



**INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH GENEALOGY
AND PAUL JACOBI CENTER**

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Research Proposal

Village Jews in the 19th Century Minsk Gubernya

through a Genealogical Lens

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1. Introduction

Although Jews are typically viewed as urban dwellers, there was a considerable rural Jewish population from the very beginning of their settlement in Eastern Europe to the end of the 19th century. The presence of a large segment of the Jewish population in villages, as distinct from their residence in small towns ("shtetlach"), was, in fact, one of the most distinctive features of the East European Jewry during the entire period of its existence. The main reason for this "ruralization" of the Jewish population was the legal entrée into villages afforded to the Jews through a system of leasing out monopoly rights enjoyed by the Polish nobility and landed gentry on their extensive country estates, where a feudal system vis-à-vis the serfs prevailed. The most widespread form of leasehold to Jews was the leasing of propination rights (production and sale of alcoholic beverages), which represented a major element in the Polish-Lithuanian economy in general. The lease of propination rights rapidly expanded and reached its peak in the 17th and 18th centuries, since it was the easiest way to market grain locally - in the form of alcohol.

Contrary to the stereotypic view, the rural Jewish lease-holders were not isolated Jewish families, wholly cut off from their brethren. The Jewish population of many villages was sometimes significant, since several leaseholders – estate stewards, forest and river managers, mill-, shop-, inn-, and tavern-keepers, lived there together with their families. Hence they developed a life-style different in many respects from the urban Jews, mainly as a result of their direct and daily contact with the non-Jewish serfs and their masters, the land-owners. On occasion, Jews in some villages (or clusters thereof) joined together and formed a rural Jewish community, which might try to gain independence from the nearby

urban Jewish community. Attempts by the Russian authorities to expel the Jews from rural areas from 1804 onwards remained largely unsuccessful, and the proportion of rural Jewish population of Russian Empire remained significant, though diminishing from between approximately one-third of the total at the beginning of the period under consideration to about 15 per cent by the end of the 19th century.

2. State of the Art

While the "Village Jew" is a major theme in Yiddish literature, art and music, its treatment is generally nostalgic, sentimental and even romanticized. Awareness of this topic and its importance from a scholarly point of view has grown lately, but little serious research has been done on the subject, and such that exists generally concentrates on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the period before the Partitions of Poland (1772-95). Paradoxically, the records and data for the 19th century, when the area was under Russian jurisdiction, are much richer and more extensive than for the previous periods. They are largely unexploited and await examination, as proposed in this study.

3. Scope of the Research and its Innovation

The present project proposes to conduct a systematic research, first of its kind, into the rural Jews in the "Gubernya" (Governate or Province) from its establishment as a major administrative unit within the Russian Empire in 1796 to the outbreak of the World War I in 1914. This region has been chosen because of its central position in the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania and then in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Located in present-day Belarus, it was a core area of the Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe for centuries before the Partitions of Poland and a highly significant component of "Litvak" Jewry as a whole. During the period of Russian jurisdiction (from 1795 on), the internal administrative units of the Minsk Gubernya were changed and re-organised by the authorities from time to time: initially, it embraced the districts (*uyezd*) of Bobruisk, Borisov, Disna, Igumen, Mozyr, Pinsk, Rechitsa, Slutsk, and Vileika. In 1842, the districts of Disna and Vileika were transferred to the Gubernya of Vilna, while the large district of Novogrudok was added from the Gubernya of Grodno. The proposed study will necessarily take these changes into account.

Note: The difference between "village" and "town" was somewhat blurred in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, a village was legally distinguished from a town in the Russian Empire. Moreover, many small towns (which were often little more than overgrown villages), that were called "shtetls" by the Jews, were considered villages from the

administrative point of view. Only in 1875 were they formally defined as "*mestechko*" (small towns in which Jews were legally permitted to reside). Thus, for the purpose of this study, a "village" will be defined for the entire period under consideration as a rural settlement which was classified as a village before 1875 and remained such thereafter.

4. Sources

The research will be based upon a close examination of primary archival sources held in various archives in Belarus, Russia and Israel, with support from such printed materials and secondary works as are available. The main groups of archival documents that will be examined are: population census data found in the so-called "Revision Lists" (*revizskiye skazki*) from the years 1795-1808, 1811-1812, 1815-1825, 1850-1852, 1857-1859, 1860-1897, the 1874-75 "Lists of Jewish Males" and the "All-Empire Population Census" of 1897 (only partially extant). Use will also be made of taxation records, military conscription records, inventories of rural estates (one representative example of such documents is provided in the appendix), birth, death, marriages and divorces registration (*metricheskiye knigi*) kept by state-appointed rabbis from 1835 onwards, and finally lists of voters to the State *Duma* (parliament) for the years 1906, 1907 and 1912. The main body of documents, and notably the Revision Lists, are found in National Historical Archives of the Republic of Belarus (NHARB) in Minsk and in Central Archives of the Russian Federation (GARF) in Moscow.

5. Research Aims

The research objectives are: the compilation of statistics for the rural Jewish population in the Minsk Gubernya as fully as possible, and the mapping of the Jewish rural settlement within the area. In addition, close attention will be paid to the occupational structure of the Jewish rural population, their family structure, cultural background, and relations with the non-Jewish rural population, as well as the impacts of the late 19th century urbanization and industrialization processes, and, finally, the Jewish migration patterns inside and beyond the Gubernya.

The main working hypothesis will be that the lives and lineages of the village Jews (called "Yeshuvnikes" in Yiddish), were markedly different from those of the urban Jews ("Shtetl Jews") - while the village Jews of course shared certain common or parallel features with their urban counterparts (though almost always with a distinct village nuance). The study will ask the necessary research questions to test this central hypothesis and, in particular, to draw out and highlight the distinctive features and patterns among village Jews.

6. Contribution to Jewish Genealogy

A principal contribution of the research will be to the genealogical study of the Jewish families from the Minsk Gubernya over several generations. The reconstruction of the entire rural Jewish population of the Gubernya is inevitably beyond reach because of the sheer volume of materials and their incomplete nature. Nonetheless, a serious attempt to reconstruct genealogical and family history of the Jews dwelling in several representative villages in various parts of the Gubernya will be made. In addition, the study will provide a considerable body of raw data for genealogical researchers, as well as the scientific basis for a more accurate interpretation of their findings.

7. Methodology

Three distinct methodological approaches will be combined in the research: systematic, analytical, and case studies.

- i. The systematical method consists mainly of tabulation of all available statistic data from different sources for rural Jewish population in chronological and geographical order and mapping of all villages with the Jewish presence.
- ii. The analytical stage of research will naturally follow this preliminary work, and its objectives include reconstruction of the occupational structure, family relations, interaction with the non-Jewish inhabitants, and identification of the distinct features of the rural Jews.
- iii. The case studies will focus, as mentioned above, on the reconstruction of genealogical history of Jewish residents in several representative villages in different parts of the region over a number of generations.

8. Product

At the concluding stage of the research, a book-size manuscript will be produced. It will be made up of four parts:

- i. Analytical chapters dedicated to the reconstructed history of the rural Jewish population of Minsk Gubernya, including their legal status, their changing situation due to the conflicting interests of the Russian government, local nobles and landed gentry, and the peasants, the reasons for the failure of the central government's repeated attempts to

expel them from the rural areas, the reasons for the diminishing numbers of rural Jews throughout the century and many other central historical issues.

ii. Tables with the full statistical data for the geographical distribution and demography of the rural Jews.

iii. Maps of all districts (*uyezd*) in the Minsk Gubernya, with an indication of all villages with Jewish presence.

iv. Genealogical charts of selection of lineages in representative several villages.