

Despite his weakness and old age, the *Maharal* decided to ride to Łęczyca. He was an eighty-year-old man, but he realized that from the distance he could not help – one had to be on the ground, from where the impurity spreads to all the Diaspora, in order to be able to fight with it and uproot it, even if it was connected with the holy Torah. When the *Maharal* reached the city limits, he had a terrible feeling and knew that a difficult war awaited him. Here the holiness mixed with the impurity and the evil had entered the *Beit Midrash* and settled there. When the *Maharal* entered the town and heard the voice of Torah and, by contrast, the bell-ringing of the Dominican churches for their Easter Day, he already knew what was going on. After the short prayer for entering a city, when the rabbis and *yeshiva* students came to greet him, he did not receive them. Instead, he asked to see the rich Jews of the city, and especially their famous *nagid*, whose name he did not even want to mention. The rabbis realized that something was wrong and their hearts were pounding with fear and trembling. When Reb Abraham heard that all the trouble was about him, he quickly came to the *Maharal* of Prague. He stood before him quietly, bowing his head and listening to the *Maharal*, who spoke to him not with anger, but with mercy and grace. And this is what he said to him: "Abraham, you are a sinner and a sinner of Israel, and many great men have already failed and been pushed into the deep abyss because of you. As a



The "Jewish street" after the deportation

rule, a sinner who sins in public is not even able to repent. But I can assure you that your repentance will be accepted. I will take the weight of the burden on your behalf, and you will be helped from heaven, because he who wants to purify himself, is helped. Therefore, Abraham, please tell me from where does this wealth come to you?"

— Holy Rabbi, I will tell you everything, if you will save my soul. I give you my possessions and I will fulfill your commands. And he began to recount how he had formerly been a poor man and a merchant of antiquities. He once found a figurine of metal that had two gems fixed in the place of the eyes. He sold the figurine with its precious stones to the bishop and he received in payment a bag of gold thalers. Since then, he became rich.

The *Maharal* sank into thought, his eyes lit up and he spoke to his heart: "How great are the words of the sage z"l, paganism defiles as *niddah*¹⁵. The same uncleanness, the bad smell and no one feels because of the dull senses, may the All-Merciful protect us."

That night, the *Maharal*, together with Abraham and his family disappeared from Łęczyca, leaving no trace. In the morning, the rabbis and *yeshiva* students left the city. Rabbi Abraham's property remained ownerless, but no one took any part of it, because both the Jews and the Gentiles were afraid to benefit from it.

After several days of fright and trembling of the entire urban population, a fire broke out and destroyed all the property. The fire went on for three days and three nights, destroying all the houses that Abraham had built, while the other houses were spared, as if a boundary had been drawn between them. Nobody tried to put out the fire, because everybody knew that it was a fire from heaven. That night, it was revealed to the rabbi and the head of the *Beit Din* of Łęczyca that the city had been cleansed of the filth and that there would be no more fire in the city.

¹⁵ TN: Hebrew, "menstruation".