Perspective on Jewish Genealogical Research in the Ashkenazi World of Central and Eastern Europe

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Our 15 years of research experience in the field of Jewish genealogical research has conspicuously highlighted the conviction that the success of such projects depends on at least three essential elements:

• Thorough and deep knowledge of the general and local historical environment where the life of the resear ched families unfolded

•Deciphering the evolution of the systems for recording vital events (births, marriages, deaths)

• Clarifying the location, the degree of the preservation and the access to the archival sources, as well as to other sources available for the research.

As far as our topic, the European Ashkenazi world is concerned, before anything, one should inform that the object of our analysis is represented by the history of the Jewish families in Central and Eastern Europe, where this branch of Jewish people, certainly present as well in other parts of the continent and of the world (Western Europe, United States, Israel, etc.), was primarily concentrated, displaying its most characteristic forms of manifestation.

From a demographic point of view, the formation of a massive Ashkenazi populated area, including the present-day Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic countries, Byelorussia and Russia is due to the massive West-East migration between the 13th and 15 th centuries determined by the historical vicissitudes of the Crusades and the general or local expulsions of the Jewish population in England, France, the different regions and provinces of the Roman-German Empire and even Hungary.

After the crystallisation of a flourishing Jewish life between the 16 th and 18th centuries based in Poland, Lithuania, Bohemia, Moravia and some parts of Germany, having an autonomous institutional system which was highly original and acknowledged by the authorities of the time, the indescribable atrocities of the Cossack Revolt led by Bogdan Hmelnicki in 1648–49 mark the beginning of decline accelerated in the 18th century by the significant geopolitical changes in the area. The Polish-Lithuanian kingdom disappeared after 1795 from the political map of Europe, being divided between the great neighboring powers: Russia, Prussia and Austria.

Moldavia, another area with a significant Jewish population, was amputated in its turn, the northern part (Bukovina) being incorporated in the Austrian Empire, and the region between the rivers Prut and Dniester (Bessarabia) becoming part of the Russian Empire.

Considering that in Western Europe, during the Enlightenment, the ideas of tolerance which opened the way for the civil emancipation of the Jews were gaining ground, a new massive East-West migration wave brings large masses of Jewish population affected by the turmoil, the wars and the territorial changes in Eastern Europe to the more welcoming countries of the Western part of the continent and, after the failure of the 1848-49 revolutions, to the free world across the ocean as well.

At the same time when these major directions of migration were being shaped, regional migrations were molding in their turn, the Jewish habitat in Central and Eastern Europe. Within the Hapsburg Empire, the poor Jewish masses migrated in the 19th century from the overpopulated shtetl regions in Southern Poland (Galicia) and Northern Moldavia (Bukovina) to the Western provinces (Austria, Hungary,

Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, Transylvania), where the economic opportunities and the gradual evolution towards an equal opportunity status represented certain attractions.

A significant number of Jews migrated from a Russia which was oppressing its Jewish population concentrated in the so-called Pale of Settlement, as well as from Poland to Moldavia, Wallachia, Hungary and Transylvania, a phenomenon whose extent was increased by the pogroms which became almost daily practice after 1880.

The restrictive anti-Jewish policy of the Romanian governments after 1866 that postponed the granting of civil rights until after World War I caused, at the end of the 19 th century and in the first years of the following one, large-scale migration of Romanian Jews towards Western Europe, the United States, as well as to the territory of the future state of Israel, owing to a highly influential Zionist movement.

After World War I, new Jewish population migrations were determined by the vicissitudes of the civil war in Russia, which, especially after the pogroms in Ukraine, caused hundreds of thousands of Jews to take refuge in Romania, Hungary, Poland and Western Europe.

The Holocaust manifested its destructive effects in this region, affecting the Jewish population in Poland, the Baltic States, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Bessarabia, Bukovina, as well as in Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Northern Transylvania. Despite outward anti-Semitic policies and the multitude of restrictive and property-depriving measures, a significant part of the Jewish population in the Old Romania (Moldavia and Wallachia), Southern Transylvania and the Hungarian capital Budapest survived as a result of the fact that the "Final Solution" was not applied by the governments.

After World War II, in the context of the establishment of the new communist dictatorship, with its frequent anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist impulses, a large part of the Jews in Romania and Poland headed for the State of Israel, unlike the Jews of Hungary, which remained primarily in its country. Eventually, after 1990 the fall of communism and the division of the Soviet Union opened the possibility of a massive immigration to Israel for the Jews of Russia, Byelorussia and Ukraine[1].

As the significance of these great population migrations is evident through their effects on the destinies of the individual families, which we intend to retrace through genealogical research, we consider it similarly important to know the institutional structures which throughout the centuries governed Jewish life in the areas subject to our investigation.

The general framework of the religious community and of the rabbinical institution increased, diversified and differentiated in the relatively favourable circumstances of the 16th to 18th centuries in Poland, Lithuania, Bohemia, Moravia, Germany, Moldavia, Wallachia, Transylvania and Hungary. The institution of the Chief Rabbi, which cumulates the supreme responsibilities in the religious field, appears and consolidates in Poland, Lithuania, Bohemia and Moravia, later occurring in Transylvania, (where it lasts until 1879) and in Hungary.

The religious communities organize themselves into district councils and Councils for the countries of Poland and Lithuania, which last until the middle of the 18th century, similar attempts at crystallizing autonomous supra-community structures being less successful in Bohemia, Moravia and Germany because of a less favorable official attitude than in the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom.

In Moldavia and Wallachia, the institution of the so-called ``hahambaşa" provides the supreme lay and religious authority in the local communities led by elected heads from the two provinces, an organization system which lasts until the temporary Russian occupation of between 1830 and 1834. In Transylvania,

only one community is officially acknowledged until 1848 – the community of Alba Iulia – which was placed under the authority of the Chief Rabbi or the National Rabbi of the Province.

In Hungary and Transylvania, the massive demographic growth and the gradual development of the legal framework towards civil emancipation led, in the first half of the 19th century, to a significant institutional proliferation through the emergence of numerous local communities having rabbis, synagogues, elected lay leadership, diverse and multiple education, charity and religious structures.

The civil emancipation in 1867 brings about a tendency for institutional reorganization in the sense of centralization; however, the effect of the centralisation decisions adopted in this respect by the Congress of the Hungarian and Transylvanian Jews in 1868-1869 being an exactly opposite one.

The communities that accepted the Congress decisions (the so-called Neologs), those that categorically rejected them in the name of preserving the community tradition and autonomy unaltered (the Orthodox) and those that opted for maintaining the status-quo-ante existing before this schism formed their own structures, independent of one another and unsubordinated to any central lay of religious institution. This system was maintained despite all the 20th century vicissitudes and tragedies, until the levelling force of the communist dictatorship imposed a forced restructuring of the single community model[2].

The evolution from this point of view was different in Romania, where in the second half of the 19th century the state declined any official acknowledgement of the Jewish religious communities, so that these, even though they did not disappear, had to function outside a legally constituted framework. Only after World War I, in the context of civil equality expressed in the 1923 Constitution, a Law of the Cults, adopted several years later, acknowledged the *de jure* existence of the Jewish religious communities in Romania, establishing the principle of a single community in every town or village, with the exception of the right of the Orthodox and Sephardic communities to have their own communities.

After World War II, a Federation of the Jewish Communities in Romania took over the leading role in the institutional field, and a Chief Rabbi of the Mosaic cult holds supreme authority in religious matters[3].

As far as the evolution of the juridical statute of the Jews in the researched area is concerned, ever since the first centuries of the second millennium this is regulated through specific legislation and through privilege acts given around 1250-60 by the kings of Hungary, Bohemia and Moravia and the Austrian princes, through which the freedom of the Jewish economic activities, the personal and material safety and the free, undisturbed practice of religion were granted.

The fall of some of these kingdoms (especially Hungary after 1526), as well as the growing intolerance in the Roman-German Empire determined a concentration of the Jewish life in Poland and Lithuania between the 16th and 18th centuries, where a relatively trouble-free cooperation between the royal authority and the autonomous Jewish institutional structures is achieved, which guarantees, in exchange for the fulfilling of fiscal duties, a favorable environment for carrying out flourishing economic activity.

In the autonomous principality of Transylvania, under Turkish sovereignty during the 16th and 17th centuries, and in the Austrian Empire after 1699, a privilege given in 1623 by Prince Gabriel Bethlen and subsequently reconfirmed numerous times, states with relative precision the rights of the Jewish population and the limits within which these could be exercised, the most important restriction being the limitation of the right of legal settlement to just one town – Alba Iulia.

In Moldavia and Wallachia, the statute of the Jews until the dawn on the 19th century is characterised by the phrase “hostile tolerance” specific to the Greek-Oriental world of Byzantine origin: effective freedom

for the economic activities, free exercise of religion, all within an environment marked by mentalities hostile towards the Jews, which did not exclude the appearance, in the 18 th century, of ritual killing accusations and the outbreak of sporadic episodes of anti-Jewish violence[4].

At the end of the 18th century, the practise of enlightened monarchs, inspired by the enlightenment philosophy, having as prototype the tolerance edicts of the Austrian emperor Joseph II, inaugurate the era of major changes towards integrating the Jews in the society of the time as citizens having equal rights, people who consciously assume as well the obligation deriving from such statute.

The conditioning of these transformations by the abandoning of important marks of the spiritual tradition and community autonomy springs a profound identity crisis in the Jewish world, the Haskalah movement and the reform begun in Germany gathering significant supporters (such as Chief Rabbi Aaron Chorin in Arad, a personality who paved the way in this respect)[5], as well as powerful opposition on the part of Orthodox traditionalism and mystical Chassidism primarily present in Poland, Ukraine, Moldavia, Bukovina, Northern Hungary and Transylvania. The severe political confrontations regarding the civil emancipation of the Jews in the first half of the 19 th century culminate in the dramatic period of the 1848–49 revolutions, which beyond the great expectations of liberal solutions which remained unfulfilled, highlight the very dangerous potential of prejudices and hostility against the Jews which forecast the emergence of the modern anti-Semitism that generated the 20th century tragedies. Nevertheless, until around 1870, civil emancipation of the Jews becomes a legally acknowledged reality in Germany, Hungary, Austria, Transylvania, Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, opening the way for rapid and significant integration and affirmation of the Jews in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the respective countries[6].

The exceptions to this paradigmatic evolution are represented by Russia (which includes until World War I a significant part of Poland, the Baltic Countries, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Bessarabia, massively populated with Ashkenazi Jews), as well as Romania.

In the Russian Empire, the feeble reforming attempts at the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century make way, during the reign of Nicholas I, for a most oppressive regime that openly promotes the conversion and the forced Russification of the Jewish population. A short period of openness towards liberal reforms, between 1860 and 1880, marked by the reign of the Czar Alexander II, is replaced, after his unfortunate assassination in a terrorist plot, by some decades in which the overt anti-Semitism of the officialdom institutionalizes pogroms, and *numerus clausus*, exclusion as the regular tools of state policy towards the Jews until World War I.

The Russian revolution in 1917 finally brings legal, constitutional acknowledgement of equality of rights for Russian Jews, but the civil war in the subsequent years brings about mass violence of indescribable proportions, especially in Ukraine. The communist regime, in its Stalinist and post-Stalinist versions, does not exclude, despite appearances, the perpetuation and the periodic outbreaks of an anti-Semitism deeply rooted in the mentality of the highly prejudiced and ignorant majority[7].

In the Romanian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, the generous and liberal-inspired goals of the 1848 revolution and of the first years after the 1859 unification of provinces will soon make way (starting with the 1866 Constitution) for an increasingly restrictive policy, sprung primarily from the fear of the emerging Romanian middle class towards the competition provided by their Jewish counterparts who were well-represented especially in the commercial, industrial and financial life of the Moldavian towns. The recognition of Romania's independence, after the 1877-78 war against the Ottoman Empire, conditioned by the Great Powers on the granting of civil rights for all the citizens, regardless of confession, stirs the bitter opposition of the Romanian political class and public opinion against this

condition, which will successfully prevent until the end of World War I the realization of Jewish emancipation goals. Only after the adoption of the Minorities' Statute, imposed by the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919-20, and the 1923 Constitution of Greater Romania (which included Transylvania, Bessarabia and Bukovina), were Romanian Jews were granted equal civil rights[8].

Civil emancipation was not a universal remedy for the Jewish problem either in Western Europe (as the Dreyfus Case eloquently shows) or least of all in the Central and Eastern parts of the continent, where the interwar period, despite. constitutional and international guarantees, marked the unfortunate rise of the anti-Semitism turned into state policy in Germany after 1933, an example followed by Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and, starting with 1938, in Romania as well. The effects of this evolution materialized in the tragedy of the Holocaust, through which most of the Jewish population in central and Eastern Europe was exterminated.

The rebuilding of Jewish life in the post-war period was marked by the new communist dictatorship, whose initially egalitarian and internationalist promises were drastically disproved by a political practice in which the anti-Semitism, the exclusion and the discrimination found more or less overt, but never eradicated forms of manifestation. The result was a constant decrease in the Jewish population through emigration to Israel and to the West, an instrumentalization of the community practices by the dictatorial regime, which had visible repercussion at the level of the Jewish families' life and history.

The fall of communism in 1989 opened up the possibility of an institutional and spiritual renewal of Jewish life, not without the persistence of some flaws from the past that are felt until today and leave their mark even on the possibilities of research in the field of Jewish genealogy

The fundamental sources of such research have their origin in the policy adopted, beginning with the 18th century, under the influence of a mercantile economic doctrine, by the states in our area of interest regarding the statistical recording of the population and its material resources with a view to adequately knowing the basis for taxation and recruitment.

The censuses and general conscriptions also record the Jewish population, and as its integration in society becomes an objective of state policy, special statistical records regarding this segment of population highlight the number, the geographic origin, the family and professional structure, the territorial spread and its resources that could be subject to taxation. In Transylvania, for example, the first such population conscription of the Jewish population is done in 1753, and in Moldavia, a conscription of the 1,400 Jewish families is done for the first time by the Russian occupation authorities during the Russian-Turkish war in 1768–74[9]. After the integration of some provinces having a numerous Jewish population in the Austrian Empire, Russia and Prussia, following the three divisions of Poland and after the territorial amputation of Moldavia, the massive growth of the Jewish population and its migrations within the great empires mentioned above leads to the expansion of statistical recording practice at the general, provincial and local level to the level of the families, as the system of official records containing births, marriages and deaths are introduced.

In the Austrian Empire, the first official measures in this respect date back to the end of the 18th century, being initiated by the reformist monarch Joseph II, the task of recording the data falling on the clergy of each confession (in our case, on the rabbis). The sources preserved in the archives prove an uneven application of these regulations, even though rabbinical records emerge at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century.

In Transylvania and Hungary, for instance, such sources from Arad date back to 1794, and in Bukovina, sources from Suceava go back to 1843. In Prussia (including the Polish parts of the former kingdom), the

system of rabbinical records becomes generalized after the great modernising reforms following the country's defeat to Napoleon in 1806. Napoleon also is responsible for the introduction in 1809 of the registry records, common for all inhabitants, in the Grand Duchy of Warsaw; in 1826, the Czarist occupation regime establishes the system of rabbinical records in the part of Poland subject to Russian authority, as well as in Ukraine, Byelorussia, the Baltic Countries and Bessarabia.

In Moldavia, traces of such recording of vital events by the rabbis are preserved from the seventh decade of the 19th century in Botoşani and Fălticeni.

A new phase in the evolution and modernization of the recording system is represented by the introduction of the official registries, with single records for all the inhabitants, regardless of their religion, kept in the official registry of the state administration. This system is inaugurated beginning with 1865 in Romania after the unification of the Moldavia and Wallachia principalities, with 1874 in the newly-unified German state, and with 1895 in the Hungarian part (including Transylvania) of the Austro-Hungarian Empire formed in 1867. The Austrian part will adopt the registry system only in 1938. The rabbinical recording of the vital events continued in parallel with the state registry, as far as the births, the religious marriages and the burials in the Jewish cemeteries are concerned[10].

Taking into consideration the accessibility of the sources for researching the Jewish genealogy, the official regulations, presenting local differences stemmed from political or mentality motivations specific to every country in the above-mentioned area, generally converge towards permission for researching the registry records more than one hundred years old, usually kept in the in the departments or regional offices of the national state archives. For the state records of the last hundred years, kept in the administrative registry offices, the access of citizens is limited or forbidden by the different legal practices motivated through possible implications for the personal rights of living people.

The archives of the Jewish communities, the burial records and the cemeteries are generally accessible to researchers, sometimes in exchange for paying a fee, but their preservation state is largely influenced by the enormous destruction occurred during the Holocaust.

Taking into consideration these historical antecedents and present conditions, we would like, in the end, to trace some possible directions regarding the orientation of future research in Jewish genealogy in the Ashkenazi world in Central and Eastern Europe.

1. Indexing the available sources for each country

From this point of view, one can find remarkable achievement, thoroughly inventoried in the *Avotaynu Guide for Jewish genealogy*, edited by Sallyann Amdur Sack and Gary Mokotoff in 2004, Miriam Weiner's works regarding Poland, Ucraine and the Republic of Moldova (Bessarabia), that of György Haraszti regarding Hungary or Jana Sarmanyova's work for Slovakia can be considered as models[11]. Romania is the country most solicited from the point of view of intentions for researching the history of Jewish families, but here such an essential work tool is still missing. \

Making a directory of the rabbinical and state registry records andof the other archival sources relevant for Jewish genealogy would be an invaluable project. As is the case of the quoted bibliographical antecedents, cooperation with the national archives and registry offices would be essential, although their reticence to such an endeavor has so far been obvious. The project is doable, involving a group of young researchers, PhD candidates and students, who, under competent supervision, could gather the material for the directory within one or two years. Its publication under the aegis of the International Institute for

Jewish Genealogy would be a remarkable step forward in the development of historical studies of the Jewish families in Central and Eastern Europe.

2. Indexing the published official statistical records

These sources (censuses, conscriptions) are essential primarily for the periods when there are no rabbinical or state records, as well as for completing, verifying and correcting the data in the existing records. Premises and models exist from this point of view as well, such as, in the case of Romania, the uploading on the Internet of the 1942 censuses of the Romanian Jews referring to the males born at the end of the 19th century done by a team from ROM SIG and JewishGen, or the publication in a printed form of the 1824-25 census of the Jews in the Moldavian capital, Jassy, who were under the protection of foreign consulates. [12] The systematic gathering of data regarding these sources and the electronic or printed publication of the information they contain would be a long-term project of great perspective and usefulness.

3, **Indexing and processing the information provided by the funeral inscriptions in the Jewish cemeteries**

In this case as well, a first stage, largely achieved through the project of the International Association of Jewish Genealogy Societies and the important contribution of the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, includes an inventory and description of existing cemeteries. The next step would be to trace and index the burial records in the community archives and in the *chevra kadisha* fonds, so that the funeral inscriptions in the cemeteries could subsequently be exploited. In the case of Romania, a pioneering work in this field, having a model value, has been drafted for the more ancient part of the great cemetery in Siret[13].

4. Gathering genealogical information from the manuscript notes on the Hebrew books or on books making reference to Jews written in other languages

A recent doctoral thesis defended in Cluj dealing with the Hebrew books reserve of the Satu Mare community, including some 400 volumes[14] highlighted the promising potential existing in the margin notes made by the book owners or readers for tracing original information on family history. A systematic research of community book fonds or of those in the great libraries and exploitation of the already published notes would provide a highly interesting source through the evident surplus of information and the complementary nature of the data in relation to the other available sources.

5. **Creating data bases and publishing the lists of Jewish students in the universities of the countries in the researched area, indexing the school documents and records[15]**

6. Indexing the data referring to the Jewish soldiers, publishing some lists containing the numbers of the dead, the wounded and the decorated soldiers in the wars in whichthey participated.[16]

7. Creating a data base that would include the names, the dates of vital events, place of residence and profession of the individuals identified through the research carried out

Such a built up and updated source would form an extremely useful starting point for the future projects, and, at the same time, would enable one to avoid the repetition of some research initiatives that have already been carried out.

Therefore, one can find multiple and extremely promising direction for the development of the Jewish genealogy studies and research in the Ashkenazi area of Central and Eastern Europe in the years to come. The establishment of the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy in Jerusalem undoubtedly marks a

turning point of uncontested value for the realization of as many of the above-mentioned possibilities within a foreseeable time frame.

We wish it every success in this important mission.