
—Măriuca Stanciu

Translated from Romanian by Anca Mircea

GDAŃSK (Ger., Danzig), port city, center of trade and industry on the Baltic. Gdansk was a Hanseatic port in Royal Prussia and became the capital of Westpreussen (West Prussia) during the nineteenth century. From 1920 to 1939, it was known as the Danzig Free City (under the protection of the League of Nations), and since 1945, it has served as the capital of the Gdansk Województwo in the Republic of Poland.

Due to the strong resistance of the Christian population, it was only toward the end of the eighteenth century that Jews gained permanent settlement rights within Gdansk’s limits. Until that time, Jewish merchants, who came to Gdansk primarily from Poland–Lithuania, were only allowed to enter the city during the fair after paying a high fee. Jewish business activity in Gdansk was based on trade in consumer goods, conducted in cooperation with the grain-exporting Polish nobility. From the late sixteenth century, small Jewish communities were established in the suburbs of Schottland (where a burial society was founded in 1724), Hoppenbruch, Weinberg, Langfuhr (where a burial society was organized in 1775), and Mattenbuden (where a synagogue was erected in 1793).

After the incorporation of the Hanseatic city into the Prussian state in 1793, a limited number of Jews were awarded citizens’ rights; under Napoleonic rule (1807–1814), Jews received the right to trade in Gdansk. From 1837 to 1860, Yisra’el ben Gedalyah Lipschütz (1782–1860), author of the commentary on the Mishnah known as Tiferet Yisra’el, served as rabbi in Gdansk. The consolidation of the five Jewish communities in and around the city into the United Community of Danzig did not take place until 1883. While the minority of Orthodox Jews continued to worship in the Mattenbuden synagogue, the Liberal majority built a central synagogue that was completed in 1887. The Danzig Temple symbolized both the unity of the community and the integration of Jews in the city. It conformed to Danzig’s architecture but also retained the Moorish features characteristic of synagogues in the late nineteenth century.

As a result of World War I, Gdansk was placed under the protection of the League of Nations in 1920. In the following years, the port city became a transit point for tens of thousands of East European Jewish emigrants en route to North America, several thousand of whom ended up settling permanently in Gdansk and neighboring Zoppot. Ensuing tensions in the Jewish community resulted in the establishment of separate East European Jewish congregations. After the National Socialist seizure of power in Germany in January 1933, Gdansk’s special status under international law slowed down the direct implementation of the Nazis’ persecution of Jews, making it possible for a large number of Jews from the town to emigrate, as well as for the valuable contents of synagogues to be transported to the United States.

At the beginning of World War II, some 1,660 mostly elderly Jews were still living in Gdansk and Zoppot. Between 1941 and 1943, a total of 575 were deported to extermination camps, and others to Warsaw and Terezin. The small number of surviving Jews emigrated in the summer of 1945 after harassment from Soviet and German occupiers.