

Researching the Rural Jewish Population of Minsk Guberniya, 1795–1914

by Judith Kalik

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Although Jews typically are viewed as urban dwellers, there was a considerable rural Jewish population in early modern Eastern Europe. The census of Jews in the Polish crown lands conducted in 1764–65 indicated that, of the total number of Jews in the region, about one-third lived in rural settlements, but in some regions they formed an absolute majority. One such predominantly rural region was the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, comprising modern Lithuania and Belarus where, according to the above-mentioned census, about 60 percent of the Jews lived in villages. The mass Jewish settlement began there relatively late—after the Union of Lublin in 1569—when Lithuania was reorganized on the Polish model, both politically and economically. These changes brought with them close economic ties between the Jews and the Lithuanian magnates, and this caused in turn the increasing ruralization of the Jews. The main reason for this ruralization of the Jewish population was the transition of the Jews to lease holding as their main occupation at the beginning of the early modern age. The most widespread form of leasehold was, as in the Polish-Lithuanian economy in general, the leasing of propination rights. Propination rapidly expanded and reached its peak in the 17th and 18th centuries, being the easiest way of marketing grain locally in the form of alcohol.

After the partitions of Poland in 1772–95, almost all the territories of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania were incorporated into the Russian Empire. Thus, the local Jews had to face an entirely new reality. Instead of the decentralized and rapidly disintegrating state where they were safely protected by the powerful magnates, they found themselves in an over-centralized autocratic empire where the Polish and Lithuanian magnates—their lords and protectors—were treated with suspicion as potential rebels. As a matter of fact, this situation was not entirely unfamiliar for the Jews of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In 1654, a large part of this state—the Voivodeship of Smolensk—was annexed by Russia; this annexation became internationally recognized by terms of the peace agreement of Andrusovo in 1667. Also, Ukrainian lands on the left bank of the Dnieper River were taken over by the Russians from the Crown Poland lands.

Contrary to the widespread view that the Jews were ex-

pelled from all these territories, a relatively large Jewish population remained there under Russian rule. Recall that the village of Lubavichi—the cradle of the Chabad movement—is located in Smolensk guberniya, as is the village of Zverovichi, which served as the main stage of the so-called “Voznitsyn affair” (a conversion of Russian nobles to Judaism in the mid-18th century). However, the Jewish presence in Russia was never formally legalized, and the Jews continued to live there under constant threat of expulsion. Such expulsion orders were in fact issued periodically during the 18th century, but the Jews rapidly adjusted to the endemic features of the Russian legal system: selective implementation of laws; use of unrealistic draconian legislation in order to extract bribes rather than to implement it; and periodic campaigns of feverish activity in strict implementation of the law.

Jews of the former Polish-Lithuanian territories usually found a safe haven in the chain of Jewish communities on the Polish side of the Russian border during such campaigns of expulsion and returned to their places of dwelling inside Russia during the periods of relaxation. It is important to emphasize that it is practically impossible to understand the living conditions of the rural Jews in the Russian

Empire during the post-partition age without taking into account this earlier Jewish experience in Russia in the course of one-and-a-half centuries.

Jewish Life After the Partitions of Poland

After the partitions of Poland, the Jewish presence in Russia was finally legalized, but not for the rural Jews! One of the ideological justifications for the annexation of the eastern part of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth by Russia was the protection of the Orthodox “Russian” (i. e., Ukrainian and Belarusian) population of these regions against the oppression by Polish Catholics and their “Jewish agents.” In practice, however, Russian authorities were neither able nor willing to infringe on the seigniorial rule of Polish and Lithuanian landlords over their “Russian” serfs for a variety of reasons, but the Jewish rural leaseholders became an easy target for a demagogic policy of peasants’ protection.

The prohibition for the Jews to live in rural areas was promulgated first in the Jewish statutes of 1804, which formulated the general framework for the Jewish presence in Russia and, among other things, established the Pale of Settlement. A special committee for resettlement of the rural

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Jews in towns and shtetls, as well as on state lands used for agriculture, was created in 1807 and, in 1808, about one-third of the rural Jews agreed to leave rural areas “voluntarily.” Because of logistical difficulties and protests of local nobles, the program of resettlement was suspended in 1809. Attempts to evict rural Jews continued occasionally in Russia in the following years. Especially cruel was an episode in 1821 when about 40,000 rural Jews were evicted from their houses during the winter without provision of any alternative housing.

Jews soon adjusted to the new situation following the model of the pre-partition age of their experience in Russia. During the paroxysms of eviction campaigns, they found retreat in shtetls and towns and returned to rural homes when the campaign was over. Jewish lease holding survived in rural areas until World War I. The most important factor, however, that led Jews to abandon their centuries-long involvement in lease holding was not governmental intervention, but new economic opportunities that opened for Jews during the 19th century in such fields as industry, trade, liberal arts, services and agriculture.

Researching Minsk Guberniya

All the above summarizes our knowledge about the rural Jews in the Russian Empire so far. The importance of this subject began to win recognition in scholarly research only quite recently. The present research project is aimed at the full-scale reconstruction of the rural Jewish population of Minsk guberniya from 1795 to 1914. It includes evaluation of the basic statistics of this population and its geographical distribution; reconstruction of its occupational and family structure and its ties with the non-Jewish population.

This region is chosen because of its central position in the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This was the core area of the Jewish settlement in Belarus before and after the partitions. Minsk guberniya was organized after the third partition of Poland in 1796. During the period of Russian rule, the territory of this administrative unit changed. Initially it included the districts (*uezd*) of Bobruisk, Borisov, Disna, Igumen, Minsk, Mozyr', Pinsk, Rechitsa, Slutsk and Vileika, but in 1842 the districts of Disna and Vileika were annexed to Vilna guberniya, and the district of Novogrudok was added to Minsk guberniya.

The present study examines the rural Jewish population of Minsk guberniya in a narrow sense—without Disna, Vileika and Novogrudok districts. The study is based primarily on archival material, since the existing statistical reference books for this period such as “Materials for Geography and Statistics of Russia Collected by the Offices of the General Staff”, published by I. Zelenski in 1864, or the materials of the first general census of the Russian Empire of 1897, published in 1906 by N.A. Troinitski, do not provide separate data for the rural Jewish population. The research at present is in its initial stage of the collection of sources found in the National Historical Archives of Belar-

rus (NIAB) in Minsk.

The most valuable source of information on the rural Jewish population is in five files prepared by the above-mentioned committee for resettlement of the rural Jews in towns and shtetls in 1808. These documents provide full lists of all rural Jews in seven districts in Minsk guberniya; the districts of Bobruisk, Borisov, Minsk, Mozyr', Pinsk, Rechitsa and Slutsk, with indication of their occupations and the affiliation to their noblemen employers. Lists for the district of Igumen are missing; nevertheless, the information about its rural Jewish population is found in the census lists (*revizskie skazki*) of this district for 1795 and 1807. Unfortunately, the rest of such census lists from other districts and from Igumen district itself issued later in the 19th century do not distinguish rural Jews from the urban ones.

Preliminary Results

The information found in these lists is not yet systematized, but it is possible to offer a preliminary evaluation of their contents. Administratively, the Russian districts (*uezd*) were subdivided into rural communities called *volost'*, but the basic unit of registration of rural Jews both in census lists and in lists prepared for evictions served on the Jewish communities (*kahal*) centered in the shtetls (*mestechko*), which only partially overlapped the Russian *volost'*. Of course, the difference between town and village was blurred in Eastern Europe in general and in the Russian Empire in particular, and many shtetls were themselves large villages. Nonetheless, the sources regularly distinguish the shtetl Jews whom they call “settled” Jews from the rural Jews called the “unsettled” ones. The villages belonged to several subcategories: *selo*—large village, usually with a church; *derevnia*—small or middle-sized village; *sloboda*—suburban village; *zastenok*—typically a Lithuanian term that designated lands that remained outside of the 16th-century land-register *Volochnaya Pomera* and thus were not incorporated into the *folwark* system (large scale grain production for export); and *khutor*—isolated farmsteads.

Many Jews lived outside the settled areas in highway inns and, in one case, in a movable inn (*vperedvizhnoikarchme*). The comparison between the census lists for 1795 and 1807 shows that in the pre-partition Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, villages were not attached permanently to a particular urban community, but rather were attached to a community temporarily on a rotation schedule used in order to adjust the taxation burden of Jewish communities. Internal migrations are also reflected in the sources. Many Jews lived in villages far away from their home communities, which is indicated in eviction lists; many others left their original places of dwelling and their present whereabouts also are indicated in census lists.

The vast majority of the Jews were innkeepers (*karchmar'*); tavern-keepers (*shinkar'*) were also very numerous;

and many others are designated simply as leaseholders (*arendar*). This absolute predominance of leaseholds of various kinds distinguished the rural Jews from the urban ones. For example, in 1795, in the shtetl Pukhovichi of the district of Igumen, there were 9 lease holders, 20 tavern keepers, 3 tailors, 5 horse drivers (*furman*), 1 peddler, 1 candle maker (*voskoboinik*), 3 butchers, 1 textile painter (*kraselnik*), 1 shoemaker, 2 conditors (*sladovnik*), 1 teacher, 1 rabbi's assistant (*podrabinek*), 1 cantor and 3 synagogue attendants (*shkol'nik*), while in the villages which belonged to this community there were 19 lease holders and 11 tavern keepers only. Occasionally, such occupations as barbers (they served also as paramedics), tailors, millers, master in glass factory (village Brodnia in the community of Borisov), agricultural manager, farmers and even one teacher (village Grodek in the community of Logoisk) appear in villages. Many rural Jews are said to live "in his own house," "in a rented house," "in peasant's hut" (*v krestyanskoj izbe*) without indication of their occupation. In the village of Koreni in the community of Kalinovichi in the district of Rechitsa, Jews living in their own houses were exceptionally numerous: 16 men and 23 women. No rabbis or other occupations connected to the synagogue service are mentioned, since there were no rural synagogues in the region.

Employers of the rural Jews were in most cases owners of inns and taverns who leased their property to Jews. They were of several categories: managers of the former royal estates, which became property of the Russian imperial family and of confiscated estates which passed to the treasury; Lithuanian magnates; Russian military and civil dignitaries; low and middle Russian, Polish and Lithuanian nobles; and ecclesiastic institutions. Members of the Radziwiłł family were the most conspicuous. Prince Michał Radziwiłł dominated in the district of Borisov; Dominik Radziwiłł—in the district of Bobruisk; Józef Radziwiłł—in the district of Slutsk. Prince Franciszek Ksawery Drucki-Lubecki owned numerous inns in the district of Pinsk; Count Pius Tyszkiewicz, in the district of Borisov; Count Potocki, in the district of Rechitsa and Count Chodkiewicz, in the district of Mozyr'. Senator Nepliujev, Admiral Pushchin, General Vereshchagin and Count Sivers were among the most prominent Russian dignitaries. Lower and middle nobles dominated in the district of Minsk. Two rather unusual non-noble personalities also appear among employers of the rural Jews: the English merchant Forster who owned two inns in the villages of Radovichi and Simonovichi in the community of Turov; and the Jewish merchant Movsha (Moses) Shimonovich who owned three inns in the villages of Bircha and Noviny in the community of Bobruisk.

Ecclesiastic institutions of all three churches present in 19th-century Belarus—Roman Catholic, Greek-Catholic, and Orthodox—were very active in the employment of the Jews. Catholic monasteries of Benedictine, Dominican, Franciscan and Piarist orders; Uniate Basilian and Orthodox

(called in documents "Greek-Russian") monasteries; and parish churches (*plebania*), priests, bishops and archbishops (Iov Potemkin, Orthodox Archbishop of Belarus) were among them. This practice contradicted the synodal legislation of all three churches, but it was a direct continuation of the common pattern in the pre-partition Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

A special group of rural Jews were the Jewish farmers. We have seen that few Jews were involved in agriculture in traditional Jewish society. Later on, the Russian government made great efforts to convert Jews into farmers whom it saw as a "productive" element in contrast to the "parasitic" Jewish leaseholders. Initially, in 1806, the government offered to the Jews the opportunity to migrate to the uncultivated steppes of Kherson guberniya on the northern shore of the Black Sea. This area recently had been annexed to Russia from the Khanate of Crimea and was intensively colonized by Russian peasants from central Russia and other densely populated areas. Financial and logistic difficulties, however, prevented large-scale Jewish migration there.

In 1835, the government allowed Jews to settle on treasury lands inside the Pale of Settlement. Because of the great importance attributed by the government to this issue, the Jewish farmers are the only rural Jews who are listed separately in the census lists from the mid-19th century. Not all Jewish farmers lived on treasury estates; many lived on their own land and some on private estates. Thus, in 1850, 20 Jewish families lived in the village of Nedvezhin on the land of Faddei Obrompol'ski, and one Jewish family lived in a village of Kaneyevichi on the land of another Jew, Mos'ka (Moses) Kurdin. Nearly all these villages are called *zastenok*, which means that they were not involved in the folwark system.

While the present research lacks a perspective that is continuous in time, since it is based mainly on documents from the years 1807–08, this shortcoming probably can be overcome in further research. At this point, the genealogical perspective should be taken into account. Though rural Jews are not specially indicated in the census lists after 1808, the family history of some individual rural Jewish families can be traced for generations. Of course, this work is just beginning. I expect to find valuable information from the end of the discussed period in lists of voters to the Russian State Duma (House of Representatives) from the years 1906, 1907 and 1912, since they include exact addresses of all males with electoral rights. These lists are kept now in Moscow.

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