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***Village Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Minsk Gubernya  
through a Genealogical Lens***

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I. Introduction

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, village Jews (“*yeshuvnikes*”, in Yiddish) constituted a significant segment of the Jewish population living in the Pale of Settlement.<sup>1</sup> Their total numbers have not been established with any precision. Estimates for the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century range from anywhere between a quarter and a third, if not more, of the overall Jewish population, with considerable variations dependant on time and geographical location.<sup>2</sup>

Little research has been done into this large segment of Jews, in comparison with the abundant work done on Jews living in the towns (*shtetlach*). The reason is clear. The *yeshuvnikes* were very ordinary people, generally not members of any élite, whether rabbinical or intellectual, commercial or communal. They formed a scattered and largely anonymous mass, constituting a focus of concern for the Russian authorities at the time - but seldom drawing the attentions of contemporary scholars.<sup>3</sup>

However, as a group, the village Jews merit serious attention and beg basic questions. What were their real numbers? In what ways were they similar to town Jews and how did they differ? Since they were often just two or three Jewish families living among overwhelmingly larger numbers of Christians, how did they maintain a Jewish way of life? What languages did they speak? What were their

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<sup>1</sup> The area in Imperial Russia in which Jews were permitted to reside, as defined by Catherine II in 1794 (after the Second Partition of Poland) and maintained with minor modifications until April 1917, when it was abolished. After the Third Partition of Poland and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the area included all of Russian Poland, Lithuania, Courland, Byelorussia, most of the Ukraine, the Crimea and Bessarabia.

<sup>2</sup> For recent approximations of East European Jewish populations, see Bartal, Israel, *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772-1881* (Philadelphia, 2005), 42: at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> Century, “nearly 30%” of East European Jews lived in villages and were linked to the estate economy; and Hundert, Gershon David, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: a Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, [2004] 2006) 29: in 1764-65, almost 27% of Jews in Poland lived in rural areas, with variations in different provinces ranging from 1.2% to 36% (citing Raphael Mahler, *Yidn in amolikh Poyln in likht fun tzifern* (Warsaw, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> A survey of the literature produced almost no extended studies of village Jews in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Eastern Europe. The 3-volume YIVO Institute’s *Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (New York, 2008) does not offer a single article devoted to village Jews (although it contains many *en passant* mentions of them). On the other hand, the Eastern European village and the village Jew were popular motifs in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish literature, both Yiddish and Hebrew.

relations on the local nobility on whom they were dependant? How did they interact with the non-Jewish majority? How did the processes of urbanisation, increased mobility and eventually mass migration affect them?

This research proposal rests on the hypothesis that informed answers can be provided by the systematic use of sources usually favoured by genealogists, including poll-tax lists, “census” records<sup>4</sup>, vital records,<sup>5</sup> “family registers”,<sup>6</sup> and the like, for the simple reason that identifiable village Jews are listed in detail in those sources.<sup>7</sup> Further insights can be obtained through scholarly genealogical research, which seeks to contextualise the lives of individual Jews into their wider milieu. On the basis of private letters, personal memoirs and family lore, all critically examined. Greater scrutiny of these and other sources, it is suggested, would throw light on the personality and predicament of the village Jew in 19<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe. By extension, this exercise could also illuminate contrasting aspects in the lives and lifestyles of *shtetl* Jews, who may fairly be considered the village Jews’ reference group.

The paper takes the form of a case-study, based on an in-depth examination of five extended - and representative - families of village Jews,<sup>8</sup> living from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the outbreak of World War I (and beyond) in the orbit of the old *shtetl* of Lechovich,<sup>9</sup> which is located roughly halfway on the line between Minsk and Brest-Litovsk. Under the (Jewish) Council of the Four Lands (ועד ארבע ארצות), it fell within the “community” of Brest. For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was located administratively in the Slutsk Uyezd, within the Minsk Gubernya of Imperial Russia. Today, it is part of Belarus.<sup>10</sup> The Polish-Lithuanian Poll Tax List of 1784, lists 98 villages associated with the town (within what became its *volost*, or administrative district), with – please note - more Jews, 375 in all, living in these villages than in the town proper (360 individuals).<sup>11</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, a “village” is defined as a community having up to 4-500 inhabitants, usually less. Larger communities, with 500 souls and more, are collectively referred to as “towns”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Revizskaya skazka*.

<sup>5</sup> *Metricheskie knigi* (kept by rabbis from 1826 onwards).

<sup>6</sup> *Posemeinye spiski i obyvateľ'skie knigi* (deposited with the municipality and updated ever two years or whenever a Jew changed his place of residence).

<sup>7</sup> For a convenient description of these records, see Vladislav Soshnikov, “Jewish Genealogical Research in the Imperial Russian Empire”, *Avotaynu*, xvi, 2 (2000), 32-37.

<sup>8</sup> The 5 families of village Jews in the sample group were: Abeliānsky (first identified in the village of Varavichi – moved on to Vielke Luki; Khvedyuk-Mandel (Khvedyuki – then spread out widely to several villages in volost (district) of Lechovich and beyond); Mlotok (Stanislovo/Ved'ma [Stanislovo originally incorporated as a “*mestechka*” = small town] and other villages); Puzharik (Gorodeja, near the town of Kletsk); and Strelovsky (name derives from village of Strelovo, whence family members first identified in Aikoche and subsequently in Male Luki).

<sup>9</sup> “Lechovich” is the way the town’s name was pronounced by the Jews in Yiddish. In Belorussian it is spelled “Lyakhovich” and in Polish “Lachowicze”.

<sup>10</sup> Hence most of the official Russian records for Lechovich during the period under consideration are housed in the National Historical Archives of Belarus in Minsk (abbreviated to “NHAB”). These have been used extensively for this study. Other, less rewarding, records are to be found in the State Archives of the Brest Region in the city of Brest and in the Zonal State Archives in the city of Baranovichi.

<sup>11</sup> Original Poll Tax List (in Polish) located in the National Historical Archives of Belarus [NHAB], At LVIA, FSA AP. – B3754L.643§ (?); posted in English as a searchable database on the Lyakhovich SIG Website at <http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/lyakhovich/lyakhovich.html>.

<sup>12</sup> That is, larger communities ranging from a small town (a *shtetele* in Yiddish), through a town (a *shtetl*), to a city (a *shtot*).

## II. Similarities with Urban Jews

After the Third Partition of Poland in 1795, all Jews in the area, indeed in the Pale of Settlement as a whole, were subject to discriminatory legislation emanating from the centrist, autocratic regime in St. Petersburg. At the regional level, the Jews were confronted by an ever-present, heavy-handed bureaucracy, riddled with corruption and caprice. The primary points for interface with the local Russian authorities involved functions such as name-taking, residence registration, censusing, military service and tax-paying. In each of these contexts, the rural Jews behaved in ways broadly similar to the urban Jews, though usually with an observable village “nuance”.

### 1. Name-Taking

By the Imperial Statute of December 1804, Russian Jews were required to adopt permanent surnames.<sup>13</sup> This process took a certain amount of time to implement but it emerges from the 1816-19 Revision Lists,<sup>14</sup> that it was completed in the Lechovich area within a decade or so, *vis-à-vis* town and village Jews alike.

At first, the village Jews tended, perhaps as a matter of convenience, to adopt toponymics, after their home villages – rather than patronymics or metronymics which were more prevalent in the towns (presumably for reasons of simple identification). Over time, and certainly by mid-century, these village toponymics were often changed, for any one of the several reasons that frequently led Jews to change their surnames. In the towns, many names reflected a trade, but given the limited occupations open to village Jews, names of this kind are less common – although “Kovel” (a blacksmith in Yiddish) and “Mlotok” (a hammer in Russian) do appear for individual families in the 1819 Lechovich Revision List.<sup>15</sup> Other surnames like “Krechmer” (an innkeeper) and “Milner” (a miller), both of which might have been expected, do not appear for some reason.

### 2. Classification and Registration

In 1794, virtually all Jews in Russia were integrated into the social class of *meschinen* (town dwellers).<sup>16</sup> Thus, a curious anomaly was created throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with almost all village Jews being officially classified as “urban Jews” and appearing as such in the record.

Only at a later stage was some differentiation introduced, as the authorities became more efficient in identifying and enumerating the Jews. Hence, a system of “Supplementary Revision Lists” was introduced for Jews who for one reason or another did not appear in the earlier Revisions based on them. In the Supplementary forms, “place of residence” was usually indicated and thus the *yishuvnikes* can easily be identified in their villages. Interestingly, the Supplementaries for village Jews could be witnessed and counter-signed by non-

<sup>13</sup> Czar Alexander I, Imperial Statute Concerning the Organisation of the Jews (9 December, 1804), Article 32.

<sup>14</sup> Available in NHAB file 333/9/220 – for the 1816 Revision, see pp. 1,009-29; for the 1819 Supplementary Revision Lists, pp. 1,024-45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Bartal, Israel, *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772-1881* (Philadelphia, 2005), 60; this classification was set in stone in the 1804 Imperial Statute cited immediately above, Article 34.

Jewish village elders, instead of functionaries of the *kahal* (Jewish community), as was the case for town Jews.<sup>17</sup>

Generally, a Jew's place of residence, as originally registered, stuck with him throughout life. Hence, one finds many Jews from both town and village remaining on the Lechovich lists for various administrative purposes, even if they had long moved out of the town and its surrounding villages.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Census Taking

Between 1795 and 1858, the Russian authorities conducted six (6) Censuses or "Revisions" of the Jews;<sup>19</sup> in 1874, they produced comprehensive "Lists of Jewish Males" in major towns, including Lechovich; and, in 1897, the "All Russia" Census was held.<sup>20</sup>

The Jews were adept at avoiding the census-takers but gradually the system caught up with them. Thus, for example, only 565 Jews were recorded in the 1816-19 Revision (that is, 170 fewer than in the 1784 Polish-Lithuanian Poll Tax List). Against that, the 1874 List contains over 3,050 Jewish males alone. Even allowing for the population explosion among East European Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this later figure has to reflect increasingly systematic - and more successful - efforts to find and record the Jews.

That said, it can be asked whether the village Jews were not better placed to keep themselves off the lists longer than others, simply by virtue of the fact that the census takers worked from the towns and did not go from village to village. This suggestion could be checked by a methodical combing and comparison of the Revision lists. But, as indicated, by 1874, the authorities seem to have caught up with most of the absentees, including *yeshuvnikes*.<sup>21</sup> By this time, it should be

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<sup>17</sup> Within the sample group, Shloima, son of Yankel, Mandel, resident of Troyanovo was witnessed by two non-Jews in the village and then counter-signed by three other non-Jews "on behalf of" the Crown Rabbi [official rabbi], the Head of the House of Worship [synagogue] and the [Jewish] Tax Collector - see NHAB file 330/1/111 (1874), household 806. Two of Shloima's brothers, Meer and Benjamin in the villages of Stanislovovo and Musichi respectively had their forms filled out in a slightly different manner: their forms were first witnessed by non-Jews in the village and then taken to town to be counter-signed by Jewish officials - for both, see NHAB file 330/1/111 (1874), households 184 and 885.

<sup>18</sup> By way of a single illustration, witness the typical case of Shmuilo, son of Izrael, Mandel (born 1825): listed in the 1834 Revision as a "town dweller" in Lechovich (NHAB 333/9/573, p. 969, entry 51) [even though he probably lived with his parents in a nearby village]; in the 1850 Census he is still recorded as a "town dweller" in Lechovich (NHAB 333/9/491, p. 406, entry 6), with a notation that he has moved to Odessa in that year; as of 1874, he returned to the Lechovich area and lived in the nearby town of Male Siniavka (NHAB 330/1/114, p.83) but nonetheless he is still enumerated as a "town dweller" in Lechovich (NHAB, 333/1/111, "List of Jewish Males" in Lechovich, household 855, entry 101); and in 1883 he dutifully presented himself in Lechovich to pay his taxes (NHAB 1883 List of Taxpayers in Lechovich, posted in English as a searchable database on the Lyakhovich SIG Website at <http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/lyakhovich/lyakhovich.html>).

<sup>19</sup> Russian "Revisions" were conducted in 1795, 1811-12, 1816-19, 1834, 1850, and 1858.

<sup>20</sup> Most of the 1897 Census has been lost, while the summary numbers have been preserved. For Lechovich, see Brockhaus-Efron, *еврейская энциклопедия* [Jewish Encyclopedia] (St. Petersburg, 1906-13), x, 451, showing at total of 5,016 people living in the town and its villages, of whom 3,846 were Jews (= about 77%).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. the case of Meer, son of Yankel, Mandel, who in 1863 registered himself as a bachelor, even though he was married (see "Supplementary Revision List" in NHAB, file 333/3/903 (1863), p. 162 (obverse), entry dated 25 December, 1863); while, a decade later, his marital status was corrected in the Lechovich "List of Jewish Males" (see NHAB, file 330/1/111, (1874), entry 184).

added, the Jews themselves had come to recognise that there were serious disabilities, even dangers, in not appearing in the official records and thus they were probably more amenable to being enumerated.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Conscription

The Jews made supreme efforts to evade military conscription which was regarded, with good reason, as a calamity for themselves and their sons.<sup>23</sup> Instituted in 1827, call-up was initially from age 14 for a period of 25 years,

in fearful conditions that few survived, or at least survived as Jews. The *kahal* was allotted a quota for recruits whom it was expected to supply and, through its agents, it tended in the first instance to press into service unfortunate youngsters - orphans, waifs and strays - who had no particular protectors in town.<sup>24</sup> In these circumstances, it can be suggested that young Jewish males in the village, living with their parents, were perhaps a little more out of harm's way. A proper answer could be provided by careful analysis of the lists of recruits.<sup>25</sup> What is clear, however, is that some village Jews did not escape lengthy military service in the middle of the century.<sup>26</sup>

In 1874, the system was changed and a form of national service, for a period of five years, was instituted, falling on town and village Jews alike,<sup>27</sup> as can be seen from the conscription lists frequently published in the official gazettes.<sup>28</sup> The Jews continued to resort to various devices to avoid call-up, also reflected in the detailed lists of "draft dodgers" published regularly,<sup>29</sup> and from the heavy fines imposed on families when a conscript repeatedly failed to report for duty.<sup>30</sup> Here again, it is

<sup>22</sup> Cf. ChaeRan Y. Freeze, "To Register or Not to Register: The Administrative Dimension of the Jewish Question in Russia", *Avotaynu*, xiii, 1 (1997), 6-11.

<sup>23</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Revisions, particularly the earlier ones, the number of Jews under the age of 20 is patently deficient. For example, in the 1816 Lechovich Revision, there are just 39 children under the age of 10 and 18 under the age of 20, out of a total of 366 individuals (see NHAB file 333/9/220). In subsequent Revisions, a significant number of teenage boys and men in their 20's are marked as "absent" from their parents homes or "missing" altogether.

<sup>24</sup> See Domnitch, Larry, *The Cantonists: The Jewish Children's Army of the Tsar* (Jerusalem/New York, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Military conscription records (*posemeinyespiski* and *svidetelstva o voinskoi povinnosti*) for Lechovich are located in the voluminous NHAB 622/1, 622/2 and 622/3 series – e.g. for a sampling the 1890's, see files 622/1/48 (1890-91), 622/3/12 (1895), /20 (1895), /21 (1895-96), and /28 (1896).

<sup>26</sup> E.g. within the sample group, in 1874 Gershen, son of Movshe, Mandel (born 1838), was still in the army at age 36, which implies that, if recruited at age 14, he was in his 22<sup>nd</sup> year of service - see NHAB 330/1/111(1874), household no. 650, entry # 157.

<sup>27</sup> Useful discussion in Vilius Botyrius and Daniel Rozas, "Residents' Lists and the Russian Military Draft", *Avotaynu*, xvi,1 (2000), 20-22.

<sup>28</sup> Published regularly in the *Minskie Guberniskie Vedomosti*.

<sup>29</sup> Within the sample group, the following were listed as "draft-dodgers": Rafael, son of Leibo, Abeliansky (b. ~1870).; Aizik, son of Yokhel, Mandel (1891), Beynish, son of Shmuilo Yosef, Mandel (1871), Gedalyo, son of Aron, Mandel (~ 1889), Mendel, son of Yokhel, Mandel (~1880), Movshe, son of Shmuilo Yosef, Mandel (~1880), Vulf, son of Aron, Mandel (~1890); Govsey, son of Movshe, Puzharik (~1887), Izroel, son of Yankel Elya, Puzharik (b. 1882), Leiba, son of Movshe, Puzharik (~1874), Leibo, son of Zelig, Puzharik (~1855); Yosef Movshe, son of Yokhel, Strelovsky (1892).

<sup>30</sup> E.g. within the sample group, fines of 300 roubles imposed on the families of Shmuel Yosef, son of Srol, Mandel for non-appearance of son Movshe for military service, and of Izroel Meer, son of Shmuel Yosef, Mandel, for non-appearance of son Beynish (in both cases, the culprits had left Russia for the United States); also on family of Michel, son of Rafal, Mlotok, for non-appearance of son Srol.

apparent that the Jews did not succeed in avoiding conscription altogether and there is ample evidence that village Jews served equally alongside urban Jews.<sup>31</sup>

## 5. Taxation

Taxes levied on the Jews were onerous.<sup>32</sup> That said, it is interesting to note the growing numbers of village Jews appearing in the tax-payers lists, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed.<sup>33</sup> This begs the question of whether, beyond the more thorough enumeration of the Jewish population as a whole, village Jews might have been more liable for taxation. The reasoning behind this question is that by and large the *yeshuvnikes* were gainfully employed in the villages and earning something, whereas in the towns utterly destitute Jews tended to congregate, with neither the means of making a living nor any prospect of reaching a tax-bracket.

## III. The Dissimilarities

### 1. Security

Under the Czarist régime, Jews in general could never have felt really secure. However, the predicament of the *yeshuvnikes* was especially precarious. This is not the place to detail the repeated Russian attempts to expel the Jews from the villages, starting with an edict in 1795, calling for their transfer to the towns; and then a provision in the 1804 Statute, envisaging the expulsion of Jews from rural occupations, particularly the liquor trade, commencing January 1808.<sup>34</sup> Although these and subsequent threats to the village Jews' security were never fully executed, they remained latent until the outbreak of World War I.<sup>35</sup>

The Lechovich Revision and Residence Lists make it clear that no expulsion orders were actually implemented in the area. In fact, they indicate a surprising degree of stability among the rural Jewish population. On the other hand, from letters written by *yeshuvnikes* at the turn of the century, it emerges that their insecurities never really left them, especially in view of the "May Laws" of 1882 which, as originally framed by Ignatiev, called for the wholesale expulsion of Jews from the villages.<sup>36</sup>

### 2. Symbiotic Relationships with the Landlords and the Peasants

A second major difference between rural and urban Jews lies in the symbiotic relationships between the *yeshuvnikes* on the one hand and the local Polish landowners and peasants on the other.<sup>37</sup> In the towns, the nobles and the "magnates" must have been remote figures to the ordinary Jew. In rural areas,

<sup>31</sup> E.g. within the sample group: Avram, son of Meer, Mandel (b. 1871); Rafael, son of Itsko, Mlotok (~ 1892)

<sup>32</sup> Generally, Jews paid double the taxes for their class, plus additional taxes imposed specifically on them and/or the *kahal*.

<sup>33</sup> For Lechovich tax-payers, see several files in the NHAB 359/1 and /2 series, including 359/1/163 (1886-1908), and 359/1/174 (1909); 359/2/1 (1877), 359/2/3 (1908), and 359/2/7 (1896-97); also dispersed elsewhere, in other series— e.g. NHAB 299/2/8530 (1883-84).

<sup>34</sup> By far the largest numbers of Jews were employed in the liquor trade – see f.n. 49 below.

<sup>35</sup> Dubnow, S.M.(trans: I. Friedlander), *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* (Philadelphia, 1946), ii, 35; cf. Bartal, Israel, *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772-1881* (Philadelphia, 2005), 62

<sup>36</sup> Cf. reports and letters in the possession of the author, written by village Jews at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, discussing the precariousness of their existence and deliberating where they should emigrate to (the UK, US or Argentine).

the reverse was the case. The villages and estates around Lechovich were mainly owned Polish gentry and small land-owners who were close to their properties.

The *yeshuvnikes* were highly dependent on their patronage, especially for the so-called “*arenda*” (lease) contracts, which were usually the legal basis for their presence in the villages. Indeed, the *yeshuvnikes* would come into regular contact with the land-owners, as they managed the latter’s estates and operated their monopolies on alcoholic beverages, mills, forests, etc. – so much so that in several cases, the Lechovich records show “place of residence” of certain Jews as the land-owner’s manor in the village or on the estate.<sup>38</sup>

In the *shtetlach*, there was often a critical mass of Jews, who could live and conduct their affairs almost entirely within their own community. Thus, aside from petty commerce, contact with the non-Jew was limited, to the extent that many *shtetl* Jews did not even speak a local language, be it Polish, Byelorussian or Russian proper.<sup>39</sup> In the villages, the situation was the reverse. The *yeshuvnikes* filled pivotal roles that brought them into daily contact with the peasants, as managers of the land-owners estates and, at another level, as they ran the taverns, mills, smithies and village stores. Thus, the village Jews unquestionably spoke the local language. Moreover, they probably dressed in much the same manner as the peasants and subsisted in similar ways, with the inevitable cow in the back-yard and a vegetable garden, plus a few fruit trees, beside their wooden cottages. It follows that they were also responsive to the Christian and agricultural calendars, in a way the *shtetl* Jews simply were not.

On the whole, relations with the peasants seem to have been close and reasonably good.<sup>40</sup> Children grew up together, while adult Jews might assist peasants by interceding with the landlords and even by preparing petitions to the authorities on their behalf. A report of tensions, that appears atypical, came in 1911 when villagers in Yamichno protested the presence of a young Jewish husband who, as was customary, had moved into his bride’s parents’ home in the village. The complainants petitioned for the Jew’s expulsion and, at a time when official attitudes towards the Jews were deteriorating badly, they won their case.<sup>41</sup>

### 3. Religious practice, education, marriage, etc.

Despite being at a fair remove from the *kahal* in the *shtetl*, the *yeshuvnikes* managed to maintain a very traditional - some would argue, a very conservative – Jewish way of life in their villages.<sup>42</sup> They had to fend for themselves in several areas of religious life. For example:

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Bartal, *loc. cit.*, on “economic symbiosis”.

<sup>38</sup> See Lechovich “List of Jewish Males” in NHAB, file 330/1/111 (1874), where over 20 of the village families listed are shown as living in a “*folvarok*” (manor).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Bartal, *ibid.*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> Witness instances of village Jews lodging in the homes of farmers e.g. NHAB, 330/1/111 recording Mendel Rafalov Mlotok residing with Stepan Babin, a farmer, in the village of Kazennye Gusaki; cf. many popular reports of friendly relations between Jews and peasants – e.g. village children growing up together, exchanging Easter eggs and *matzo* (unleavened bread eaten at Passover), etc.

<sup>41</sup> Full official account of the incident in NHAB (Grodno), file 1/18/1616 (1911), pp.3-6:

<sup>42</sup> Judging by the speed at which some village Jews shed their religiosity on arrival in Western Europe and the United States, it can equally be argued that in many cases their religion as practiced in the villages was rather shallow, emotional and in reality merely a form of social conformism – but that fascinating topic is outside the scope of this paper.

- To constitute a *minyan* (prayer quorum) for Sabbath services, the males from a cluster of small villages, within walking distance of each other, would have to gather together.
- On the important Jewish festivals, not every village Jew moved into the *shtetl*, as is often supposed. Sometimes the *yeshuvnikes* brought in a Jew from town to conduct services in the village for a few cents.<sup>43</sup> At the turn of the century, there was a well-known *chazzan* (cantor) in Lechovich, Reb Lippe, who used to travel out to the villages to perform marriages and officiate on other occasions.<sup>44</sup>
- Kosher meat was only available in the towns - but many of the *yeshuvnikes*, including their wives, were capable of slaughtering chickens and other fowl ritually.<sup>45</sup> For chicken soup, they did not lack!
- To give their children a Jewish education, the *yeshuvnikes* probably had to rely mainly on itinerant *melamdim* (traditional teachers). In some cases, these taught the girls as well as the boys – at least to write Yiddish and read a little Hebrew.<sup>46</sup> In the record, there are also documented instances of young village boys lodging with relatives in Lechovich, presumably to be educated at a *cheder* (traditional religious school for children). Likewise, there are examples of village boys being entrusted to their grandparents after their parents emigrated abroad, to continue their Jewish education and have a *bar mitzvah* (confirmation) in the “Old Country”.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, several young men from villages or with village backgrounds are known to have gained an advanced Jewish education - so a “*gelernte yeshuvnik*” (well-educated village Jew) was not necessarily an oxymoron.<sup>48</sup>
- *Shadchonim* (marriage-makers) were presumably employed by the *yeshuvnikes*, just like the *shtetl* Jews, to find suitable spouses for the children. However, there is ample evidence of young *yeshuvnikes* marrying the girl next door or from the next village. In addition, there appear to have been distinct occupational networks, leading the children of, say, inn-keepers to marry one another - with the same pattern holding for the children of millers, blacksmiths and so on.

<sup>43</sup> Private letters in the possession of the author, describing how Elya, son of Yokhel, Strelovsky officiated as a *chazzan* (cantor) on the Jewish High Holydays in villages near Baranovichi for a pittance.

<sup>44</sup> See Chaim Friedstein, “Rabbi Lippe, the cantor”, [no first name given], in Rubin, J. (ed), *Lachowicze; Sefer Zikaron* [Memorial Book of Lachowicze] (Tel Aviv, 1948-49), 257-8.

<sup>45</sup> Yiddish letter in the possession of the author, indicating that Frume Strelovsky continued to ritually slaughter chickens for her family’s use long after they emigrated from the village of Male Luki to the Jewish colony of Las Palmeras in Argentine in 1902.

<sup>46</sup> As regards teaching of girls, witness several examples of 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish girls in villages with the ability to read and write Yiddish fluently, and correspond with relatives abroad in that language.

<sup>47</sup> Within the sample group, two documented cases of pre-*Bar Mitzvah* boys (Vulf, son of Yankel Elya, Puzharik-Mandelson and Zeev, son of Bernat, Willensky) being left behind in villages to complete their Jewish education.

<sup>48</sup> At least six young men within the sample group attended a *yeshivah* (“college” for religious studies), of whom one, Shmuilo Yosef, son of Srol, Mandel, became the “Crown Rabbi” (official rabbi) of Lechovich at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and another, Movshe, son of Yitschok Menachem, Puzharik, qualified as a rabbi but did not practice as such in the village of Gorodeya. Yet another, a Talmudical scholar, ran a mill in the village of Male Luki.



#### 4. Economic Situation and Property Ownership

It would seem that the *yeshuvnik* was frequently better off than many a *shtetl* Jew, for the simple reason that the Jews had a defined place in the village economy and derived an income from their employment in a narrow range of occupations.<sup>49</sup> Thus, a significant number of village Jews are recorded in the Russian records as property-owners, living in “their own house” or in their “*korchma*” (inn),<sup>50</sup> whereas most Jews resident in the town of Lechovich are shown as renters or lodgers.

It should be noted that, given the *yeshuvnikes*’ dependency on the land-lords, their economic position was compromised, sometimes gravely, when the Russian authorities moved to crush local Polish noblemen who took part in the Rebellion of 1860-61.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, with the emancipation of the serfs (also 1861), there were some enterprising *yeshuvnikes* who managed to acquire land in the villages (and then were sometimes forced to fight long rearguard actions against land-owners who tried to dislodge them).<sup>52</sup>

#### 5. Mobility

As a group, the *yeshuvnikes* were highly mobile, in two ways quite distinct from *shtetl* Jews:

- First, their sons tended to move out of the home village in search of a livelihood. These younger *yeshuvnikes* can be tracked as they moved to
- other villages,<sup>53</sup> usually not far from home and generally within a 30 kilometre radius of Lechovich.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> The 1764-65 Polish-Lithuanian Poll Tax List, 80% of Jews living in villages were involved in occupations connected with the liquor trade (producing and purveying alcoholic beverages) on behalf of the land-owners – see Goldberg, Jacob, “Tavernkeeping”, in *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (New York, 2008). As above, other Jews were predominantly estate managers, tax-collectors, blacksmiths, millers and village shopkeepers.

<sup>50</sup> Within the sample group, witness the cases of three Mandel brothers, all registered in Lechovich, each resident in a different village within a different volost – Benjamin, son of Yankel, Mandel, “in his own house” in Musichi, Grozov volost (see NHAB, file 330/1/111 (1874), entry 885); Meer, son of Yankel, Mandel, “in his own house” in Stanislovovo, Darevo volost (see NHAB, file 330/1/111, (1874), entry 184); Shloima, son of Yankel, Mandel, “in his own house” in Troyanovo, Potseyki volost (see NHAB, file 330/1/111 (1874), entry 806). Cf. two Mlotok brothers in parallel circumstances: - Fayba, son of Rafal, Mlotok, “in his own house” in Stanislovovo, Darevo volost (see NHAB, file 330/1/111, (1874), entry 182); and Mendel, son of Rafal, Mlotok, “in his own house” in Kazennye Gusaki, Kletsk volost (see NHAB, file 330/1/111 (1874), entry 792. Several other cases also exist in the sample group.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Assaf, David (ed.), *Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl: the memoirs of Yekhezkel Kotik* (Detroit, 2002), p. 349.

<sup>52</sup> See threats of court action against Meer, son of Yankel, Mandel, announced in *Minskie Guberniskie Vedomosti* (1877) # 40; and again, on a separate issue, in *Minskie Guberniskie Vedomosti* (1904), # 99.

<sup>53</sup> Within the sample group, the shuffling of *yeshuvnikes* and their sons from village to village was constant throughout the century: take, for example, the following cases: in 1784, Leizer, son of Girsh, Khvedyuk lived in the village of Khvedyaki with his father (see 1784 Polish-Lithuanian Poll Tax List, *loc. cit.*) – by 1805, he had moved to Sakuny (see 1805 List of Jewish Inn-keepers, *loc. cit.*); while Sholom, son of Leizer, Khvedyuk, originally of Sakuny, had by 1805 relocated to Khvedyaki (see 1805 List of Jewish Inn-keepers). Cf. three sons of Yankel, son of Vulf, Mandel, moved from their parental village [unknown] to three separate villages – Benjamin to Musichi, Meer to Stanislovo, and Shloima to Troyanovo (see “List of Jewish Males” in Lechovich in see NHAB, file 330/1/111 (1874); while another son, Shmuilo, had moved out of his village existence completely

- Second, many *yeshuvnikes* gravitated to the towns throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A trend can be observed. In the first quarter of the century, they were moving into Lechovich proper; by mid-century, they were spreading out to towns nearby, such as Nesvizh and Kletsk; and by the end of the century they were looking further afield to Baranovichi and Slutsk. It may be assumed that most of these people were propelled by the population explosion and were looking for employment – which was not readily available. Thus, for many *yeshuvnikes*, the towns rapidly became staging posts for onward migration to the West.

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Restrictions of time have limited me to a cursory survey of selected aspects of the *yeshuvnikes*' lives and precluded treatment of many other questions. Nonetheless, I trust that at this point it is possible to write Q.E.D. (*quod erat demonstrandum*) beside the proposition that village Jews merit research in their own right - and, perhaps more importantly, that rewarding insights into their lives can be derived from available primary sources examined within a genealogical framework.

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and relocated to the town of Novogradok (see NHAB, file 333/9/488 (1852), p. 90 (obverse), entry 4). Several more cases of movement from village to village within the sample group could be cited.  
<sup>54</sup> "30 kilometre radius" based on careful plotting on the movements from village to village of the Jews in the sample group throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.