SCRIPTA JUDAICA CRACOVIENSIA * Vol. 8
Kraków 2010

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Familiarization with the Polish Diaspora. Selected Legends of the Mediaeval Jews

There is no need to prove the significant role played by legends, myths and stereotypes in the history of the world. Also in the Polish lands, we can find many stories connected with the history of the Jews. There is still no comprehensive study on legends concerning Jews in mediaeval Poland, but we already have the book by Haya Bar-Itzhak, a professor of Comparative Hebrew Literature at the Haifa University.[1] An exception here may be the well-known legend about the love affair between King Kazimierz Wielki (Casimir the Great) and the Jewish girl Esther, which has been widely described in many works. Of special importance is the book written by the eminent literary historian and linguist, Chone Shmeruk, entitled "Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jidysz i polskiej" (*The Legend of Esther in Yiddish and Polish Literature*).[2]

In the Jewish Diaspora, that is in exile, the myths and legends created by the Jews played a variety of functions. An ethnologist, Olga Goldberg-Mulkiewicz, following the Mircea Eliade's idea of consecrating the place of settlement, showed that, in the context of the Polish Diaspora, the local Jewish legends played a role in getting familiarized with the foreign place and country.[3] There were also legends in Poland, spread by people who were unfriendly towards the Jews and intended to slander them and justify the hostile attitude of the Christians towards them. Examples of the first category are the legends about the arrival of Jews in Poland and about Abraham Prochownik (*The Gunpowder Man*), and examples of the other include the magic ring of Levek the Banker and the Jews being involved in the ceremony of profaning the Host. There were also legends which could fall into both categories at the same time, like the story about the love between King Casimir the Great and the Jewish girl Esther or about Bishop Mikołaj Błażejowski's miraculous ring.

Two legends of Jewish origin describe the arrival of Jews in Poland. The first, short on detail, was mainly intended to explain the Hebrew name of Poland – Polin; the second, rich in detail, offered an accurate chronology of the Jewish settlement in this area and explained its circumstances. According to the first legend, the persecuted Jews, expelled from the European countries, headed eastwards, to the more sparsely populated but fertile lands. As they were too tired and hungry to go any further, they decided it was time to rest or, in another version, they got a note from heaven above with the written

[1] Bar-Itzhak 2001.
[2] Shmeruk 2000.
[3] Goldberg-Mulkiewicz 2003: 21–22.

words – *po lin* – which in literary translation means "rest here". First, the term assumed the form "Pojlin", and was used to refer to Poland, examples of which can be found in the journey diary of Petachia of Ratisbon (12th c.), in the work *Or Zarua* by Isaac of Vienna (13th c.), and in the responses of the German Rabbis Moses Minc (15th c.) and Israel of Brno (1400–1480).[4] The symbolic etymology of the term *Polin* was attributed to the well-known rabbi from Kazimierz near Kraków – Moses Isserles.[5] On the other hand, as noticed by O. Goldberg-Mulkiewicz, this term may only mean that the Jews were just to spend some definite time there needed to rest and get sleep, and not to settle there permanently. However, as the rest time was prolonged, they had to familiarize themselves with the foreign place and start or rather strengthen links with it, which could be and was done with the use of different methods.[6]

The second legend about the Jews' arrival in the Polish lands was presented cond volume of Joachim Lelewel's book *Polska wieków średnich* (Poznań 1856). From this source we learn that the Jews fled to Germany from Spain and were quite happy there until the outbreak of the war between the Franks and the Saxons. The Jews did not take part in the fights, but nevertheless became victims of attacks and harassment from both parties of the conflict. Their situation did not become any better after Saxony had been conquered by the ruler of the Franks,[7] Charles the Great, and after Christianity was introduced there. As a result, the Jewish elders decided to leave the country. First, however, in 4653,[8] they sent envoys to the Polish ruler Leszek IV[9] who, speaking Latin, presented the misfortunes of the believers of Judaism. Their story moved Leszek, which encouraged the envoys to ask his consent to the settlement of Jews in Poland and permission for them to exercise crafts and cultivate land. Before the Polish ruler took his decision as to the further fate of the Jews, he asked the envoys a number of questions concerning their faith:

1º. What is your religion? To which they answered they believed in the being who was invisible, eternal, omnipotent and indivisible. This being had created everything and continued to maintain everything.
2º. What do you think of the soul? They thought it was immortal.
3º. Do you feel guilty before God when you harm each other? They answered there was no doubt they did, as the smallest harm done to another human being would be punished.
4º. Is anyone who differs from you in his opinions (religious?!) considered to be a human being? The Jews confirmed that regardless of what such person thought or said, he was a human being and they considered him as such.
5º. What do you do, though, if a man does not accept your dogmas of faith? They stated that only human matters belonged to man, while all the rest belonged to God and He would judge.

[4] Huberband 1951: 35, 39–43; Weinryb 1973: 18, 335.
[5] Żebrowski 2003: 337.
[6] Goldberg-Mulkiewicz 2003: 21.
[7] In the original test – the ruler of Germany.
[8] According to the Jewish calendar: Weyl 1849b: 155.
[9] He was called a young king.

6º. How do you feel about strangers who want to settle in your homeland that is in Palestine? They answered they felt the way that God and people required.

7º Does your law speak of tolerance? The Jews replied that yes, quite a lot, and then quoted a number of citations from books of the Torah:[10]

- *Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt* (Exit, 22, 20; *ibid*. 23, 9).[11]
- *And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be onto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt* (Levites, 19, 33–34).
- *He doth execute judgement of the fatherless and widow, and loves the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. Love ye therefore the stranger, for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt* (Deut. 10, 18–19).
- *When thou cuttest down thine harvest in the field and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it; it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow; that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands* (Deut. 24, 19).
- *And thou shalt rejoice in every good thing which the LORD thy God hath given unto thee and unto thine house and the Levite and the stranger that is among you* (Deut. 26, 11).

Leszek was satisfied with the replies he received from the Jews to his questions. Nevertheless, he conferred for three days with his counsellors before he finally agreed to the settlement of the Jews in his lands. In 894, large crowds of believers in Judaism left Germany and arrived in Poland, where they were received with great hospitality. In 4665 (905) they were granted a privilege that gave them permission to settle, practise their own faith, perform unrestricted trade and craft activities, have their own jurisdiction, made them independent from noblemen[12] and provided protection from all enemies. Unfortunately, this privilege was allegedly lost during the Polish-German war in 1049.[13]

The above legend probably goes back to the late 18th century. Its authors and promoters were most probably the Jews themselves, worried by their, then formulated, new legal status (perhaps during the sessions of various commissions of the Four Years' Sejm (1788–1792), and the loss of numerous privileges granted to them by the Polish rulers. Some Jews might have wanted to undertake actions that might lead to giving them equal rights with all other citizens. The above legend was intended to make everybody aware that the Jews appeared in the Polish lands as soon as the early Middle Ages, took part in the creation of the Polish state as welcome, free and even in some way privileged people, who were, moreover, characterized by great tolerance towards strangers. It is possible that through the contents of this legend, they expected to force the same tolerance towards themselves.

[10] Weyl 1849a: 144; Weyl 1849b: 155–156; Weyl 1849c: 159–160; Lelewel 1856: 417–418; Mahler & Ringelblum 1937: 15–17.

[11] All biblical quotations from *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu w przekładzie z języków oryginalnych*, edited by a group of Polish biblists, 4th edition, Poznań–Warszawa 1989.

[12] In the original text: the knights.

[13] Weyl 1849c: 160; Lelewel 1856: 418; Mahler & Ringelblum 1937: 17.

Evidence for the late origin of this legend may be, among others, the reference to expelling Jews from Spain which occurred in 1492. According to the story, it was from there that they fled to Germany and next to Poland. J. Lelewel found the legend in the article written by a philosophy doctor and author of guidebooks about Germany, Louis Weyl (deceased in 1854), a Jewish teacher from Berlin, who was born in Piła (Schneidemühl). His text appeared in 1849 in the German journal "Der Orient" published by Julius Fürst.[14] While writing it, Weyl was drawing on many different works, among them that of Wolf Meyer Dessauer, entitled *Phylacterium, oder Arganton und Philo im Schoosse der wahren Glükseligkeit*[15] which appeared anonymously in Berlin in 1801. In the endnotes to his article, the author also referred to the texts of various Polish writers, including Klemens Janicki, Tomasz Treter (1547–1610), Mateusz Bembus, Adam Naruszewicz, Władysław Grabowski, who pointed to the very early arrival of Jews in the Polish lands, within the period between the late 8th and the end of the 11th century.[16]

Much more mysterious is the legend of Abraham Prochownik (the Gunpowder man), the authorship of which is also ascribed to the Jews themselves. It tells of the events after the tragic death of Prince Popiel.[17] A great meeting was called at Kruszwica, where people gathered to elect a new ruler. However, when they failed to chose a worthy successor, it was agreed that their ruler should be the first man to come to their settlement at dawn. Four sentries were placed at the bridge leading to the town. By coincidence, the first person who appeared on the bridge over the Gopło lake at dawn of the next day was Abraham, the Jew who used to bring gunpowder to the town and was therefore called Prochownik (the Gunpowder man). After joyful greeting, the sentries led Abraham to the town where, according to the former agreement, his head was to be adorned with the crown. First, Prochownik firmly refused, but as all the gathering insisted on their decision being put into practice, he asked for one day's delay so that he could seek counsel in his prayer to God. He further requested not to be disturbed in his prayers. Still, when two days passed and Abraham did not leave the cottage where he had locked himself, the oldest man from the crowd[18] decided to make him go out and forced the door open with an axe. After that, Abraham appeared before the gathered crowd and persuaded the people that the most worthy of the crown was Piast, the man who forced his way into the cottage. Abraham argued that Piast had wisdom, as he knew the country could not exist without a ruler, and courage, as despite the distinct order, he opposed it to save his country. The crowd liked what he said and Piast was elected prince (king).[19]

The oldest story about Abraham the Jew was published on nine pages by Roman Zmorski (1822–1867), writing under the pen name R. Zamarski, under the title *Powieść o Abrahamie Prochowniku (opowiedziana przez jego Potomka)* [The story of Abraham Prochownik told by his descendant] in the collection *Domowe wspomnienia i powiastki*

[14] Weyl 1849a: 143–144; Weyl 1849b: 155–156; Weyl 1849c: 159–160.

[15] [W.M. Dessauer], *Phylacterium, oder Arganton und Philo im Schoosse der wahren Glückseligkeit. Betrift die treue Darstellung des übernaturlkichen Wunders, welches am 25. August 1799 in Posen mit ausgezeichneter Pracht gefeiert ward; die Geschichte der Israeliten und die zu wünschende bürgerliche Verbesserung derselben*, Berlin 1801.

[16] Weyl 1849a: 143.

[17] In the original text: King Popiel.

[18] In the original text: of the noblemen.

[19] Mahler & Ringelblum 1937: 14–15; Sehn 1998: 227.

(Warszawa 1854). R. Zmorski had once been a well-known poet, translator and folklorist, the most eminent representative of the so called Warsaw Bohemians, whose political activity forced him to frequently change places of residence. He stayed in Mazovia, Greater Poland, Silesia and Pomerania, as well as in Prussia, France and Ruthenia. In Brussels, he contacted, among others, Joachim Lelewel. Zmorski published a series of legends and stories, mostly from the regions of Mazovia and Silesia.[20] The legend about Abraham Prochownik was narrated by him in such a form as if really told by one of Abraham's Jewish descendants, although the main character was presented in a playful way. That is why the text was rich in phrases of the "nu" or "oj wej" type (characteristic of so-called "Jewish Polish") or "our great grandfather Abraham". There were also references to the Jewish Sukkot Holiday, the Feast of the Booths and typical Jewish dishes like "kugiel" or fish. Zmorski also made a joke by giving an approximate date of the event he described – "long, long ago when people did not yet know vodka or snuff".[21] It is generally known that the terms "vodka" as well as "snuff" appeared in Poland in the 17th century.[22] This fact is of significance, as the later compilers of this legend dated its origin to this particular period.

Zmorski's legend of Abraham Prochownik was copied by a teacher and education activist, Ewaryst Estkowski (1820–1856), who published it, in 1854, in the fifth volume of the Polish Pedagogical Society's organ – "Szkółka dla Młodzieży" (formerly called "Szkoła Polska").[23] It also attracted the interest of J. Lelewel who, in the already mentioned work *Polska wieków średnich*, pointed out that what remained in the memory of the readers of the story was the wisdom of Abraham, who proved to be more clever than the noblemen by observing that there was no need to look for foreign candidates to the throne when they had equally capable ones among themselves. On this occasion, Lelewel also tells the legend of Saul Wahl,[24] who ruled Poland for one day during the interregnum after the death of Sigismund Augustus, after having unexpectedly been chosen by the nobility for the position of President of the election and interrex, because the Primate, customarily taking this function in such cases, had gone to bed.[25]

Zmorski's humorous story about Abraham Prochownik started to change, retold by subsequent compilers, into a moralizing treaty praising those who every day work hard from dawn, and additionally presenting the Jews in an increasingly better light. It is no surprise, then, that Jewish historians too became interested in its contents. One of them was Herman Sternberg. In the work written in German and published in the early 1860s *Próba historii Żydów w Polsce od ich przybycia do tego kraju (ok. IX w.) do 1848* [An Attempt at Describing the History of the Jews in Poland after their Arrival in that Country (ca 9th c.) till 1848][26] the author presented, in an abbreviated form, the legend of Abraham Prochownik, referring to Zmorski's story. At the same time, Sternberg related the history of Abraham with the brakteat coins bearing Hebrew inscriptions, from the times of Mieszko the Old, the prince of Greater Poland, which were supposed

[20] Pieścikowski 1985: 688–689.
[21] [Zmorski] Zamarski 1854: 196–204.
[22] Brückner 1985, I: 373–374; Brückner 1985, II: 677–679.
[23] Jagielska 1984: 247.
[24] More about Saul Wahl and the legend, see Gąsiorowski 1996/1997: 10–12.
[25] Lelewel 1856: 419–420.
[26] Sternberg 1860.

to prove the authenticity of the legend. In Kazimierz Stronczyński's book devoted to coins minted during the rule of the Piast dynasty[27] and in the catalogue of coins published by Leon Mikocki,[28] Sternberg found two brakteats bearing the name Abraham. On the first coin was the inscription "Prince Abraham", and on the second "Sacrifice and Abraham". Sternberg identified the Abraham from the Hebrew inscriptions on these coins with the Abraham from the legend in an attempt to make the story more credible.[29] The same reasoning was followed by Sternberg eighteen years later, in the extended version of his book, published under the slightly changed title *Historia Żydów w Polsce pod panowaniem Piastów i Jagiellonów.*[30]

Apart from Sternberg, the abbreviated legend of Abraham Prochownik was also presented in works by Aleksander Kraushar,[31] Maksymilian Gumplowicz[32] and Hilary Nussbaum,[33] as well as Rafał Mahler and Emanuel Ringelblum, the publishers of resource texts for the history of the Jews in Poland, and next, in the works of a few other writers.[34] Separately mentioned would be the article from the late 19th century, written by Ernest Sulimczyk Swieżawski, devoted to the two legends already described about the arrival of Jews in Poland at the times of King Lestek and about Abraham Prochownik. The author related these stories not only to the Hebrew brakteat coins from the 12th century, but also to the letter of Chasdai ibn Shaprut (ca. 915 – ca. 970), a physician and diplomat of the Caliph of Cordoba, Abd-al-Rahman III, written to the ruler of the Chasars who was a believer in Judaism. In this letter, Chasdai, a historical person, listed among the envoys who came to see the Caliph also the envoys sent by the "king of Gebalims", called "al-Sekalab", and among those, the two Jews – Saul and Joseph. The Polish publisher of this letter, August Bielowski, speculated in the endnotes that the name "king of Gebalims" referred to the Slav ruler Ziemomysł, the father of prince Mieszko. If Ziemomysł already trusted the Jews to such an extent that he was sending them as envoys into foreign lands, they must have settled in his country much earlier, perhaps exactly at the time when Polanie had been ruled by the legendary Lestek.[35]

The beginnings of the Abraham Prochownik legend were associated by Swieżawski with Abraham Zbąski. Zbąski was a Protestant and one of the most powerful magnates of Greater Poland. According to Bartosz Paprocki, after the death of Sigismund Augustus he aspired to the Polish throne. His name (which was, by the way, very common in this family) was supposed to point to his Jewish ancestry. On the basis of the frequency of the name Abraham in the Zbąski family, Edward Raczyński and Joachim Lelewel traced his origins back to a figure who was equally legendary as Abraham Prochownik, Esther, the Jewish mistress of King Casimir the Great.[36] Moreover, just as

[27] Stronczyński 1847: 300, type 53; annex, p. 5–6.
[28] Mikocki 1850: 10, no. 179.
[29] Sternberg 1860: 6–9.
[30] Sternberg 1878: 4–6.
[31] Kraushar 1865: 41–44.
[32] Gumplowicz 1903: 22–24.
[33] Nussbaum 1890: 2–4, 8.
[34] Mahler & Ringelblum 1937: 14–15; Sehn 1998: 223, 225–226.
[35] Swieżawski 1882: 59–62; Chasdai-ibn-Shaprut, in: A. Bielowski (ed.), *Pomniki dziejowe Polski*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1960: 51–83.
[36] Raczyński 1842: 214; Lelewel 1844: 340–341; Paprocki 1858: 211; Mieses 1991: 252–254.

Prochownik passed the crown on to Piast, Zbąski was said to pass the crown on to Henri de Valois, who had promised to have cannons sent to Poland, which had reference to the nickname of the legendary Jew. Later, just like Lelewel, Swieżawski combined the story of Abraham Prochownik with the legend of the one-day Polish king, Saul Wahl of the Katzenelenbogen family. It is worth adding here that, on the occasion of successive royal elections after the death of the last of the Jagiellonian dynasty on the Polish throne, even Jews were sometimes mentioned among the social classes who should hold the right to elect the sovereign. One of those who publicly spoke about such an option was the famous poet Jan Kochanowski of Czarnolas (1530–1584). In his speech during the parliamentary (Sejm) session in Warsaw (1573–1575), he put forward a project of this kind, arguing that originally, God Himself established for the Jews the right of royal election which later spread all over the Christian world, because according to St. Paul, "the whole of Christianity was born from Abraham's seed".[37]

The earlier described legends about the arrival of Jews in Poland and about raising one of them to the throne could be classified as extolling, considering their positive message. In mediaeval Poland there were, however, other stories presenting Jews in a ad light. These were the accusations of black magic, profanation of the Host or ritual murders of Christians. An example of the magical practices of Polish Jews was the ring which came into possession of a well known chronicler and royal vice-chancellor, Jan of Czarnków († 1386/1387). After the death of Casimir the Great, the vice-chancellor was involved in the matter of opening the king's tomb and stealing the funeral insignia, which he allegedly passed to the Gniewkowski prince, Vladislav the White (Władysław Biały) who would not have accepted the candidacy of Louis the Great to the Polish throne, as he himself claimed the throne due to his birth rights. In 1373 (?), the doctor of the decrees, the titulary parish priest of Our Lady's Church in Kraków, the chancellor of Greater Poland and later Bishop of Poznan, Mikołaj of Kórnik († 1382) started legal proceedings against Jan of Czarnków, accusing him, among other things, of theft of the king's money in the sum of 16 thousand grzywnas collected from Krakow's Jews, keeping an adulteress and witch, an old Ruthenian woman, and possessing the magic ring of Levek the Jew. Unfortunately, the accuser did not specify the properties of the ring. It was a historian, Jan Dąbrowski, who said that the ring belonged to Levek ben Jordan († ca. 1395), the banker of Polish rulers – Casimir the Great, Louis of Hungary, Jadwiga and Vladislaw Jagiello, the tenant of the Kraków mint and the salt mines in Bochnia and Wieliczka.[38]

Much more grave consequences than the imputation of witchcraft were brought by accusing the Jews of profanation of the Holy Host and ritual murders. This problem has been studied at length by Hanna Węgrzynek, who referred to accusing the Jews of such crimes by the term "the black legend". Of particular interest in this respect is the history of the Corpus Christi cult in Poland. It developed after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) at which approval was given to the decree on transubstantiation, that is the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Host and in the wine transubstantiated during the Holy Mass. The celebration of Corpus Christi was established by Pope Urban IV in 1264, and

[37] Swieżawski 1882: 63–65, 121, 123; Ulewicz 1984: 452.

[38] Helcel 1856: xiii–xiv, note 5; *Kronika Jana z Czarnkowa*, translation by J. Żerbiłło, ed. M.D. Kowalski, Kraków 1996: 55, note 110; Dąbrowski 1964: 148.

as early as three years later, Cardinal Gvido, at the synod in Wrocław, introduced it in that diocese. In 1420, at the synod in Gniezno, it was recognized as a Christian religious holiday for the whole of Poland. Because of the Jan Długosz Chronicle, the origins of dedicating the churches at Kazimierz near Kraków (1340) and in Poznań (1399) to Corpus Christi were related to the alleged theft of the Hosts by the Jews and their profanation. Churches were later founded at the places where the Hosts were miraculously found. The chronicler's reports and other texts gave rise to anti-Judaist speeches and writings presented mainly by representatives of Polish and foreign clergy, which, apart from Węgrzynek, have also been discussed by many other researchers.[39] As reported by daily papers, today people still believe in false accusations suggesting that the Jews profaned the Holy Host. For example, at Żydowska Street in Poznań a well was found where, allegedly, the Jews had dropped the profaned Host. People continue to take water from this well, believing in its miraculous and curative properties.[40]

The history of the Middle Ages also knows legends which combined "the black and the white legends" of the Jews. In this category we can place the story presented by Jan Długosz, already widely discussed by scholars,[41] about the alleged love affair between King Casimir the Great and the Jewish girl, Esther as well as about the miraculous ring of Bishop Błażejowski. It must have been difficult for the famous chronicler to explain the reasons for such an eminent Polish ruler, Casimir III, to have granted a few extensive privileges to the Jewish people, and yet he was unable to prove they had been forged. That is surely why he invented a story about another mistress of the king known for his dissolute life style. According to the story, Esther charmed the king with her beauty, and in answer to her pleadings he granted to all Jews special rights which – according to what Długosz wrote – constituted grave abuse of God's Majesty.[42]

The story of Esther had been used by the authors of anti-Jewish literature to question the legal status of Jews in Poland. Among many texts of this type, we can mention such examples as the book *Żydowskie okrucieństwo* [Jewish cruelty] written by a Catholic priest, Przesław Mojecki, published in Kraków in 1589, the works of Sebastian Śleszkowski and many others. The compliment Długosz paid to the unusual beauty of the Jewish girl also affected the imagination of Jewish writers, who began to treat the love affair described by him as the real fact. One of the first was David Gans, who in his work *Semah Dawid* [The Descendants of David], published in Prague in 1595, devoted two sentences to the relationship of King Casimir and Esther. From that time, the legend started to acquire new pseudo-facts describing Esther's later life and the places connected with her. There was even a mound in Łobzów that was devoted to her memory. Moreover, the legend constitutes a significant part of the heritage of Polish and Jewish culture. Specific details on this subject can be found in the book by Shmeruk quoted earlier and in numerous other studies.[43]

[39] Ioannis Dlugossi, *Annales seu Cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae. Liber nonus*, Varsaviae 1978: 247–249; *idem*, *Liber decimus 1370–1405*, Varsaviae 1985: 236; Rożek 1991: 142–143; Węgrzynek 1995: 31–34; Bracha 2002: 483–491; Tokarska-Bakir 2008: *passim*.

[40] V. Szostak, *Co piją przy Żydowskiej*, „Gazeta Wyborcza", March 27, 2008: 15.

[41] Bar-Itzhak 2001: 113–132; Shmeruk 2000: *passim*.

[42] Ioannis Dlugossi, *Annales seu Cronicae...*: 283–285.

[43] Bartoszewicz 1914: 44; Gill 1997: 61–63; Shmeruk 2000: 15, 37.

Not so widely known is the legend of the midwives' ring, probably first described towards the end of the 19th c. by Leopold Hauser (1844–1908) in the historical monograph of Przemyśl. It refers to the activity of the Przemyśl bishop Mikołaj of Błażejów Błażejowski (ca. 1405–1474), once the custodian of the Kraków Cathedral and the king's secretary. One day, when he was already the bishop of Przemyśl, so in the period between 1452 and 1474, while taking a walk in Zasań, a suburb of Przemyśl, he was unexpectedly asked by a despairing Jew for help with the difficult labour of his wife. Obviously, it was a plea for prayer in the intention of the happy childbirth. Błażejowski agreed to help the Jew, visited the house where the Jew's wife was lying in difficult labour and told the woman to put his bishop's ring on her finger. Thanks to this jewel, a child was soon born. People started to believe that the bishop's ring had miraculous power, and it was lent to other women in need. Hence, the ring's Latin name *annulus pauperis salutaris* (the curative ring of the poor). Most probably, after the bishop's death, his ring was kept by the Cathedral Chapter in Przemyśl, which continued lending it to help in cases of difficult childbirths. This is what it gave it the name "the midwives' ring". One of the first source materials where the ring is mentioned dates to 1476 and comes from the manuscript of Fryderyk Alembek *Collectanea librorum consistorialium Premysliens*, written in 1647 and kept in the archives of the Przemyśl Chapter in Przemyśl. Based on it, we can learn that in 1476 the ring was borrowed from the chapter by a Mikołaj Radwan de Prostek who left for it a bond in the considerable sum of 100 grzywnas. The custom of the chapter lending the ring to women in childbirth is said to have survived in Przemyśl until as late as the end of the 19th century.

The legends about the arrival of the Jews in the Polish lands in the early Middle Ages written down by Jewish authors towards the end of the 18th century were most probably created to prove their early settlement in that area and as the evidence of their having equal rights with the other inhabitants of the region. This was of particular importance at the time of revision of Polish legislation during the Great Sejm and the legislative changes caused by the partition of Poland. From an ethnographic point of view, the legends also involved the element of familiarizing the place – Poland, a foreign land where the Jews, expelled from other parts of the world, finally came to reside. Much earlier though, already in the late 15th century, the so-called black legend of the Jews developed, originally spreading in Western Europe and used by, among others, Jan Długosz, which consisted in propagating among the faithful the superiority of the Christian religion over all others, and in particular, over Judaism, through accusing its believers of black magic, profaning the Host and ritual murders. How strongly such beliefs were rooted in the minds of simple people can be guessed from the fact that even now they continue to be used in all kinds of propaganda. Some of the legends, for example that of the love affair between Casimir the Great and Esther, which were originally meant to discredit the Jews, were acknowledged by them as credible and retransformed in order to raise the splendour of their own nation.

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