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Rabbi Bernard Rosensweig, of the Kew Gardens Adath Jeshurun Synagogue, and First Vice-President of the Rabbinical Council of America, offers a sharp critique of Arthur Koestler's views on the Khazar — Origin of East European Jewry. Rabbi Rosensweig is the author of *Ashkenazic Jewry in Transition*, and teaches at Touro College in New York City.

THE THIRTEENTH TRIBE, THE KHAZARS AND THE ORIGINS OF EAST EUROPEAN JEWRY

The origins of East European Jewry are shrouded in obscurity, and it is difficult to define and to delineate them with unassailable accuracy. The sources are scarce, the legends are open to attack and interpretation, and some of the "scholarly" hypotheses were advanced as a partisan weapon in the struggle for equal rights.¹

Yet, a knowledge of the historical background of East European Jewry is essential for the proper evaluative understanding of the modern Jewish world in which we live. We must remember that beginning with the sixteenth century, East European Jewry became the center of the Jewish world and the mecca of Jewish learning and creativity. In 1939, before the Holocaust robbed us of a third of the Jewish people, East European Jews comprised the overwhelming majority of the Jewish group; and the role of these people in the growth and development of American Jewry, as well as in the emergence of the State of Israel, is so evident as to require no elaboration. Under these circumstances, any serious attempt by a competent scholar to come to grips with the problem of origins is worthy of consideration and analysis. Unfortunately, Arthur Koestler's book, *The Thirteenth Tribe*,* does not fall into this category.

Koestler has based his book on the most glamorous and exotic of all the various theories, namely, the Khazar theory. The Khazar theory contends that the roots of East European Jewry are

* *The Thirteenth Tribe* (Random House, 1976).

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to be sought among the Khazars, who had earlier converted to Judaism, and who, as their own kingdom declined and disintegrated, laid the foundations for the emerging Jewry of Eastern Europe. It is this theory which Koestler expounds, expands and exploits in *The Thirteenth Tribe*. The first half of the book is devoted to the early history of the Khazars, their development into a formidable kingdom, their conversion to Judaism and their subsequent fall. The second half of *The Thirteenth Tribe* is directed towards a concerted effort by the author to prove that the Khazars are the fathers of East European Jewry.

Koestler's thesis and his arguments are not new; he adds nothing to our knowledge of the Khazars, and no novel insights about their relationship to East European Jewry emerge in this work. This hypothesis, though lacking historical substance, as we shall see, enjoyed a certain acceptance in Jewish historiography at one time, and few scholars were prepared to challenge its validity. Tadeusz Czacki and Max Gumpłowicz were its early champions. The late Isaac Schipper subscribed to this view in a somewhat modified form and A. N. Poliakov emerges as the most extreme proponent of this position in the twentieth century.²

Koestler's book depends, in large measure, on Poliakov's development and conclusions. Koestler himself has provided the coordinated structure, the literary style and the ability to convey as unquestioned, proven facts what most serious scholars will cautiously assert to be hypothetical conjectures. Normally, we would pass over this book in silence. But it is precisely because Koestler utilizes the experienced pen of the effective writer, and provides his work with a veneer of scholarship, that *The Thirteenth Tribe* becomes a deceptively dangerous work, requiring a thorough refutation.

The reader might wonder whether it really makes any difference if this theory or that theory accounts for the beginnings of East European Jewry. The truth is that it does matter — abundantly. Many elements which are crucial to the future of the Jewish group are influenced by and dependent upon our initial assessment of origins. Despite Koestler's feeble protest and weak rationalization, the Khazar theory, for example, has been used by the enemies of the State of Israel to undermine the legitimacy

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of the Jewish claim to its ancestral homeland. Baroodi and his cohorts have made this a constant refrain of their nefarious propaganda. These Jews, they re-iterate time and time again, have no claim to the land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob because they are not "real Jews," but rather the descendants of converted Khazar Jews. "Only a small fraction of them (the Jews) could lay claim to being children of Israel or even Semites . . . 90% of the Jews of Eastern Europe were descendants of Slavs, Germans, Franks and Khazars."³

In addition, we must deal with one more question before we embark upon a close analysis of Koestler's contentions: What motivated Koestler to write this particular book? Even works of serious scholarship can have subjective overtones. In Koestler's case, I can detect two such motives. In the first instance, I am convinced, he is motivated by an implacable hatred of the Jewish religion. Koestler smugly declares that "Orthodox Jewry is a vanishing minority," that "Orthodox Judaism in the Diaspora is dying out" and that "the vast majority of enlightened or agnostic Jews . . . reject the Chosen-Race doctrine of Orthodoxy." These statements are not only untrue and unfair, but they reflect an undisguised enmity to Judaism generally, and to Orthodoxy, in particular.⁴

Anyone who has read Koestler's *Promise and Fulfilment* will recall his venomous diatribes against everything which is Jewish in the Jewish State, and his confident prediction that this "cultural claustrophobia" would only be a passing fancy, and that "*within a generation or two Israel will have become an entirely 'un-Jewish' country.*" (Italics his). He rails against "kosherness" in Israel, that the restaurant will not serve him cheese after his meat. He is upset by the use of the Hebrew language and the Hebrew alphabet in the Jewish State, and he insists that it should be latinized. He despairs over the amount of time spent on the Bible and Hebrew classics in the secondary schools of Israel, and he laments that the "Orthodox stranglehold" on the country will lead it "back to the bronze age." The canards which are spewed forth in that book would have been labelled as blatant anti-Semitism if its author had been a gentile.⁵

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We have every reason to be grateful that the dire predictions made in 1949 have remained unfulfilled. Orthodoxy continues to be a vital factor in the Diaspora, and the generation of the "kippah serugah" gives the lie to Koestler's dream (or is it nightmare?) of a Jewish state emptied of all its Jewish content. But what better way to promote and foster the process of an "un-Jewish" Israel than by attempting to demonstrate that there is no intrinsic relationship between those people who were instrumental in the establishment of the state, and the religious history, principles and background which spawned the dream and powered its fulfilment.

There is a second element in Koestler's "theology" which must be taken into account. Koestler, who is the product of an assimilationist home, whose Jewish background is practically nonexistent, and who at one time in his life was a committed Communist, has insisted that the creation of the Jewish State has introduced a forced option for the Jewish people. Those Jews who are committed to Judaism must draw the consequences of their commitment and return to the Promised Land; all others must solve the "Jewish problem" by renouncing their faith and taking the path which leads to assimilation. For himself, Koestler has unhesitatingly and unashamedly opted for assimilation. However, Koestler is anxious for other Diaspora Jews to follow his lead. How can the religious dimension of Judaism, which is at the heart of the Jewish commitment and which Koestler considers to be a dangerous anachronism, be more effectively undermined than through a pseudo-scholarly work which aims at severing the present contemporary Jew from his original roots, of what Koestler calls "the Biblical Tribe?"⁸

II

Let us now examine the book and its contents a little more closely. Who were the Khazars and how did they come to Judaism? The Khazars have left nothing in their own language, and what we know about them comes to us in the writings of other peoples who came into contact with them. The major sources of our knowledge are the Moslem geographers and his-

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torians of the Middle Ages as well as the somewhat controversial Khazar correspondence which was conducted between Hasdai ibn Shaprut of Spain and the Khazar king, Joseph.⁷

It is practically certain that the Khazars were Turks from Central Asia, who lived originally in the area between the Volga River, the Caucasian Mountains and the Don. By the end of the seventh century, or shortly thereafter, the Khazar kingdom was extended to include the Crimea, that area which we know as Southern Russia and the Ukraine, and the region around Kiev. It was here that they undoubtedly came into contact with Jews who had resided there and traded there from the beginning of the common era, and shortly before the middle of the eighth century (the accepted date today is the one which was advanced by Jehuda Halevi in his *Kuzari* — 740) a part of the Khazar people, led by their king, Bulan, accepted Judaism.⁸

The nature of the Judaism which they embraced is difficult to determine with exactitude. Prof. Dunlop, who has written a major work on the Khazars, surmises with reservations, that between Bulan and Obadiah, that is, between 740 and 800, some form of Karaism prevailed, and that Rabbinic Judaism made its appearance with Obadiah's reform. This would account for the existence of Khazar Karaites speaking a Turkish dialect at a later period in Eastern Europe. Prof. Baron, on the other hand, contends that the Khazars, in fact, accepted a watered-down syncretistic Judaism — not Karaism — which simply resulted from an ignorance of Talmudic law. One of his primary arguments is that the Khazars had already accepted Judaism prior to the actual advent of Karaism. In either case, both of these men would undoubtedly agree with the assessment of the late Prof. Halpern, that no Jewish culture of any real consequence developed in Khazaria.⁹

By the end of the tenth century, the Khazar kingdom was in disarray and in the process of disintegration. The decisive element in this process was the Russian invasion of 965, which amputated large parts of the empire. Step by step, the decline continued, and by the time the Mongols arrived in the thirteenth century, the Khazar State was no longer in existence.

III

It was this group of Jews, Koestler claims, which emigrated from their native Khazaria in substantial numbers to Poland and provided the bulk of the Jewish population of that new country. What are the proofs which he presents in support of this position? There are a number: (a) the minting of coins using Hebrew letters; (b) the insignificant number of German Jews in the Middle Ages; (c) the westward dispersion of the Khazars before their destruction in Khazaria; (d) Khazar place names in Poland; (e) the emergence of the *shtetl*.

Let us consider these proofs very carefully. Koestler informs us that the Byzantine Jews, who came to Khazaria in substantial numbers and were influential in the conversion of the king, brought with them the Hebrew alphabet which became the written alphabet for the various languages spoken in Khazaria. Further on in the book, he reveals to us that hundreds of coins were unearthed in Great and Little Poland, dating from the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth century, which bear inscriptions in Hebrew lettering. Some inscriptions are directly concerned with the ruler — Mieszko, king of Poland; others include the name and title of the mintmaster. The inference is obvious. The Khazars used the Hebrew alphabet; the coins are inscribed in Hebrew. Ergo, the early Jewish settlers in Poland were Khazars. Approvingly, Koestler quotes Poliak: "These coins are the final evidence for the spreading of the Hebrew script from Khazaria to neighboring Slavonic countries."¹⁰

However, we have the right to ask whether these coins really provide this kind of irrefutable evidence. The fact is that Jewish mintmasters were particularly active in a number of German states and principalities during the twelfth century. In the Wetterau region, for example, these thin coins, known as bracteates, were issued between 1170 and 1180 with the name of David Ha-Kohen imprinted in Hebrew. We have found twelfth-century coins in Saxony and Wurzburg struck with Hebrew names. Why, then, must we conclude that the presence of minted coins with Hebrew lettering inevitably indicates the presence of Khazar Jews in Poland? On the contrary, considering all of the informa-

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tion which we have in regards to these bracteates, we are warranted in endorsing Halpern's conclusion that these mintmasters were undoubtedly immigrants who came from the west.¹¹

Another central argument of the proponents of the Khazar theory involves the "numbers game." The number of Jews who ultimately populated Poland proves that the early Jewish settlement there could not have come from the west, but must have come from Khazaria. Over a number of pages, Koestler depicts the hardships, the persecutions and the substantial physical losses which the Jews of Germany suffered. This process began with the First Crusade and reached a climax with the Black Death, in the middle of the fourteenth century. How could the small, pitiful remnants of this ongoing program of decimation have populated Poland?

Koestler takes this argument a step further. He utilizes Vetulani's figures, namely, that there were approximately 500,000 Jews living in Poland in the seventeenth century, to his own advantage. These figures, he proclaims, accord with the "known facts" about a protracted Khazar migration via the Ukraine into Poland-Lithuania. This transfer of population, he maintains, extended over a period of five or six centuries, and was more or less completed by the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, by which time, even he concedes, the Khazars had apparently been wiped off the face of the earth. In his eagerness to identify Polish Jewry with its supposed Khazar antecedents, Koestler concludes with the strange statement: "The tentative figures for the Khazar population at its peak in the eighth century should be comparable to that of the Jews in Poland in the seventeenth century . . . — give or take a few hundred thousand as a token of our ignorance."¹²

That ignorance, unfortunately, is not confined to the estimation of population figures. There are a number of implications in these statements which must be challenged on scholarly grounds. The first implication of Koestler's approach is that the Khazar people, as a group, left their homeland over a prolonged period of time, and that all the Khazars, or at least the majority of them, were Jews. But were they, in fact, all Jews?

The truth of the matter is that the Khazar Jews in Khazaria represented only a minority of the population. The Khazar conversion to Judaism proceeded from the royal house to the ranks of the nobility and the upper classes, without ever including the broad masses of the Khazar people. Dunlop quite correctly points out that the Judaizing of the general populace, if it was ever seriously undertaken, never proceeded very far, since even in the tenth century the Moslems and the Christians greatly outnumbered the Jews; and Baron concludes in his study of the Khazars that "without the reinforcements constantly pouring in from the (Byzantine) empire, as a result of persecutions, they doubtless would have remained but a tiny minority, with negligible influence on Khazar affairs."

This position is fully supported by the mediaeval Moslem authors. Ibn Rusta, writing in 903, says: "Their supreme ruler is a Jew and likewise . . . those of the generals and the chief men who follow his way of thinking. The rest of them have a religion like the religion of the Turks." Baron quotes Ibn Fadhlān — whom he describes as a well-informed Arab traveller — who observed that even in his day "the Jews constitute the smallest number even though the king belongs to them." Against this background, we can better understand the meaning of Massudi's comment that "in Khazaria there are seven judges, two for Jews, two for Moslems, two for Christians and one for the pagans."¹³

This Jewish minority underwent further diminution in the tenth century. In the period following the Russian invasion in 965, a number of Arabic sources refer to the conversion of the Jewish Khazars to the Moslem religion. According to Ibn Miskawayh, and others, the Khazar king asked his Moslem neighbors for help against the invaders and was refused on the grounds that the Khazars were Jews, and that if they wanted help they would have to agree to become Moslems. The king agreed and all of them, except for the king himself, became Moslems. Let us agree with Dunlop that Ibn Miskawayh's statement is overdrawn and that the conversion to Islam was not "universal"; however, Dunlop himself concedes, that, at the same time, it does not justify our dismissing it as unhistorical. We are able to affirm that in the process of the Russian conquest, significant inroads were

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made into the already small Jewish Khazar population. The implications of this development are twofold. The great number of Khazars who populated Khazaria at its height were, in the main, not Jewish Khazars; and, consequently, the use of the name Khazar in any given context does not necessarily refer to or imply Khazar Jews.¹⁴

Let us take our argument forward in another direction. According to all scholars, the Jewish population in Poland at the end of the fifteenth century (depending upon the various estimates) ranged from between 10,000 to 30,000 souls, no matter what their origin. Koestler himself conceded that by this time the Khazars had, for all practical purposes, disappeared. In any case, no matter what theory we adopt for the beginnings of Polish Jewry we would still have to confront and account for the phenomenon of an unusually high population growth which marked the next one hundred and fifty years of Polish Jewish life. Why would a Khazar population of ten or thirty thousand Jews more readily explain a large population rise by the middle of the seventeenth century, than the same number of "real Jews?"

Koestler will undoubtedly respond that there were groups of Khazars ready elsewhere to migrate into Poland. But where were these impressive Khazar reserves to be found? Here Koestler falls back on Baron's statement: "But before and after the Mongol upheaval, the Khazars sent many offshoots into unsubdued Slavonic lands ultimately to build up the great Jewish centers of Eastern Europe." In other words, it was in places like Hungary and Kievan Russia that the Khazars supposedly regrouped in large numbers, and from which they infiltrated Eastern Europe with a Jewish presence.¹⁵

How true are these assertions? Koestler talks about the "Khazar Diaspora in Hungary." Long before the destruction of Khazaria, several Khazar tribes, known as the Kabors, joined the Magyrs in their migration into Hungary. While there may have been a small number of "real Jews" living in Hungary from Roman days, there can be no doubt that the majority of Jews in Hungary originated in the waves of the Kabor-Khazars. This, Koestler claims, is "relatively well documented," though signi-

ificantly here, as elsewhere, he provides us with no real proof. He then concludes with a statement from Poliak: "The Magyar and Kabor migration into Hungary blazed the trail for the growing Khazar settlements in Poland."¹⁶

However, these claims are open to question, and we will not accept them simply because they are advanced as assertive statements. We know that long before the Magyar occupation, as early as the second century, Jews lived in many parts of the Roman provinces of Pannonia and Dacia. We do not know what happened to these enclaves during the migration which preceded the Magyar conquest of Hungary in the ninth century. They were either augmented or replaced by other Jews, for example, from Byzantium. Certainly there was a Jewish community in Hungary in the tenth century because Hasdai Ibn Shaprut thought of using them as a conduit for the delivery of his letter to the Khazar king.¹⁷

However, the fact of an acknowledged Jewish population in Hungary at this time does not necessarily imply that it was of Khazar origin. On the contrary, there are real reservations to be expressed in regards to identifying these Jews with the Khazars. No one will argue that Khazar tribes accompanied the Magyars on their expeditions of conquest. But who were these Kabor-Khazars? Prof. A. Scheiber, who is a specialist in Hungarian Jewish history, has pointed out that the Kabors, were a rebel Khazar tribe, and that it is unlikely that the leaders of this group of Khazars, rebelling against the king who actually professed Judaism, would themselves be Jews.

In addition, the first public records in Jewish sources dealing with the Hungarian Jews, belong to the eleventh century. These sources seem to indicate two important truths, namely, that the Jews of Hungary had trade contacts with their brethren in the west, and that they submitted their disputes and problems to great Ashkenazic authorities like Rabbi Judah Ha-Kohen, the author of the *Sefer Hadinim*, of Mainz. Even if we were to accept Poliak's contention that the Hungarian migration blazed the trail for Polish settlement — and there is no supporting evidence for this assertion — we would still be able to question its Khazar content. Given the very dubious connection between the

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Kabors and the Jewish Khazars and the ongoing trade and religious relationship between Hungarian Jewry and the Jews in Ashkenazic countries, why should we prefer a Khazar origin for these Jews over the existence of a "native" Jewish community in Hungary?¹⁸

The same is true for the Jews in Kievan Russia. Koestler speaks confidently of the Khazar Jewish community of Kiev. According to an ancient Russian Chronicle, the inhabitants of Southern Russia paid tribute to the Khazars in the second half of the ninth century and in the first half of the tenth century. At this point, Koestler writes, Khazar settlements and colonies were founded in various places in the Ukraine and in Southern Russia. After the Russians wrested control of these areas from the Khazars, Khazar communities continued to flourish there; and after the final destruction of their country, they were reinforced by large numbers of Khazar immigrants.¹⁹

Again, we are treated to a series of surmises being presented as factual statements without the supporting evidence. The immigration of the Khazar Jews into these areas at the time of the Khazar control of the country, which is loudly proclaimed by Koestler, is more cautiously assessed by sober scholarship. Prof. S. Ettinger, of the Hebrew University, considers this to be a matter of conjecture. We have no certain knowledge of how Jewish settlements in Russia came into being, he asserts. Certainly there were ancient Jewish settlements in the Caucasus and in the Crimean area on the north shore of the Black Sea, as well as in the Khazar kingdom. But we really have no tangible evidence of any connection between these Jews and the origins or development of Jewish life in Kievan Russia.²⁰

On the other hand, we do know that the Jews in this region had commercial, communal and religious ties with Byzantine Jews. We know of representatives of the Russian community sending delegates to participate in a conference in Constantinople (or Salonika) to oppose the Karaites on matters involving the calendar. We are even aware of contacts with Jews in the west. As a matter of fact, Dubnow speaks in terms of a substantial western Jewish immigration to Kiev.²¹

Beyond that, Ettinger has evaluated the life and structure of the Jewish community in Kievan Russia and he has concluded that it was an active community which, during the eleventh and early part of the twelfth centuries, maintained contact with other Jewish communities. Its scholars, like Rabbi Moses of Kiev, had ties with the Tosafists, and were familiar with the traditions of the Ashkenazic west. Rabbi Isaac ben Durbello gives an account of what he was asked in Russia, and the local customs which he recorded. This would seem to indicate that in Kiev, at least, Jewish scholarship was fairly well developed and that the customs of Russian Jews, at this period, were meaningful and had crystallized. Would this kind of developed Jewish community and Jewish scholarship be possible among Khazar Jews who, as we have earlier pointed out, had accepted a minimal form of Judaism, and whose religious and cultural level was probably elementary? Koestler himself concedes to the overwhelming cultural and religious superiority of the Ashkenazic Jews coming from the west.²²

In any case, whatever Jewish settlements there may have been in Kiev and in other parts of Russia during the early Middle Ages, they all seem to have disappeared with the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century. The Jews, who appear in Russia in the eighteenth century, were in reality Polish Jews, who lived in the Polish territory which was annexed by Russia, or who had managed to immigrate there. The original Jews, who had lived in these areas, had disappeared, probably more through decimation than through migration.²³

Finally, the actual population figures upon which Koestler has built his proposition require further examination. The first point which can be made without fear of contradiction is that population figures for this period are not easy to estimate. The basis for prediction is not very solid and the materials required are sparse and limited. Yet, even as we take this into account, a number of criticisms can be levelled at Koestler's inferences and conclusions.

In the first instance, it must be stated that the Jewish population in Germany was severely wounded by the tragic historical events which began in the year 1096, but was not destroyed. During the first half of the fifteenth century, in the aftermath of

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the Black Death, there were probably still between 25,000 to 50,000 Jews in Germany, many of them in the process of moving eastward. When you consider that, in the Middle Ages, population figures were generally small, and that large cities in Poland could boast of populations which numbered only a few thousand, then this is quite a respectable figure upon which to build an expanding Jewish population in Poland.²⁴

In addition, we will not be surprised to learn that there is absolutely no unanimity among scholars as to the population for the earlier period in Poland. Schipper, who made the first serious attempt to compute the number of Jews in Poland at the end of the fifteenth century, came up with a figure of 18,000 for Poland proper and 6,000 for Lithuania. Weinryb talks in terms of between 10,000 and 15,000 Jews in Poland-Lithuania, and the late Prof. Ben Sasson projects a figure of 20,000 to 30,000 Jews, as inhabitants of this part of Europe at this time.²⁵

At the same time, Weinryb, and many other scholars, would strongly disagree with Vetulani's estimated figure of 500,000 Jews in Poland in the seventeenth century. Weinryb bases his own calculations on Ettinger's figures for the Jews living in the Ukraine in the seventeenth century, and, as a result, advances a possible projection of 170,000 Jews living in Poland in the year 1648. This is obviously a much more plausible and manageable figure for a discussion of the Jewish population growth-rate. It is well within the realm of possibility that a group of 10,000 to 20,000 "real Jews" at the end of the fifteenth century could produce a population of 170,000, or more, within a century and a half.²⁶

The continuous growth of population throughout the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth centuries, under conditions of comparative tranquility, could be due both to immigration from without as a result of persecutions and expulsions, as well as to a natural, steady increase. The growth-rate for Jews was conceivably higher than for the general population. This could possibly be due to a lower mortality rate because of ritual and hygienic superiority, as well as to a greater immunity to devastating urban epidemics among Jews. In addition, there were thousands

of young Poles who became priests and nuns and practiced celibacy while thousands of others lost their lives through military service. The conclusion to which this analysis must inevitably lead us is that the growing Jewish population in the period prior to the Chmielniki uprising does not require a massive Khazar explanation in order to be feasible. "Real Jews" could just as easily have produced the same results.²⁷

However, Koestler and his mentors have other arguments to advance. One of the most popular "proofs" of the supporters of the Khazar hypothesis is based on the fact that there are place names in Poland which are derived from "khazar" or "zhid": Ghazara, Zydowo, Kozarzewek, Kozars, Kozarzow, Zydaticze, Kawiori (which is supposedly derived from Kabaroi, the name of a Khazar tribe), and others. These, we are told, may well have been the villages or temporary encampments of the Khazar Jewish converts in their long trek to the west. This proof was first adopted by Gumpłowicz, expanded by Schipper and re-iterated by Poliak.²⁸

However, the uncritical repetition of the same idea, even by men who aspire to scholarship, does not confirm its validity. The fact is that even if we were to prove that these place names actually pointed to the early settlement of the Khazars in Poland, we would still be obligated to demonstrate that they were Jewish settlements. We have already shown that the majority of Khazars were not Jews. All that these places would indicate, under the circumstances, would be that these were Khazar settlements, and not necessarily the settlements of Khazar Jews.

However, it is not even necessary to make this concession. Balaban has shown that many of the place names can be explained in a different way. The name Kawiori, which is mentioned twice in the sources, means on both occasions "cemetery." Kozara can be derived from a Polish word "koza" which means goat, or "kosa" which is a Slavic word for sickle. It seems to me that Ben Sasson's statement is quite definitive in this respect: "The theories of some historians that place names like Zydowo . . . and Kazarow indicate the presence of villages . . . and even the presence of Khazar settlements in the regions where they are found have been thoroughly disproved."²⁹

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There is one other claim with which we must deal. The proponents of the Khazar theory utilize the unique social structure which emerged first in Poland, and later in Russia, as indisputable proof of their position. Schipper maintained that the fact that Jews were involved in agriculture and in Jewish villages can only mean that they must have been Khazar Jews, because we know that the primary livelihood of the Jews of Khazaria was agriculture, whereas western Jews were mainly identified with commercial activities. Poliak insists that some of the vital traditions of Khazar life were preserved in the self-contained community town with an exclusively or predominantly Jewish population, known as the *shtetl*. The *shtetl*, Koestler declares, shows a more specific affinity with what we know about the Khazar township, even though Koestler himself concedes that we know very little thereof. Koestler, in summing up this "proof," announces that here in the *shtetl* we may have the "missing link" between the market towns of Khazaria and the Jewish settlements.³⁰

In the eyes of Koestler, and those whom he follows, the *shtetl* is simply an extension of Khazaria into Poland, rather than what it really is — a pragmatic reaction to new economic realities. The main determinant was functional need in terms of the exigencies of the developing Polish economy. In the thirteenth century, when the Polish nobility decided upon the commercial development of their country, the Jews, together with the Germans, were indispensable to the financing and the realization of this program. However, the conquests of a united Poland-Lithuania in the west and in the south brought with it new challenges and opportunities in the second half of the sixteenth century. The steppes of the Ukraine and the forests further north were now opened for reclamation and colonization. The Polish nobility was not interested in devoting itself to the administration of these estates. Their power was derived from their military and political authority. Consequently, they tended to turn to the Jews, who now became the valued partners of the nobility in the management of their estates and affairs.³¹

What emerged in this period was the *Arenda* system. In essence, the "arenda," which is a Polish term, was a system which

allowed a person to lease fixed assets such as land, estates, mills, inns, distilleries, or specific rights, such as the collection of customs, duties and taxes.

As a result of this system, the Jews became involved in the "agricultural arenda." They leased landed estates, specific branches of agriculture, forestry and processing. Gradually, through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they became predominant in these areas. Jewish settlements began to spread over the country. When a Jew would acquire a complex of small towns, villages and estates to administer, he usually brought other Jews, members of his family or acquaintances, and settled them on the various estates and facilities which were available. Before 1569, there were twenty-four Jewish settlements in the Ukraine; before 1648, the number had grown to one hundred and fifteen communities — many of them extremely small in size.³²

In addition, the Polish nobility, which was friendly towards the Jews, began to establish a network of "private cities" which, in reality, were little more than townlets. The relationship of the nobility to the peasant population was strained, and the Jews were a much more reliable element. From the very start, these new "private" townlets were overwhelmingly Jewish.³³

As a consequence of the active colonization of the Jews in the Ukraine and their role in the establishment of "private cities," there was created for the first time in the history of Ashkenazic Jewry, a broad base of population and settlement with real ties to the world of agriculture. We must concur with Ben Sasson when he writes that "the later style of life in the *shtetl* was based on the achievements and progress made at this time." Which is the more plausible explanation for the origins and development of the East European *shtetl*: the vague, unsubstantiated Khazar townships, or the realistic economic changes which took place in Polish life and which produced the Arenda system and the "private towns?"

IV

We have exposed the weaknesses of the Khazar hypothesis and the fact that it stands on wobbly scholarly foundations without

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historical support. Is there any other direction in which we can look for an acceptable and creditable explanation of the origins of East European Jewry? It seems quite clear to me that the evidence points towards the west, and that we must look toward German Jewry in order to find our solution. The first settlers of Poland, and the nucleus upon which East European Jewry was ultimately built, probably had their roots in the soil of Ashkenazic life.

These Jews first appeared in the eastern parts of Europe in the capacity of traders. In the pre-Crusade period, Jews played an important role in international trade. The Jews of Franco-Germany in this "heroic age," as Prof. Irving Agus has demonstrated, controlled the roads and could travel over long distances with comparative ease. Not only did these Jews utilize the southern trade route which spanned the Mediterranean Sea but, as Brutzkus has shown, there were also northern trade routes which moved from Mainz to either Regensburg or Prague, and then on to Kiev by way of Poland or Hungary.³⁴

The merchants who travelled over these routes were involved in the export and import trade. Eleventh century sources, as reflected in the Responsa literature, confirm this reality. In one responsum, we are told of two brothers from Regensburg who returned from Russia with heavily-laden wagons, and who, because of an accident, were forced to spend the Sabbath with Jews in an Hungarian community. There are indications in the Responsa that, in the eleventh century, there were Jews living in Przemyśl, and that there was a Jewish community in Cracow. Agus, in analyzing the Cracow responsum, suggests that "this . . . would tend to prove the existence of a very close association between Jews of . . . Cracow . . . and those of Germany, and perhaps also points to a community of origin."³⁵

In this period, as the Jews traversed these routes, small Jewish settlements undoubtedly sprang up along the way. What must have existed at this time, in the pre-Crusade period, were comparatively small commercial enclaves. This small commercial colonization might never have progressed very far except for the fact that it was augmented dramatically by circumstances which

forced large numbers of Jews to leave their homes in Germany and to seek refuge in Poland.

This eastward movement began in the wake of the First Crusade in 1096, and increased in volume with each crusade and persecution. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as German Jews lived through the massacres of Rindfleisch (1298) and Armleder (1336-1338), and then climactically through the stark calamity of the Black Death (1348-1350), Poland increasingly attracted growing numbers of Jews from Germany and Bohemia. When Rabbi Israel Isserlein, in the fifteenth century, makes the statement that Poland had always been considered a haven for Jewish refugees from Germany, he was not only affirming the reality in his generation, but he was echoing a truth which had, prevailed in the centuries which preceded him.³⁶

It is these two factors, then — the desire for economic development and the need for a new “home” — which sparked the movement of Jews eastward from Germany almost at the very beginnings of the Polish state. All of the evidence seems to point in this direction.

To begin with, we must consider the “geography of settlement.” The first solid information which we have about Jewish settlement within the borders of Poland dates from the twelfth century. A study of these settlements reveals that almost all of them are located in Western Poland and in Silesia, which at that time belonged to Poland. In a chart listing the number of cities and towns in which Jews are mentioned in these early centuries, Weinryb indicates that of the forty-one cities and towns in which Jews were settled as late as the fourteenth century, thirty-two of them were to be found in Silesia, three in Great Poland and two in Little Poland. In other words, the Jews appear to be living in the most westerly parts of Poland, in that territory which is adjacent to Germany, and moving slowly eastward — a clear reflection of the direction from whence these immigrants came.³⁷

There are even more important factors to be considered. The legal situation of the Jews in Poland was governed by the privileges which were first granted to them in 1264 by Boleslav the Pious of Kalisch. However, a closer look at this charter reveals that it is not a novel document; quite to the contrary, the basic

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privileges therein were formulated in accordance with German and Bohemian precedents. The rights, which were promulgated and granted, were of western origin both in terms of substance and formulation. We must remember that the concept of privileges developed under the Carolingian emperors, and was used by princes and bishops in Germany in order to attract Jews and to enlist their aid in the development of urban society. The Jews asked for and received these charters in return for their participation in the upbuilding of royal and ecclesiastical domains. It would be requested by and meaningful to Jews who understood the ramifications of its provisions, as well as its underlying thrust. The implication of the charter of Boleslav is clear. It was granted to Jews who probably came from the west, were sensitive to its significance and pressed for its formulation.³⁸

Beyond that, the internal structure of the Jewish community in Poland, its religious orientation, its pattern of ritual and usage, all indicate western or, more particularly, German Ashkenazic roots. Even Koestler concedes that, religiously, Polish Jewry lay within the German sphere of influence; he attempts to explain it as the capitulation of the weaker Khazar religious element to a superior force. However, it is not really necessary to appeal to an artificial rationalization when the much more obvious concept of religious continuity is both plausible and consistent with the facts.³⁹

Ashkenazic influence was apparent everywhere in the religious life of the Jewish community in Poland. The few religious authorities who serviced the early Polish communities undoubtedly came from the west and maintained the religious traditions of Franco-German Jewry. Religious questions were submitted to German rabbis, and it is altogether conceivable that Rabbi Judah the Pious, the great "hasid" of Ashkenazic Jewry in the early part of the thirteenth century, was considered the final authority for these East European Jews.⁴⁰

Nor will anyone seriously argue against the proposition that the range of religious practices, rituals and usage or *minhag*, which East European Jews accepted, came from the Ashkenazic west. We have every right to assume, under the circumstances,

that these forms were utilized because they were extensions of or similar to those which they had observed in the lands from which they had immigrated. We must remember that Jews have always jealously guarded their ritual and their customs. Whenever a number of Jews migrated from one country to another, they brought with them their individual customs, ritual and law; and eventually these *minhagim* affected the religious practices of their adopted homeland. Consequently, when Rabbi Moses Isserles, known as *Rama*, proudly proclaimed in the sixteenth century: "We are the heirs of Ashkenazic Jewry," he was echoing the accepted belief that the Jews of Poland were the legitimate carriers or propagators of the Ashkenazic way of life, which they and their ancestors had practiced from the earliest beginnings of Jewish life in Poland.⁴¹

One more piece of evidence must be presented on behalf of our position. The language which the Jews spoke in Poland, which we today call Yiddish, came from the Germany of that day. It will be hard for the reader to accept, but Poliak even attempted to disassociate Yiddish from its German roots by claiming a Gothic origin for Yiddish. The recorded words of the Gothic language, which are preserved in the fifteenth century, show it to be so different, that no serious student of philology would agree to the possibility of a relationship between these two languages, even at an earlier period.⁴²

Koestler is a little more reticent than his mentor in the matter of Yiddish. Instead, he approaches the problem which Yiddish poses for the advocates of Khazar origins from a more complex line of reasoning. In order to bring the German roots of Yiddish closer to the east, he presents Mises' theory that the German which led to Yiddish did not come from western Germany, but from the "so-called east-middle German dialects which were spoken in the Alpine regions of Austria and Bavaria . . . In other words . . . adjacent to the Slavonic belt of Eastern Europe." From there, Koestler proceeds to discuss the role of the Germans in the economic development of Poland and the importance of the German language for business and culture. The result was, Koestler tells us, that the Khazars shed their own language, adopted Yiddish, and were exposed, in the process, to the superior but "rela-

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tively small number of German-speaking Jews.”⁴³

One may wonder why it is necessary to use this kind of convoluted reasoning in order to explain the existence of Yiddish as the “mother-tongue” of East-European Jews. Where is there a single piece of evidence that the “inferior” Khazar Jews surrendered to their “superior” environment? The fact is that the Khazar Karaites did actually maintain a Turkish-allied dialect in Eastern Europe. Why should they have been the exception to the Khazar capitulation? In order to give the stamp of validity to Koestler’s proposition, he would first have to prove that the Jews who came to Poland were Khazars, that they actually adopted this foreign language for their own use, and at the same time explain why the Karaites turned out to be loyal to their linguistic roots — none of which he has actually done. All of this is really unnecessary. The obvious contention, that the Jews brought with them into their new homes in Poland the language which they had spoken in their old ones in Germany, accords much more satisfactorily with the known facts. Why, then, must we build an untenable theory on a complex maze of unsubstantiated hypotheses?

Koestler wrote his book with the intention of persuading Jews and non-Jews that the roots of East European Jewry was to be found in the soil of the Thirteenth Tribe, the Khazars who converted to Judaism. His arguments are weak and unconvincing, and his conclusions, stated and implied, cannot be accepted by the serious scholar or reader. While the origins of the founding fathers of East European Jewry may never be fully or absolutely proven, the evidence moves irresistably in a westerly direction. The descendants of these Jews, both in Israel and in America, can feel secure in the knowledge that, on the most objective grounds, they are the sons and daughters of “real Jews,” or as Koestler puts it, “the Biblical Tribe.”

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NOTES

1. Cf. B. D. Weinryb, "The Beginnings of the East-European Jewry in Legend and Historiography," which appeared in *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neeuman* (Leiden, 1962), pp. 449-453. For a discussion of various legends concerning the beginnings of East-European Jewry, cf. Weinryb, *op. cit.*, pp. 453-455; *The Jews of Poland* (Philadelphia, 1973), pp. 17-19; S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1957), III, 217; S. M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* (Philadelphia, 1946), I, 40. Weinryb describes eight different theories, two "western" theories, and six "eastern" theories. Cf. Weinryb, *Beginnings*, pp. 458ff.; *Jews in Poland*, pp. 19-20.

2. Cf. A. Harkavy, *Ha-Yehudim U-Sefat Ha-Slavim* (Hebrew) (Vilna, 1867), pp. 8-9; 11ff.; I. Schipper, "Toldot Ha-kalkalah shel Yehudei Polin Ve-Lita Mi-Yamim Rishonim," in *Beth Yisroel Be-Polin* (Jerusalem, 1948), I, 55ff.; Weinryb, *Beginnings*, pp. 470-471; A. N. Poliak, *Khazaria* (Tel Aviv, 1943). Koestler concedes that Poliak's work was not well-received in scholarly circles but he ascribes it to the fact that Poliak's thesis is considered "an attempt to undermine tradition concerning the descent of modern Jewry from the Biblical Tribe." The critical evaluations of acknowledged scholars like Friedman and Landau, throw the lie to this kind of peevish accusation. Baron, incidentally, adopts a median position. He talks of refugees from Khazaria meeting other Jewish groups from Germany and the Balkans and together laying the foundations for the Jewish community of Poland. Cf. Baron, *op. cit.*, pp. 206 and 218.

3. Cf. Koestler, *op. cit.*, pp. 223ff.; B. D. Weinryb, "Origins of East European Jewry," *Commentary*, XXIV, 509.

4. Cf. Koestler, *op. cit.*, pp. 224-225.

5. Cf. A. Koestler, *Promise and Fulfilment* (New York, 1949), pp. 316ff.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 334-335.

7. For an evaluation of the sources, cf. Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 324 note 30; D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (New York, 1967), pp. 89-170; "The Khazars," in *The Dark Ages* (Rutgers University Press, 1966), pp. 329-334; Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, pp. 206-222.

8. The historical background is detailed by Dunlop, in his *History*. For an analysis of the conversion and the debate which preceded it, cf. Koestler, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-82; Dunlop, *History*, pp. 89ff.; *Khazars*, pp. 334ff.; Baron, *op. cit.*, pp. 198 and 326 note 33; I. Halpern, "The Jews in Eastern Europe," in *The Jews: Their History* (New York, 1970), p. 309.

9. Cf. Baron, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-203; Koestler, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-74; Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 315; Dunlop, *History*, p. 148.

10. Cf. Koestler, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62; 152-153. Cf. also Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 218; Poliak, *op. cit.*, chapter IX.

11. Cf. D. M. Friedenberg, "Mintmasters and Moneyers" in *Economic History of the Jews* (New York, 1976), pp. 253-254; Weinryb, *Jews of Poland*, pp. 23-24; 337, note 13; H. H. Ben Sasson, *Trial and Achievement* (Jerusalem, 1974), p. 145; Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 318. See also Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, *Responsa* (Prague edition), no. 903.

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12. Cf. Koestler, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-151; 159-168. Cf. A. Vetulani, "The Jews in Mediaeval Poland," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* (Dec. 1962), pp. 274-294.
13. Cf. Baron, *op. cit.*, pp. 207 and 324; Dunlop, *History*, p. 224; *Khazars*, pp. 347, 351-352; Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 315; Weinryb, *Beginnings*, p. 485.
14. Cf. Dunlop, *Khazars*, pp. 353-354; *History*, pp. 244ff.
15. Cf. Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 206; Koestler, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
16. Cf. Koestler, *op. cit.*, pp. 142ff.; 158; Poliak, *op. cit.*, Chap. III. Cf. also Dunlop, *History*, pp. 197-204.
17. Cf. Baron, *op. cit.*, pp. 211-212; A. Scheiber, "Hungary," in *Dark Ages*, pp. 314-315.
18. Cf. Scheiber, *op. cit.*, pp. 314-316.
19. Cf. Koestler, *op. cit.*, pp. 95, 125 and 145.
20. Cf. S. Ettinger, "Kievan Russia," in *The Dark Ages*, p. 319; Baron, *op. cit.*, pp. 213ff.
21. Cf. Ettinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 321-322; 443 notes 9 and 10.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 324ff.
23. Cf. Weinryb, *Beginnings*, pp. 494 and 496; Dunlop, *Khazars*, p. 354.
24. Cf. Weinryb, *Jews of Poland*, pp. 32 and 308.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 32 and 311; Ben Sasson, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
26. Cf. Weinryb, *op. cit.*, pp. 316-317; S. Ettinger, "Jewish Participation in the Colonization of the Ukraine," (Hebrew) *Zion*, XXI, 107-142. Cf. Ben Sasson, *op. cit.*, p. 161, who estimates that there were 100,000 Jews in 1578 and approximately 300,000 in 1648.
27. Cf. Weinryb, *op. cit.*, pp. 311-313; Ben Sasson, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
28. Cf. Koestler, *op. cit.*, p. 145; Schipper, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-156; Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 218.
29. Cf. M. Balaban, "Korot Ha-Yehudim Bi-Yemai Ha-Benaim" in *Beth Yisroel Be-Polin*, I, 3; Ben Sasson, *op. cit.*, p. 144; Weinryb, *Beginnings*, p. 487.
30. Koestler, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-156; Poliak, *op. cit.*, Chap. III; Schipper, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-156.
31. Cf. Ben Sasson, *op. cit.*, 156-160.
32. *Ibid.* Cf. A. Wein, "Arenda," in *Economic History of the Jews*, pp. 125-127.
33. Cf. Ben Sasson, *op. cit.*, pp. 157ff.
34. I. A. Agus, *The Heroic Age of Franco-German Jewry* (New York, 1969), pp. 23-51; J. Brutzkus, "Trade with Eastern Europe," *Economic History Review*, XIII, pp. 31-41. Cf. Weinryb, *Beginnings*, pp. 462ff., for his reservations about an active northern trade route. It should be noted that the "western" theory in regards to Polish Jewry was espoused by Dubnow, Balaban, Halpern and Weinryb.
35. See *Shibbolei Ha-Leket*, no. 60; Rabbi Isaac ben Moses of Vienna, *Or Zarua*, I, 694; Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, *Responsa* (Prague edition, no. 912. Cf. also I. A. Agus, *Urban Civilization in Pre-Crusade Europe* (New York, 1965), pp. 93-97; 104-107; Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 339 note 60.
36. See Rabbi M. Minz, *Responsa* (Lemberg, 1851), no. 63.
37. Cf. Weinryb, *Jews of Poland*, pp. 22-23 and 31; Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 318.
38. Cf. Halpern, *op. cit.*, pp. 321-322; Weinryb, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-35.

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39. Cf. Koestler, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

40. See Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, *Responsa* (Lemberg edition), no. 112; *Or Zarua*, I, 113. Cf. also Weinryb, *Beginnings*, pp. 497-499; *Origins*, pp. 517-518.

41. See Rabbi Moses Isserles, *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah*, XXXIX, 18.

42. Cf. Koestler, *op. cit.*, p. 178; Weinryb, *Beginnings*, p. 491.

43. Cf. Koestler, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-177. It should be mentioned that other scholars have approached the problem of Yiddish differently from Mises.