

Rabbi Alan Berg  
Satan in America 2.  
The House of Earl and the Council of Four Lands

## II

Why did the Chelmnitzki massacres happen? What was the condition of the Jews before this catastrophe happened?

The beginning of modern Jewish history and the origins of where Jews are today are in the year 1587 in the decree by the Polish King Sigismund formalizing a decades old agreement that the Jews in the four lands under his domain should collect taxes on themselves, and should do so for the non-Jews who live in the Four Lands, and deliver the funds to him, to Poland.

The decree quickly set in motion the organization of all of the Jews living in Poland, the Ukraine, the Baltics and western Russia into one self-governing Jewish nation called the Council Of Four Lands. This became the first modern Jewish nation. Each community was governed by a Kahal, or Kehillah.

The Council of Four Nations, the antecedent and predecessor and model of today's state of Israel, had two eras.

A Golden Era from 1551 to 1648 and a long collapse from 1648 to 1764 when it was officially abolished by King Stanislov August.

Whatever its own condition, golden or gornisht, the Council existed at the indulgence of Polish monarchy for whom and with whom Jews had, almost always, a dynamic partner, and this history gave their successors the inclination to seek similar partners.

In Satan in Goray we have the most comprehensive picture of life during that first peaceful era of the Council of Four Lands, roughly from 1550 to 1648. A solid hundred years of life like this: (Singer) "Once upon a time everything had preceded in an orderly fashion.

Masters had labored alongside their apprentices, and merchants had traded...school mistresses had visited the girls at home.

“On Thursdays and Fridays the needy went from house to house carrying beggars bags, collecting food for the Sabbath, on the Sabbath itself, the good women of the town collected white bread and meat, fish and fruit for the needy.”

Reb Eleazar Badad, Rechele’s father, and the seven town elders had kept a sharp watch on all town affairs.

The Jews of Goray dwelled in peace with the village Christians; in the town itself there lived only a few gentiles.

And then Singer adds one other scene to his accrued narrative to this nearly beatific, but true picture of Jewish life in the first era of the Four Lands.

It is a description of the Jews at winter and summer fairs, selling religious icons to Christians passing through Goray on their way to shrines, especially in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

It rang a bell for me. Here is Singer’s description:

“The Goray fairs were famous throughout the countryside....And what merchandise ...Christmas tree masks...True often enough Rabbi Benish had interdicted Jews dealing in Christian images. Nevertheless, secretly sales continued of missals with gilded covers and pages, wax candles and even holy pictures of saints with halo’s around their heads.”

Was this important information? Did it tell us anything about what it was like to be a Jew during the 100 years of the Jewish nation?

The passage reminded me of an experience I had had personally in 1983 or ’84 when as rabbi of a small Reform congregation in Massachusetts, I was called to the home of Jenny and Earl

Salzmann. Earl had just passed away, and at about 5 pm in the evening I stood on her porch knocking on a friendly wooden door.

We talked about her husband and his good life. He was a good man. After 45 minutes, with an odd resistance, was it embarrassment, Jenny asked me to follow her from the kitchen down the stairs to the basement.

She turned on the light below. There, carefully arranged were dozens of cases, with displays carefully laid out on top of each, of Christian icons of every variety; crosses on necklaces, beads, missals with gilded covers and pages, wax candles and holy pictures of saints with halos over their heads.

The only thing missing was the Christmas tree masks.

It was as if the contents of the warehouse of the last Goray Christmas fair in 1647 had been boxed up and ended up in the basement of the Salzmann's house on Maple Street in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. An American town in 1984 not unlike Goray during the golden age of the Council of Four Lands.

Jenny, looked at me and, shyly, held up a full-advertisement that I had seen in many magazines over the years, containing pictures and a nice word and price, all under twenty dollars, for everything that filled the room from wall to wall, on tables and shelves.

At the top of the ad, Jenny said it as I saw it – The House of Earl.

She said, "The House of Earl." Her husband as a sideline – Earl Salzmann – the House of Earl, sold Christian icons, like some of our ancestors in Council of Four Lands.

The House of Earl and the Duke of Earl. My R&B brain wouldn't let go.

I was quiet as I looked around the room. The combination of the solemnity of the occasion and the recent widow's awkwardness, kept me silent.

It never left my mind, as if it was seeking the moment to comprehend what I was looking at.

And thinking of the good times for Pittsfield then, in the early 80s, the noteworthy interfaith environment, the bristling economy – Reagan had moved a lot of business to all three of GE's Pittsfield Divisions, and all of the GE execs, of all religions, and all of the clergy in town pow-wowed at the Thursday noon meeting of the Stanley Club. I remember when they welcomed the first three women as members and Bob Newman, the esteemed head of the Berkshire Athenaeum and national head of the Melville Society, almost fainted, but yes, he thought it was easily a good idea that women could be Rotarians and he was glad it had been done.

Singer writes of similar good times in old Goray: "Before the (Christmas) holidays when large numbers of gentiles passed through Goray on the way to a shrine...."

All during the fair the children of Ham rejoiced in their own way. They danced with their women, pounding the floor with their feet, whistling and singing coarse songs.

The women screamed and shook their hips, the men fought swinging mighty fists.

And what merchandise did Jews not sell. They sold women's flower patterned shawls and handkerchiefs, egg rolls and long twisted white bread, children's shoes and wading boots. Spices and nuts, iron yokes and nails; gilded bridal gifts and ready-made dresses; noisemakers for night watchmen, and Christmas tree masks.

True, often enough, (as I mentioned), Rabbi Benish had interdicted Jews dealing in Christian images."

Nevertheless. It was a time of prosperity and relative outward harmony for the Jews of Poland, of the Council of Four Lands, and of

Goray, a time when there was a constructive relationship between the Jewish people and the government of Poland.

It felt to Jews of those days, with regard to their inner lives and ours, the terrain is similar.

They too had known about 100 years of community autonomy, safety, the same economic cycles as the majority population.

In the west, in Germany and Holland, although tentative, this was the end of the middle ages, science and rational thinking were the focus of philosophy. Although it was a time of balance in the societies of the Four lands, the primitive use of violence was never far offstage – not from the Polish leadership, a group with whom the Jews had struck the alliance that made peace, creativity and prosperity possible; but from the white Russian oligarchs and the Polish nationalists who hated the Polish King.

Or so it seemed for a while.

Let me introduce you to the Council of Four Lands, and to add that this, by far, was the most impactful era in Jewish history; including upon the founding events of the State of Israel, and all Jew's life in it, and upon your life today and mine.

Here is the story of the Council of Four Lands; the source is the Jewish Encyclopedia (JE).

On July 1, 1569 the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth was established and along with it an inclusive and innovatively organized nation of many peoples; but only the Jews were self-governing with it.

The Warsaw Confederation Act of 1573 provided for religious freedom.

Co-existing in creative, dynamic partnership during this still feudal period were Catholic, Jewish, Protestant and Muslim communities.

It was the first tolerant state in Europe, and what becomes alarming is we know none of this.

The Council of Four Lands (JE) for two centuries from 1561 through the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a 100 percent Jewish government established in partnership with the newly empowered urban Polish nobility to develop and maintain trade, and to collect taxes from the 9 million Poles who lived and worked in Poland, the Baltics, Ukraine and Ruthia.

“The great number of the Jewish population, its importance in the industrial life of the country, and the peculiarities of the political and class organization of the Polish commonwealth were the reasons why the Jews of Poland formed a separated class enjoying liberal autonomy within the sphere of their communal and spiritual interests, the outcome of which was their exemplary communal organization. ...

which constituted a unit of self-government.

There was a system of courts, rabbinical and civil. From this era came great rabbis, such as Moses Iserles, who helped create a vision of a diverse Jewish community in this legendary Shulchan Aruch.

Every bit of scholarship I could find from this period had a reference to the significance of ‘fairs.’ Regional intra-national fairs, that is for all of the nations who lived in the Polish-Lithuanian alliance.

The fairs, both in their significance to the Jewish community economically, was the site where the representatives of the Kahal’s – each self-governing community, met, and where the larger body – the Kehillah, and where their Supreme Court met. For all of the Jews of the Four Lands, the central governing body was the Va-ad – big committee – that convened, created and passed national legislation for all Jews under its auspices. The fairs were where the Va’ad, call it the national Jewish congress, performed administrative functions, where it also deliberated and defined the spiritual and cultural norms, including behavior standards for Jews who lived among Christians.

This is not The Lord of the Rings. This is actual Jewish and Polish history.

The Va'ad represented the Jewish communities interests before Polish authorities, and would, in a reference that calls up Netanyahu's speech in the House of Representatives, sometimes not be seen protecting Jewish interests if they felt resistance to oppressive Polish measures would be dangerous.

The Va'ad controlled Jewish settlement and selected rabbis.

But what, I wondered, what made these 'fairs' definitive, because apparently the fairs were the ground from which this all emerged, both for Poles and for Jews.

The word 'fair' is probably not the word that would clarify to us that these events, occurring in the month of August, and in the weeks leading up to December 25 are best understood as economic equity zones, or less elegantly, free trade zones.

In this feudal/enlightenment economic hybrid of Poland, all trades controlled the products under their domain. This was called a guild. The word sounds nice. Guild. But the entire concept of access to markets or to work was nowhere in the vocabulary of anyone but oligarchs – except at the fairs.

For what reason, I ask you, were these seasonal events the location for the founding actions of the post-medieval Polish commonwealth and the self-governing, affluent, cosmopolitan, tax collecting, entrepreneurial, Jewish nations – the Va'ad – Kehillah, I call it to make it clear what was going on – The New Judea.

The last Judea being the nation centered around Jerusalem, and desecrated by the Romans in the year 70.

This was the new Judea until 1648 when Chelmintzki led Cossacks and declared war on the Poles and their allies the Jews. This was the beginning of the end for the Polish Commonwealth and for the new Judea.

Both would exist for another 100 years and collapse at the same time, but it was over in 1648.

The Jews were impoverished, dead, grieving and many, if not most, emotionally unwell for the rest of their lives from the trauma.

This is the point at which Singers book tells its story.

1648. It was an event that was shattering in its power, with the inevitable violence. Everything was disrupted.

And after an extended period, 10 then 15 years; it led to madness and decadent, recreate the past - memory. We sometimes see this happening in our own lives, you know what I mean?

Something rough happens in our lives, for a while, sometimes a long, we are disoriented. Sometimes there is too much and things become harder.

When and if this happens to the whole community at once, as it did when after a long period of relative and absolute grace; the Chelmnitzki massacres destroyed completely and permanently not only the entire world of the Council of Four Lands, but the Polish state that was favorable toward a separately governing Jewish nation within its borders...

With the Russians now ready for the hunt, then in the 17<sup>th</sup> century beginning their state based on violence, that endures to this day, and what we in America would basically call a white supremacist state.

But people in this of disorientation, like the Jews of Goray are not mad, they are simply vulnerable, overwhelmed.



In Satan in Goray, this is represented by Rachele, the daughter of Reb Badad, not a rabbi, but the wealthiest man in town, a good man. But after 1848, Reb Badad was wandering in poverty from town to town and finally...he is lost, disappeared, no one can find him. When his daughter Rachele sends a messenger to get her father's approval for her betrothal to Reb Joseph, Her father – no one can find him.

He, to me, in this book represents the cosmopolitan world of the Council of Four Lands, simply and apparently completely, vanished.

And when all of this makes Rachele seemingly mad, she repeats over and over "I can't rest," she is comforted by a mystical form of comfort brought to her by Chinkele the Pious, "Be patient, you'll soon be married to Reb Itche Mates He is a holy man sent by heaven to save you."

This is the madness that Chelmnitski tragedy created, but after the madness, came memory – a desire for restoration of the Council of Four Lands – in its health, its distinctive and creative Jewishness, not only in faith, but in citizenship; because it was the Council that controlled all law pertaining to the Jewish residents, civil, criminal and through the local council's selection of rabbis, religious law.

The 100 years of affluence and peace. Gone

If you set before you a history of this moment – and imagine only its restoration, not how or why, it is a logical goal.

And in its capacity to seek a vehicle through Hasidism, then the Enlightenment and Reform Judaism, for its restoration, you can perceive its subliminal power, a power that fueled all of these movements....

One can understand how in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, after the complete end of its hundred-year collapse, the memory of the New Judea of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Council of Four Lands, sought the Council's restoration in Zionism.