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Zempelburg and its Jewish Community

Zempelburg (Sepolno in Polish) is today a small, insignificant town of a few thousand Polish Catholic inhabitants in the Bydgoszcz Province of north-west Poland. For hundreds of years, from the dawn of history until the year 1772 it was part of the independent Kingdom of Poland. In that year, at a conference in St. Petersburg in Russia, three European powers--Prussia, Austria, and Russia forced a treaty on Poland which, among other concessions, ceded the area in which Zempelburg is located to the Kingdom of Prussia. The new province was named Westpreussen (West Prussia), and its southern part, the District of Marienwerder included such counties as Flatow, with its town of Zempelburg and Schwetz, so-named for its main town.

About 19,000 Jews lived in the Marienwerder District, out of a total population of 660,000. In 1773, when King Frederick the Great of Prussia took over West Prussia. At that time the towns and cities had generally a German Protestant majority, whereas the rural areas and hamlets had a Polish Catholic majority. Most of the land and the towns were owned by German and Polish nobility who exercised a feudal control over their inhabitants.

The Jews of the region, whom King Frederick found detestable, were the descendants of those Jews (most of them originally from Germany) who had been cordially invited and encouraged to settle in Poland by the Polish nobility of the 16th and 17th centuries, and whose entrepreneurial and managerial abilities had become indispensable to the welfare of Polish commerce and trade for 250 years.

In the 1700's Zempelburg was owned by noblemen, who had permitted a large Jewish community to develop there. In 1788, Zempelburg, with 622 Jews among 1129 residents, had the third-largest Jewish community in all of Prussia, after Berlin and Märkisch-Friedland. In 1772 Zempelburg had 129 houses occupied by Christians and 90 occupied by Jews (Jüdenhauser).

By 1805 there were 1058 Jews in the town and in 1822 the number had risen to 1583. By 1837, Zempelburg, with its 1497 Jews had the second-largest Jewish Community in West Prussia (after the great port city of Danzig, the home of 2367 Jews).

As the Jewish community grew, so did competition in commerce and handicraft manufacturing. Beginning in the 1820's many Jews were forced to leave Zempelburg and seek a livelihood in smaller, outlying towns and villages. This process continued through the 1850's, and then there began another trend: emigration to large cities newly opened to Jewish settlement such as Berlin, Breslau, Posen, Danzig and Leipzig. Also in the 1850's we observe the beginning of emigration to England, France, the United States and Canada. In the latter half of the 19th Century the Jewish population of West Prussia rapidly declined; in Zempelburg the community numbered 896 in 1871 and fell to 335 by 1910. In 1918, at the close of World War I, Poland regained its independence, and West Prussia was stripped from Germany together with neighboring Posen Province and formed the western part of the new Polish Republic.

Most of the Jews living in these provinces saw no future living under Polish rule. They sold their property and moved westward--most to Berlin--to join their relatives and townsmen who had already settled there continuously during the previous fifty years. In the 1920's the Jews in Berlin numbered nearly 200,000, most of them hailing from Germany's former Eastern regions.