Although Jews are typically perceived as urban dwellers, there was a considerable rural Jewish population in early modern Eastern Europe. In the 1764/65 census of the Jewish population of Crown Poland, about a third of the Jews are listed as living in rural settlements,\(^1\) and in some regions they constitute the majority. In the Wegrów urban community in Podlasie, for example, the census identifies 3,042 rural residents out of a total Jewish population of 3,623 (84\%).\(^2\) Despite its numerical dominance, this large rural population has not received much scholarly attention. Rural Jews are usually treated individually, and existing studies have concentrated upon their relationship with Polish magnates\(^3\) and peasants.\(^4\) Their role in the Jewish communal and super-communal (regional and national) autonomous administration has so far not been studied.

Traditionally, urban Jewish communities along with their rural peripheries have been regarded as the lowest rung of the autonomous Jewish administrative structure in the prepartition Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This view is based on a 1692 Council of Four Lands ruling decreeing that any village or township without a synagogue of its own that was located at a distance of less than two miles from a major community (kehila rashit) was to be subject to that community.

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1 Rafael Mahler, *Yidn in Amolikn Poyln in Likht fun Tsifern* (Warsaw, 1958), 50–51.
3 The most important studies on this subject are M. Rosman, *The Lords’ Jews: Magnate-Jewish Relations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the 18th Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1990); and A. Teller, *Kesef, Koakh VeHashpaa: HaTehudim BeAkhuzot Beit Radzicz BeLita BaMeah Ha-18* (Jerusalem, 2006).
for the purposes of taxation and other business dealings.\footnote{Pinkas Va’ad Arba’ Aratsot, ed. I. Halperin (new ed., rev. and ed. I. Bartal, Jerusalem, 1990), 228.} Data from the 1764/65 census\footnote{A compilation of all published data of the census is found in S. Stampfer, “The 1764 Census” (n. 2, above), 59–147.} and internal Jewish communal documentation (pinkasim), where these rural peripheries (sviwoł) are frequently mentioned, suggest that this was indeed the case.\footnote{For example, a list of villages belonging to the community of Siemiatycze in 1667, in Pinkas Kahal Tiktin 5381–5566, vol. 1, ed. M. Nadav (Jerusalem, 1996), no. 623, p. 443.} When the issue is examined more closely, however, the picture is less clear. First, the Council of Four Lands found it necessary to repeat this ruling in 1717, threatening rural Jews with severe punishments for its violation. This would tend to suggest that the previous decree may have met with mixed results.\footnote{Pinkas Va’ad Arba’ Aratsot (n. 5, above), 280–281.} Second, because the census reflects information for a single year only, extrapolating its data to cover a longer period of time is problematic. Third, the original census manuscript was lost during World War II, and the part dealing with areas where there were concentrations of rural Jews was never fully published.\footnote{The full census data for the Jewish rural population was published for regions to the west (A. Czuczyński, “Spis Żydów województwa krakowskiego z roku 1765,” Archiwum Komisji Historycznej Akademii Umiejętności, vol. 8 [1898], 3–21) and to the east (I. Kamaniński, “Статистические данные о евреях в Юго-Западном Крае во второй половине прошлого века (1765–1791),” Архив Юго-Западной России, vol. 2, part 1 [1890], 1–232; F. Bostel, “Żydzi i karańcy w powiatach żydowskich w r. 1765,” Archiwum Komisji Historycznej Akademii Umiejętności, vol. 6 [1891], 357–378; M. Balaban, “Spis Żydów i karaitów w powiatach polskich i powiatów tamże w r. 1765,” Archiwum Komisji Historycznej Akademii Umiejętności, vol. 9 [1909], 11–31) of this “belt.”} I shall refer to this area as the “leaseholders’ belt.” It stretched across the country from northern Podlasie to the Carpathian Mountains.\footnote{For the definition of this belt, see J. Kalik, “Jewish Leaseholders (Arendarze) in 18th Century Crown Poland,” Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas 54 (2006), 229–240, and ch. 6, below.}

The discovery of the corpus of Jewish poll tax lists from 1717 to 1764 has removed some of these obstacles, for the first time throwing light on the social dynamics of the rural Jewish population of the leaseholders’ belt during a period of almost half a century.

By far the richest source of documentation on the rural Jewish population is found in lists for the Jewish autonomous major community of Węgrów. Initially, hundreds of villages in this region were listed,