AR 5518 James Bennett Collection II: Communities, Zempelburg Other documents II/8c

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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 Bydgoscze 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, wheras 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 descendents 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.