

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING*Rethinking the “Golden Age”:
Jewish-Christian Relations in Pre-Modern Poland*

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“Was there ever a golden age in Jewish-Christian relations?” The question is loaded, for “a golden age” is an ideal. How is this ideal established, and by whose standards is it assessed—our own, or the standards of the time? The question is wrought with dangers of anachronistic expectations. “Golden age” meant different things to different generations of scholars and readers, and historically Jewish-Christian relations were as complicated as any area of historical study. What we may most likely find is eras of fairly harmonious coexistence, but even that “coexistence” has to be seen within its own historical context, without projection of our own modern ideals of coexistence (and even modern ideals are incongruent with reality). In his essay, Jonathan Elukin asked more specifically, “What makes a golden age?” Is it economic prosperity? Is it intellectual exchange between Jews and Christians? Those aspects of Jewish-Christian coexistence may not overlap. In Poland, for example, for a number of complex reasons, the levels of intellectual exchange were low in comparison to Italy, or the Dutch Republic, but Polish Jews did prosper economically in the pre-modern period. Historical reality, as historians like to say, is much more complicated for a “golden age” to ever exist, and the topic of Jewish-Christian relations, their idealization or demonization, has been an ever-present area of scholarly debates, changing over the decades of modern historical research.

The earliest modern historians of the Jews, both the *maskilim* and the *Wissenschaft* scholars, saw little possibility for a “Golden Age” in Jewish-Christian relations. Engaged in two projects, one affirming Jewish identity and the other pushing for emancipation, the acquisition of civil and political rights, they sought to distance themselves from the past, which they presented as a history of almost incessant suffering and persecution. For the *maskilim*, reacting to what they saw as “obscurantism” of contemporary Jews in German lands, the “Golden Age” lay not in Christian lands, but in medieval Muslim domains, where, as they saw it, a balance between Jewishness and external learning existed. Christian lands, on the other hand, because of their treatment of Jews, facilitated insular postures of the Jewish community, so criticized by Jews and Christians in the era of emancipation. For Leopold Zunz, Jewish history “from Constantine to Charles V” was a “mournful recital,” “replete with endeavors on the part of the [Jews] enemies to exterminate them.”¹ Zunz called for “justice” “not derision,” for “love,” “not oppression,” “to bring atonement” in the modern era.² For Heinrich Graetz, writing in the middle of the nineteenth-century, the potential “Golden Age”—that “atonement for the sins of a thousand years”—was the ideal of the French Revolution.³

¹ Leopold Zunz, *The Sufferings of the Jews During the Middle Ages*, trans. Albert Löwy and George Alexander Kohut (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1907), 90.

² Zunz, *The Suffering of the Jews*, 91.

³ Quoted in Salo Wittmayer Baron, “Ghetto and Emancipation,” *Menorah Journal* 14 (1928): 515.

It was only with Salo Baron's groundbreaking essay "Ghetto and Emancipation" that some of these earlier assumptions about Jewish history in Christian Europe began to break down. Baron's plea "to break with the lachrymose theory of pre-Revolutionary woe," to refocus the study of Jewish history away from the narrative of incessant suffering, and "to adopt a view more in accord with historic truth," helped open up some new questions of Jewish-Christian relations, and of Jewish life in both modern and pre-modern eras.⁴ Over the subsequent decades, Baron's call resulted in studies that have complicated the monochromatic view of Jewish past in Christian lands by examining Jewish views of Christians. The new studies also provided a new, more textured view of Jewish life in the ghettos, and, critically, "out of the ghettos," where in fact most pre-modern Jews lived.⁵

While western Jewish historiography denied the possibility of a "golden age" for Jews in Christian Europe, let alone Jewish-Christian relations, Jewish historiography of eastern Europe and Poland did in fact adopt the idea of a "golden age." Closely trailing the Polish historiography and adopting from it the concept of the "golden age," Jewish historians used the idea to describe a "golden age" of Jewish culture, or, a "golden age of Polish history," still, they certainly did not see the phrase as appropriate to describe Jewish-Christian relations.

Simon Dubnow, in his seminal *History of Jews in Russia and Poland*, talked about a "zenith." According to Dubnow, at the time when "The Sephardim of Turkey were approaching the end of their brilliant historic career, and were gradually lapsing into Asiatic stupor...the Ashkenazim of Poland, with a supply of fresh strength and the promise of an original culture, were starting out on their broad historic development."⁶ For Dubnow the hallmark of the "zenith" was Polish Jewish autonomy, as well as the "high-water mark of rabbinic learning;" but for him, "a humane and lawful attitude [among Christians] toward the Jews was out of question" because "medieval ideas had already taken such deep root in the Polish people."⁷ Still, according to Dubnow, this "high-water mark" of Jewish culture and autonomy coincided with "the golden age of Polish history,"

⁴ Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation," 526. See also a compelling essay by David Engel on Baron's views of the modern era, David Engel, "Crisis and Lachrymosity: On Salo Baron, Neobarionism, and the Study of Modern European Jewish History," *Jewish History* 20, no. 3 (2006).

⁵ See for example, Roberta Curiel and Bernard Dov Cooperman, *The Venetian Ghetto* (Rizzoli, 1990); Jürgen Heyde, "'Ghetto' And the Construction of Jewish History: The Case of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Considerations About a Research Project," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów*, no. 4 (2004); Debra Kaplan and Magda Teter, "Out of the (Historiographic) Ghetto: Jews and the Reformation," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 40, no. 2 (2009); Benjamin Ravid, "From Geographical Realia to Historiographical Symbol: The Odyssey of the Word Ghetto," in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. David Ruderman (New York: New York University, 1992); Stefanie B. Siegmund, *The Medici State and the Ghetto of Florence: The Construction of an Early Modern Jewish Community*, Stanford Series in Jewish History and Culture (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006); Kenneth R. Stow, "The Consciousness of Closure: Roman Jewry and Its Ghet," in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. David Ruderman (New York: New York University Press, 1992); David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus*, vol. 4, Judaica, Texts and Translations (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979); Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); Israel Yuval, "Ha-Nakam Ve-Ha-Klalah, Ha-Dam Ve Ha-'Alilah: Me-'Alilot Qedushim Le-'Alilot Dam," *Zion* 48, no. 1 (1993); Israel Jacob Yuval, *Shene Goyim Be-Vitkeh : Yehudim Ve-Notsrim Dimuyim Hadadiyim* (Tel-Aviv: 'Alma 'Am 'oved, 2000); Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, The S. Mark Taper Foundation Imprint in Jewish Studies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Leone Modena and Mark R. Cohen, *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁶ Simon Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, trans. I. Friedlander (Bergenfield (N.J.): Avotaynu, 2000), 28.

⁷ Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, 29, and ch. IV.

which ended in 1586 with the death of King Stefan Batory, “the valorous and enlightened Hungarian duke.” By the time he died, Dubnow argued, “the Polish populace was already inoculated with the ideas of the ‘Catholic reaction’ imported from Western Europe.”⁸ Dubnow placed the responsibility for the end of the “golden age of Polish history,” and thereby also for the beginning of the decline of Polish Jewry, on the Catholic church, the “Catholic reaction,” the “Jesuits, who managed to obtain control over the education of the growing generation, and inoculated the Polish people with the virus of clericalism,” and finally, on King Sigismund III, a “devout” Catholic, who despite “the Jesuit influence, continued the traditional role of Jewish protector.”⁹ Majer Bałaban concurred, the golden age for Poland and for Jews ended with the reign of “King Sigismund III Vasa,” “a devout Catholic, brought up by a Warsaw Jesuit and influenced by his confessors.”¹⁰ Sigismund III, Bałaban wrote, was “cold and closed...to the Jews” whose appeals to the king, especially in cases of accusations of sacrilege or ritual murder, were ineffective.¹¹

The views of the “golden age” in Poland held by generations of Polish historians were shaped by their quest to explain the collapse of the Polish state in the eighteenth century. Polish historiography of the nineteenth and early twentieth century focused on the political history of the state and dubbed the period of the country’s greatest geographic expansion in the late fifteenth and in the sixteenth-centuries, as the “golden age of Polish history.” Already in 1813, Joachim Lelewel marked the beginning of Polish decline to 1586, the year of King Stefan Batory’s death.¹² Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, while scholars representing two historiographic schools, the Cracow school, with Michał Bobrzyński, Waław Sobieski, Stanisław Kutrzeba, and the Warsaw school, with Tadeusz Korzoń, Władysław Smoleski, Adolf Pawiński, et al., offered different explanations for the state’s collapse, they all hailed Poland’s “golden age.”¹³

The Cracow school, very critical of the Polish past, tended to blame Polish political system: nobles’ democracy that turned into anarchy with its abuse of “liberum veto.” Scholar W. Kalinka, for example, wrote: “Poles are the causes of their own collapse...the misfortunes, which befell on us then and later are an atonement deserved by our nation.”¹⁴ Some blamed the “Counter-Reformation.”¹⁵ The Warsaw school, in contrast, facing criticisms and attacks from the Tsarist regime, noted foreign influences in the demise of Poland and defended Polish democracy. Already Joachim Lelewel argued that the demise of Poland was not because of its republican system as others had argued. Strong monarchy was not a guarantee of success; indeed a strong monarch could not save Spain. The reasons for decline lay elsewhere: geographic location “between three despots,” “Jesuitism,” and the “egoism” of the wealthy.¹⁶ A member of the

⁸ Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, 39-40.

⁹ Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, 41-42.

¹⁰ Majer Bałaban, *Historja Żydów w Krakowie i na Kazimierzu: 1304-1868*, 2 vols. (Cracow: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1991), vol. I: 165-166.

¹¹ Bałaban, *Historia Żydów w Krakowie*, vol. I: 166.

¹² Maria Wierzbicka, “Joachim Lelewel (1786-1861),” in *Historycy Warszawscy Ostatnich Dwóch Stuleci*, ed. Aleksander Gieysztor, Jerzy Maternicki, and Henryk Samsonowicz (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1986).

¹³ Jerzy Maternicki, *Kultura Historyczna Dawna i Współczesna: Studia i Szkice* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1979).

¹⁴ Quoted in Maternicki, *Kultura Historyczna Dawna*.

¹⁵ Waław Sobieski, *Nienawiść Wyznaniowa Tłumów Za Rządów Zygmunta III-Go* (Warsaw: Nakładem Stefana Dembego, 1902).

¹⁶ Wierzbicka, “Joachim Lelewel (1786-1861).”

Warsaw school, Władysław Smoleński complained about “scholastic torpor” caused by “the Counter Reformation,” which he blamed for Poland’s decline.¹⁷

Just as both Polish and Jewish historians blamed “Catholic Counter Reformation” for Poland’s decline, they also shared their sympathetic, sometimes romantic view of King Sigismund August, the last of the Jagiellonian dynasty, whose reign marked the “high-points,” or “the golden age,” of Polish history, and their disdain for Sigismund III Vasa (1588-1632), “the Counter-Reformation king.” Both Polish and Jewish historians saw King Sigismund III’s reign as the beginning of Poland’s “silver age,” leading to the country’s rapid decline that was to end with the disappearance of Poland from the map of Europe at the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁸

For Majer Bałaban, Sigismund August was a man of the Renaissance, not free of fault but “free from religious prejudice,” who sought to “please everyone.”¹⁹ He was sympathetic to “religious dissidents,” and Jews, too, “found justice and support in him.”²⁰ All scholars noted the king’s weakness, mostly in his personality; he was “melancholy,” not a man of “deed,” Bałaban wrote, and his indecisiveness allowed Catholicism to strengthen at the time when religious reforms were taking place.²¹ But the king was “an enlightened patron of the Renaissance,” who, though a Catholic, “contributed to religious toleration.”²² According to Salo Baron, “Sigismund Augustus’ reign was one of the happier periods of Jewish sojourn in East-Central Europe.”²³

Sigismund III Vasa, on the other hand, “a devout Catholic and a firm adherent of the aims of the Counter-Reformation,” until recently, became a symbol of reaction, and “the beginning of the Commonwealth’s decline toward destruction.”²⁴ In Jewish historiography that image of a king devoted to Catholicism goes back to the seventeenth-century Jewish chronicles of the Chmielnicki uprising in 1648-1649. The Jewish chronicler Nathan Nata Hanover wrote that during the reign of King Sigismund III, “a righteous and upright man,” “the religion of the pope gained strength in the

¹⁷ Discussed in Maternicki, *Kultura Historyczna Dawna*. See also, Władysław Smoleński, *Wiara w Życiu Społeczeństwa Polskiego w Epokę Jezuickiej* (Warsaw: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1951); Władysław Smoleński and Andrzej Wierzbicki, *Przewrót Umysłowy w Polsce Wieku XVIII: Studia Historyczne*, 4 wyd. ed., *Klasyki Historiografii* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1979).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Edward Opalinski, *Sejm Srebrnego Wieku, 1587-1652: Między Głosowaniem Większościowym a Liberum Veto* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Sejmowe, 2001).

¹⁹ Bałaban, *Historia Żydów w Krakowie*, vol. I: 139.

²⁰ Bałaban, *Historia Żydów w Krakowie*, vol. I: 139.

²¹ Bałaban, *Historia Żydów w Krakowie*, vol. I: 139-140. For Baron, Sigismund August was “more gifted than his father,” but “his passionate nature led him to devote much of his time and energy to hedonistic pursuits, and at crucial moments he neglected important public affairs.” Salo Wittmayer Baron, *Poland-Lithuania 1500-1650*, vol. 16, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, London, Philadelphia: Columbia University Press and Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976), 29. Norman Davies, *God’s Playground: A History of Poland*, vol. I: the origins to 1795 (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press, 1982), 144-145.

²² Baron, *SRHJ Vol. 16*, 31-33; Bernard D. Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland: A Social and Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland from 1100 to 1800* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), 123.

²³ Baron, *SRHJ Vol. 16*, 33. Ludwik Gumplowicz maintained that all decrees and privileges issued by King Sigismund August “were imbued with the same spirit of liberalism and free-thinking.” Ludwik Gumplowicz, *Prawodawstwo Polskie Względem Żydów* (Cracow: J.M. Himmelblau, 1867), 42-43.

²⁴ Baron, *SRHJ Vol. 16*; Davies, *God’s Playground*, vol. I: 439; Mirosław Korolko, *Klejnot Swobodnego Sumienia: Polemika Wokół Konfederacji Warszawskiej w Latach 1573-1658* (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy “Pax”, 1974), ch. VI; Daniel Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State, 1386-1795*, vol. 4, *History of East Central Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 131. Sobieski, *Nienawiść Wyznaniowa*. For a new, revised portrayal of Sigismund III, Henryk Wisner, *Rzeczpospolita Wazów: Czasy Zygmunta III i Władysława IV* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton Instytut Historii PAN, 2002), 191-192.

Kingdom of Poland.”²⁵ Modern Jewish historiography marked Sigismund III’s reign, as “the onset of the vigorous Counter Reformation,” a turning point for the decline of Polish Jewry as well, only exacerbated by the mid-century violence of the Chmielnicki uprising and the wars with Sweden.²⁶ For some historians the “happy” epoch of Jewish existence in Poland as was experienced under the Jagiellonian kings was never to return. This view has been more recently challenged, as recent scholarship has demonstrated that Jews recovered from and flourished after the crises of the mid-seventeenth century—that flourishing was manifest especially in Jewish culture, rabbinic scholarship, and economic activity.²⁷

Just how complex these historiographic assumptions are can be illustrated by the treatment of anti-Jewish accusations by the two kings both Polish and Jewish historiography consider iconic and indicative of the state in which Poland-Lithuania found itself, Sigismund August and Sigismund III Vasa, the first thought to be a friend to Jew and dissident alike, and the second “cold and reserved” who would lend no ear to Jews in trouble.

In the spring of 1556, a Christian woman and a servant in a Jewish household, Dorota Łazęcka, was accused of stealing the consecrated wafer during the Easter season and delivering the wafer to Jews in a small Polish town of Sochaczew. On April 23, 1556, she was burned at the stake just a day after her arrest, and Jews were charged with desecration of the host by “stabbing and torturing” it. One of the Jews, Dorota’s employer and a beadle in the synagogue, was executed by burning on May 15, three others, two weeks later, on June 1. It was the first documented trial for host desecration in Poland, and it took place at a volatile moment in European history, less than a year after the Diet of Augsburg had accepted the *Confessio Augustana*, and *de facto* recognized Lutheranism.²⁸

For Dubnow, papal nuncio to Poland, Luigi Lippomano, was to blame for the trial. Sent “by the inquisitor on the throne of St. Peter [Pope Paul IV],” Lippomano, Dubnow argued, “conceived the idea of firing the religious zeal of the Catholics by one of those bloody spectacles which the inquisitorial Church was wont to arrange occasionally *ad maiorem Dei gloria*.”²⁹ King Sigismund August “was shocked,” Dubnow wrote, “by these revolting proceedings which had been engineered by the Nuncio Lippomano.”³⁰ The king was “quick to grasp that the bottom of the absurd rumor concerning the ‘wounded’ host lay a ‘pious fraud,’ the desire to demonstrate the truth of the Eucharist dogma in its Catholic formulation.”³¹ Salo Baron also claimed that Sigismund August “did not believe any of these accusations,” and pointed to the decree King Sigismund

²⁵ Nathan Nata Hannover, *Yeven Mezulah* (Toronto: Ozarenu, 1990), 16; Nathan Nata Hanover, *Abyss of Despair (Yeven Metzulah) the Famous 17th Century Chronicle Depicting Jewish Life in Russia and Poland During the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648-49*, trans. Abraham J. Mesch (New Brunswick (USA), London: Transaction Books, 1983), 27.

²⁶ Baron, *SRHJ Vol. 16*, 76.

²⁷ See, e.g., Moshe Rosman, “Dimuyav Sel Bet Yisrael Be-Polin Ke-Merkaz Torah Ahare Gezerot Tah-Tat [the Image of Poland as a Center of Torah Learning after the 1648 Persecutions],” *Zion* 51, no. 4 (1986); Moshe Rosman, “Dubno in the Wake of Khmel'nyts'kyi,” *Jewish History* 17, no. 2 (2003); Murray Jay Rosman, *The Lords' Jews: Magnate-Jewish Relations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth During the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

²⁸ This trial is discussed in detail in Chapter Five of my *Sinners on Trial: Jews and Sacrilege after the Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

²⁹ Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, 37-38.

³⁰ Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, 38.

³¹ Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, 38.

August issued in January 1557 that forced all such anti-Jewish trials be adjudicated in a special tribunal in the presence of the king himself or his representatives.³²

These accounts are if not wrong, then at least misleading. Dubnow was incorrect in giving Lippomano such a leading role in the affair. Lippomano was not the prime instigator, although he did take advantage of the Sochaczew case to accomplish his own political and religious goals.³³ The negative reaction to the affair ascribed to King Sigismund August stems from these historians' focus on later developments in the Sochaczew affair. On June 8, 1556 King Sigismund August wrote a letter, addressed to Stanisław Borek, Sochaczew's city captain, calling for full and proper investigation of the case, for release on bail of the arrested Jews, and a return of the property to the arrested Jews and to other Jews who may have fled the town.³⁴ The letter arrived, and had even been dispatched, too late. The Jews had been executed on June 1. This was not the only, or the first, letter dispatched by the king in this case. On May 4, after Dorota's execution, the king had sent another letter, expressing "horror and the pain of our soul" occasioned by the news about "that woman, Dorothea Lazezka [sic] who having taken the Sacrosanct Body of God and Our Savior Jesus Christ into her impure mouth and then having removed it secretly, had given it to the perfidious Jew Bieszko Szkolnik."³⁵ The king admitted, echoing Protestant rhetoric, that "although our God is in heaven, and the hands of the impious cannot violate [him]," it is not appropriate for a Christian king to allow "the mystery of our faith" to be profaned and contaminated by "the audacity of the perfidious and wicked people."³⁶ He ordered interrogation of the captured Jews, Bieszko, Michałek, Socha, and Joseph to discover "what they did with the Sacred Sacrament."³⁷ He demanded that they then be appropriately punished for their crime, their property confiscated.³⁸ The officials followed these instructions and the Jews were burned at the stake, a whole week before the king's second letter calling for a "careful investigation," for release of the imprisoned Jews on bail, and return of their confiscated property. The second letter perhaps startled the officials involved in the trial who must have been under the impression that they were following directives from the king, dispatched in a letter of May 4.³⁹ Jewish historians either ignored the first letter, or, possibly, did not know about it. Instead, they reported the king's subsequent, if belated, reaction, while placing most of the blame for the affair on Church officials. This narrative, though, fit the image of King Sigismund Augustus they held.

Perhaps more complex is the case of King Sigismund III, the "cold" and reserved king, unresponsive to Jewish pleas. Here, too, the Jewish historians' narrative seems to overlap with that by Polish historians. Dubnow, for example, agreed with the early Polish historians who emphasized the rise of "Catholic reaction" and "intolerance" under Sigismund III. Baron, whose work is much later and understandably more nuanced, did give credit to Sigismund III for his "relatively friendly policies" that "seem to have amazed Jews themselves who must have been greatly alarmed when this pupil of Jesuits was elected to the Polish throne."⁴⁰ But Baron still linked this king's reign to the rise of anti-Jewish literature and accusations.⁴¹

³² Baron, *SRHJ Vol. 16*.

³³ On this, see Magda Teter Teter, *Sinners on Trial*, Chapter Five.

³⁴ ASV A.A. 4352, 72v, also in Wojtyska, ed. *Aloisius Lippomano (1555-1557)*, 422-423, A424.

³⁵ ASV A.A. 4352, 8r, also in Wojtyska, ed. *Aloisius Lippomano (1555-1557)*, 413-414, A422.

³⁶ ASV A.A. 4252, 8r, and Wojtyska, ed. *Aloisius Lippomano (1555-1557)*, 413.

³⁷ ASV A.A. 4252, 8v, and Wojtyska, ed. *Aloisius Lippomano (1555-1557)*, 414.

³⁸ ASV A.A. 4252, 8v, and Wojtyska, ed. *Aloisius Lippomano (1555-1557)*, 414.

³⁹ ASV A.A. 4352, also in Wojtyska, ed. *Aloisius Lippomano (1555-1557)*, 413-414, A422.

⁴⁰ Baron, *SRHJ Vol. 16*, 142.

⁴¹ Baron, *SRHJ Vol. 16*, 85-105, 143-163.

King Sigismund III was a complex figure. A son of a Lutheran father and a Catholic mother, a student of Jesuit teachers, he wanted to strengthen royal power that was waning in Poland. In 1605, King Sigismund III issued a decree ordering Jews expelled from the royal city of Bochnia, a declining, salt-producing city just 40 km east of Cracow. The decree arrived five years after a host desecration trial of two Christian men in the spring of 1600. Their trial became freighted with political consequence, its full scope evident only in 1605, when King Sigismund III issued the decree of expulsion of the Jews.⁴² Many Jews moved to a nearby private town of Wiśnicz, owned by a prominent nobleman. The expulsion, an unusual act for Poland, was touted by a local writer as a unique success that had joined a list of late-medieval expulsions from imperial cities, among them Wittenberg, Nuremberg, and Strasbourg.⁴³

Twenty-five years after King Sigismund III had expelled the Jews from Bochnia, the same king defended Jews against similar charges in Przemyśl.⁴⁴ The king established a commission to examine the proceedings of the trial, and then, when the committee reported problems, issued a decree condemning all the councilmen, magistrate, and jurors in Przemyśl for conspiring to jeopardize the findings of the royal commission. In disrespecting his official “with insolent words,” they dishonored his own person, the king claimed, and thus were guilty of contempt of his authority, for which they were to be punished.⁴⁵

King Sigismund III’s treatment of this host desecration trial in Przemyśl, so different from the one in Bochnia over two decades earlier, might seem perplexing. This king, seen by historians and contemporaries as the monarch responsible for the success of the Counter Reformation, would not have ignored the “gravity of this horrendous crime against Divine Majesty.” The king’s transformation came from the concern with royal power. In Bochnia, the royal authority had not been ignored. Though the city officials had wanted to execute promptly the two Christian men accused there of stealing the wafer, they agreed to wait for the royal decree before proceeding, and pushed for expulsion of the Jews through appropriate channels of power. Since in Bochnia it took years to accomplish this goal but this approach was effective, officials in Przemyśl did not want to wait years to achieve the goal of expelling Jews, no secret to either Christians or Jews.⁴⁶ In their zeal to expel the Jews, they ignored the existing legal frameworks and power structures. Refusing to wait for the king’s verdict and refusing to transfer the case to the palatine’s proper jurisdiction, they committed an act of rebellion against the king. As a long-term legacy, beyond the penitential prayer recited annually in the local synagogue, in 1633, the Sejm passed a constitution reaffirming legal parameters of magistrate and palatine jurisdiction, both in general and, more specifically, in criminal cases involving Jews. These measures were certainly not undertaken out of sympathy for Jews and they did not save Moszko Szmuklerz’s life. They were intended to protect and reaffirm the king’s authority and power.

The three trials, one in Sochaczew in 1556 under King Sigismund August, and the two, in Bochnia and Przemyśl under King Sigismund III, underline the complexity of Jewish-Christian relations. Surely, there was no “golden age” in Jewish-Christian relations in Poland, but Jewish-

⁴² This trial is discussed in detail in Chapter Six of my *Sinners on Trial*.

⁴³ Jan Achacy Kmita, *Ein Send Breief [Sic] Abo List Od Żydow Polskich Do Messyasza, Który Iako Żydzi Wierzą w Kraiu Siedzi Czekaiąc Czasu Przyścia Swego* (n.p.: n.p., after 1610), B3 verso. This work has been misdated by bibliographers who, like Karol Estreicher, dated it for 1601. The text, however, mentions both the expulsion of Jews from Bochnia, which took place in 1605-6, and from a nearby town of Uście, which took place in 1610.

⁴⁴ For a full discussion of the trial, see Teter, *Sinners on Trial*, Chapter Seven.

⁴⁵ AmPrz 824, 29.

⁴⁶ Schorr, *Żydzi w Przemyślu*, 252.

Christian relations in Poland, and elsewhere, were far from the dark picture offered by many historians. Even in the account of the anti-Jewish trials that complexity clashes with existing historiographic stereotypes. The reign of King Sigismund August may not have been the happiest, nor was the reign of the “Counter-Reformation” King Sigismund III the beginning of a dark period in Jewish-Christian relations. The trials encapsulate political transformations of the legal status of Jews in Poland, as their security increased in private domains and decreased in royal towns. Official documents, especially court records, by their nature, provide mostly materials relating to conflict, picturing a trail of uneasy coexistence between Jews and Christians; friendly relations between Jews and Christians seldom found their way to court records. If they did, it was only as a background of stories of conflict, or because these relations were in face considered illegal. Sometimes, paradoxically, anti-Jewish literature and Church legislation reveal closer relationships between Jews and Christians by explicitly prohibiting them.⁴⁷ In 1623, in Poznań, for example, a Jewish man was forced to defend himself in court, having been accused of having sexual relations with a Christian woman.⁴⁸ In 1748, a Jew Abram Michelevicz and a Christian woman, Paraska Danilovna, were tried in Mohilev. The two “were secretly living together in marriage,” an illegal act at the time.⁴⁹ Such sexual relations between Jews and Christians were frequent, despite being punishable, at least in theory, by death.

The surviving court cases illustrate problems with questions about the existence of a “golden age.” Such trials document certain intimacy, or at least perception of such intimacy, between Jews and Christians. And yet, they are also evidence of social discomfort with such situations and even persecution. “Golden Age” it was not, but within proper investigation of historical context one can unpack a compelling, textured, and complex set of relationships between Jews and Christians, evidence of both coexistence and conflict. It was historians who chose to emphasize one or the other. But an honest examination of both the “good” and the “bad” aspects of Jewish-Christian relations beyond the simplistic views of “the age of persecution” and “the golden age,” with mutual understanding of disagreements and errors, will result in what Bishop Sklba dubbed the “maturation” of Jewish-Christian relations.

⁴⁷ On this see in more detail, Magda Teter, *Jews and Heretics in Catholic Poland: A Beleaguered Church in the Post-Reformation Era* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). And, Kaplan and Teter, “Out of the (Historiographic) Ghetto.” Magda Teter, “‘There Should Be No Love between Us and Them’: Social Life and Bounds of Jewish and Canon Law in Early Modern Poland,” in *Early Modern Poland: Borders and Boundaries*, ed. Adam Teller and Magda Teter, *Polin* (Oxford; Portland, OR: Littmann Library of Jewish Civilization, 2009).

⁴⁸ Akta Miasta Poznania I 2250, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu, 151-152.

⁴⁹ The case and other similar cases are discussed in detail in my *Jews and Heretics in Catholic Poland*, Chapter Four.