

# THE DEMOGRAPHY OF JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN EASTERN EUROPE<sup>1</sup>

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**B**Y EASTERN EUROPE I mean Russia and the states established along her western boundaries after the First World War in territories which had belonged to the Russian Empire: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Esthonia. These communities comprised 75 per cent of the Jewish people in 1880; even in 1925 they constituted over half of all the Jews of the world. Developments between the two wars and the extermination during the last war very heavily affected this part of Jewry, which was considered its backbone from the demographic, religious, and cultural points of view.

Great changes have occurred during the last fifty years in the numbers of Russian Jews. Before the First World War they numbered approximately 5,600,000. In 1920, after the loss of the Western areas, the number decreased to 2,744,757; 1,772,479 lived in the Ukraine and 407,000 in White Russia.<sup>2</sup> 2,672,000 Jews were enumerated in the 1926 census and 3,020,000 in the 1939 census. The decrease in 1926 is to be explained by the changed definition of 'Jew'. The census of old Russia was based on religious differentiation, while divisions after the Revolution have been made on a national basis. In the 1926 census nationality was defined in terms of ethnic group, while in 1939 it was defined in terms of the national group with which the individual preferred to be identified. The number of people in Russia who were Jews by origin was greater than the number of those identifying themselves with the Jewish people. It is estimated that about 3,300,000 Jews lived in Soviet Russia at the beginning of the Second World War.

After the Russian territorial expansion during the first years of the war, the number of Jews under Soviet rule increased by approximately two millions.<sup>3</sup> A great part of the Jews failed to evacuate the areas later occupied by the Germans. The occupied territory included about two-thirds of the Jewish population within the old boundaries of Russia, or almost 80 per cent of Jews living in the expanded Soviet State. The

evacuation of the Jewish population before the advancing enemy was on a small scale, and a considerable proportion of Russian Jewry therefore fell victim to 'extermination'.

There is no reliable information on the number of Jews in Soviet Russia after the War. The usual figure of two millions probably comes close to the actual state of affairs.

Even before the last War the birth-rate and natural increase of Russian Jewry were decreasing, and it constituted an ageing population. The Jewish birth-rate was also lower than that of other urban groups.

From 1926 to 1939 the population of Russia as a whole grew by 15.9 per cent, and the number of Jews by less than 13 per cent.<sup>4</sup> We have relatively many statistical data on the Jews of Odessa.<sup>5</sup> During the years 1892-1904 the vital index (the ratio of births to deaths) never fell below 127.7 (in 1896), and during most of these years it was between 140 and 160. However, in 1905 the vital index fell to 100.6, and in the following ten years it was always lower than 125. The rate of natural increase among the Jews of Odessa fell from 12.6 in 1897 to 4.0 in 1910, and in 1920 (a year of famine and epidemics) it sank to -24.5.

The percentage of children up to the age of 10 fell from 28.3 in 1897 to 18.5 in 1920, while the percentage of those aged 50 or above rose during the same period from 10.5 to 15.5. Lorimer,<sup>6</sup> analysing the ratio between the numbers of children under the age of 5 and of women in reproductive ages, came to the following conclusion: 'It is apparent that the Jewish population was barely replacing itself at this time, whereas some groups were tending to double their number in each successive generation.' The results can be seen in the ageing of the Jewish population.

TABLE 1. *Age Frequency among the Jews of the Ukraine 1897 and 1920*

	0-10	10-20	20-40	40-50	50-60	60+	Total
1897	28.3	24.3	28.6	8.3	5.8	4.7	100.0
1920	18.5	25.9	29.7	10.4	8.6	6.9	100.0

In the year 1926 the rate of natural increase among the Jews of the Ukraine was lower than that of any other national group (Germans—32, Ukrainians—24, Poles—21, Russians—18, Jews—15) and lower than the general rate of the urban population.<sup>7</sup>

One of the reasons for this process was the entrance of many Jews into the free professions after the Revolution. These professions are known for their low birth-rate. In 1913, 7 per cent of the economically active Jews in Russia were employed in white-collar professions, and in 1939 this percentage had risen to 37.2. During the same period the number of Jews in the free professions rose from 3 to 12.8 per cent. In 1929 more than three-quarters of all Jews in Moscow were employed in the civil

## THE JEWS IN EASTERN EUROPE

service. In 1931 Jews constituted almost 30 per cent of all those employed in the medical profession.<sup>8</sup> Engagement in these professions had also led to assimilation, which in the social circumstances of the Soviet Union has promoted mixed marriages. Marriages of this kind generally produce few children, and the majority of the children born in mixed marriages are not brought up as Jews even in countries where such a possibility exists.<sup>9</sup> The breaking down of the traditional 'pale of settlement' brought about a dispersion of the Jewish population into all parts of Greater Russia, and its 'density' in the general population declined. The average percentage of Jews in all cities of Russia declined from 8.2 to 4.2 during the years 1926-39; in the cities of the Ukraine it declined from 22.7 to 11.7; and in the cities of White Russia from 40.2 to 23.9.<sup>10</sup> The consequence of this change was twofold: the standard of living among the Jews of Russia rose, and the assimilative power of the majority population group increased.

TABLE 2. *Percentages of Jews among Inhabitants of Various Regions of Russia*

	1900	1939	1946
Ukraine	9.4	4.8	1.7
White Russia	12.7	7.2	1.2
Central Russia	0.4	1.0	0.6

The concentration of Jews in big towns, their dispersion from the 'pale of settlement' into all parts of the State, the decrease in the proportion of Jews in the total population, the disturbance of equilibrium in the numbers of men and women owing to internal migration, and, in addition, the social environment which facilitates heterogamous marriages—all these are factors which determine the demographic development of Russian Jewry. Although mortality decreased to a great extent (and the Jewish infant mortality is much lower than that of the people among whom they live) it was not enough fully to counterbalance the decrease in natality.

There is no reason to believe that the situation changed after the last War. An 'external cause' exterminated part of the Jewish Diaspora in Russia, and the demographic position of the remnants does not promise very much. Russia has in general compensated itself for the heavy losses in population suffered during the war and occupation, but the Jews of Russia will find it difficult to stabilize their present numbers.

The first census in liberated Poland was taken in 1921 and showed 2,845,364 Jews by religion, as against 2,110,448 by nationality. In 1931 the corresponding figure was 3,113,933 Jews by religion, of whom only 381,000 did not declare Hebrew or Yiddish as their mother-tongue. The Jewish population in Poland on the eve of the last war was estimated at 3,350,000. The Central Committee of Polish Jews stated in a

personal communication to Professor Bachi in November 1948 that there had been more than 3.5 million Jews.<sup>11</sup> In 1945-6 there were 80,000-100,000 Jews in Poland and their number decreased by emigration to 40,000-50,000. At present we are witnessing a new wave of immigration from Poland to Israel, the result of which may possibly be the complete liquidation of the Jewish community in Poland.

The official registration of vital statistics among Polish Jews was to a considerable degree defective. Jews did not register many of their marriages and births. Therefore their official marriage-rate was low, the proportion of 'illegitimate' births was high, there were great deviations from the normal in masculinity of births, etc.

Polish Jewry had an urban character, although a smaller proportion was concentrated in the metropolitan city than in other countries. Three-quarters of Polish Jews lived in towns, as against one-quarter of the total population. But only 10 per cent of all Polish Jews lived in Warsaw, as against about 65 per cent of British Jews living in London, 70 per cent of French Jews in Paris, 45 per cent of American Jews in New York.

Only two Jewish communities in Poland numbered more than 100,000 persons (Warsaw and Lodz), and three communities numbered 50-100,000 (Lwow, Cracow, and Wilna). Most of the Jews lived in small urban settlements, in communities of less than 10,000 each. The importance of this fact for the demography of the Jews of Poland can be seen in the distribution by age of the Jewish population according to the Census of 1931.

TABLE 3. *Age Distribution (per cent) of Jewish Population in Poland, 1931*

Age	General Population Poland	Jews					
		Poland	Large Cities	Small Cities	Villages	Lodz	Cracow
0-14	33.6	29.6	27.1	31.0	32.8	27.7	23.4
15-19	9.5	9.6	9.6	9.8	9.3	9.6	9.9
20-39	32.6	33.8	36.1	32.1	31.5	36.7	39.5
40-59	16.4	18.2	19.2	17.7	16.8	15.6	20.0
60 and +	7.8	8.7	7.9	9.3	9.5	10.3	7.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The percentage of children is greater in the villages than in the cities. In all instances it is lower for the Jews than for the general population. In Cracow, the capital of Western Galicia, the low percentage of children is nearest to the Western pattern. The attraction of people of working age to the cities caused a high urban concentration of men between the ages of 20 and 40, while the contact with urban culture influenced the decline in the birth-rate.

## THE JEWS IN EASTERN EUROPE

Because of the urban character of Jews their division by occupation was different from that of the general population. 34·6 per cent of all employed Jews engaged in commerce and insurance, as against 1·5 per cent of the general population; 31·7 per cent were in industry and mining, as against 7·5 per cent; and in Government service and the free professions there were 4·3 per cent of Jews as against 2·2 per cent in the general population.<sup>12</sup>

Economic difficulties and lack of numerical balance between men and women caused postponement of marriages: 30 per cent of the total male urban population, and 53 per cent of the female, married before the age of 25; for Jews the corresponding proportions were 21·3 per cent and 34·5 per cent. It is clear therefore that births among Jews occurred at higher parental ages.

The large surplus of women in the Jewish population should be mentioned in connexion with Jewish marriage habits in Poland. According to the Census of 1931, there were 109 women to every 100 men in the Jewish population; and at the marriage-age the ratio went up to 119 : 100. This was apparently a result of emigration, in which men participated more than women.

A downward trend was evident in the Jewish birth-rate and differences existed between districts. On the average for all Poland the Jewish birth-rate decreased from 22·1 at the beginning of the twenties to 19·2 in 1937. In Warsaw the rate was 35 per 1,000 Jewish inhabitants at the end of the nineteenth century; it decreased to 15·2 during 1921-2 and to 9·0 in 1932. Galicia, and in particular its eastern part, had a higher birth-rate. This was the centre of Polish Chassidism, of deeply religious and nationalistic Jews living in small towns and villages. But even in this district the birth-rate dropped from 46·2 per 1,000 in 1882 to 21·4 during 1931-5. This is still a considerable birth-rate when compared with those of Western countries.

The Jewish birth-rate was low even if we take into consideration the urban character of the Jewish population. In the years 1931-2, the birth-rate among the total urban population in Poland was 21·0; among urban Catholics, 22·4; and among urban Jews, 18·6. During the same period the birth-rates among the rural populations were: general population, 33·0; Catholics, 37·6; Jews, 21·6.<sup>13</sup>

The infant mortality rate among Jews was very low; in 1937 this rate was 136 per 1,000 live births for the total population of Poland, but only 46 for Jews. The general mortality was also low. In 1937 it was 10·5 per 1,000 Jews for the state as a whole, and in Galicia it was 10·0 during 1931-5. Before the last war, the rate of natural increase of Jews in Poland was about 10 per 1,000. It was higher in Galicia (1931-5: 11·4) than in Warsaw (1932: 0·5; 1933: 1·7), and in small villages than in towns. The crude reproduction rate of Jews in Poland, 1927-30, was 1·41, and the net rate 1·02. In the western districts it was below 1; the

fertile groups of the Jewish population were in the central and southern districts of Poland. The rate of reproduction of Jews in the five main cities was much lower than 1.0, and the late Professor Hersch quotes only 0.47 in Warsaw during the years 1930-6.<sup>14</sup>

We have no data on the demographic status of the remnants of the Jewish community in Poland after the war. Immediately after the war there were signs of a high birth-rate, accompanied by a strong urge to establish new families and to rebuild family units. This seems to have been only a passing and temporary manifestation. According to estimates of the American Joint Distribution Committee, 2,000 Jewish births occurred in Poland in 1947. Since there were some 100,000 Jews in Poland in that year, the figure was equal to a birth-rate of 20 to 22 per thousand, hardly a very high rate. Considering the great 'fluctuation' in the number of Jews in Poland, and their strong desire to emigrate, we can assume that their rate of natural increase is not high.

The Jewish population in the other countries included in this review were small when compared with those of Russia or Poland. Lithuania had about 250,000 Jews, Latvia fewer than 100,000, and approximately only 4,500 Jews lived in Esthonia. These states lacked a 'fertile' district like Galicia, and their demographic situation was therefore worse. In Lithuania the proportion of children up to the age of ten decreased from 27.1 per cent in 1897 to 17.0 per cent in 1923.<sup>15</sup> According to Professor Hersch, Lithuanian Jewry had no natural increase at the beginning of the thirties; Professor Bachi calculated the average final number of children per family in 1936 to be 2.57, which does not differ much from Hersch's supposition.<sup>16</sup>

According to Lestschinsky,<sup>17</sup> the rate of natural increase among the Jews of Lithuania declined from 9.6 per thousand in the years 1922-6 to 1.3 in the years 1937-9. The mortality rate has become higher and higher throughout the period of Lithuania's independence, which proves that the ageing of the population has reached great dimensions. Even though the marriage rate was relatively high, it was connected with the stream of emigration (mainly to Israel), and Lithuanian Jewry did not benefit, in any demographic sense, from these marriages. The decline in the proportion of Jewish residents in Lithuanian cities shows an increasing economic competition with non-Jewish neighbours and a worsening of the general economic situation. It is no wonder, therefore, that the number of Jewish emigrants from Lithuania in the years 1923-39 was higher by some five thousand than the natural increase during the same period.

The situation in Latvia was worse. In spite of the small Jewish emigration, the number of Jews in this country decreased from 1925 to 1935. In 1934 rates of births and deaths were equal (12.4). Esthonian Jewry was similar in character, origin, and way of life to Latvian Jewry.<sup>18</sup>

All these communities were annihilated in a very short time. The

## THE JEWS IN EASTERN EUROPE

Nazi Commanders of occupied areas considered it their first duty to 'cleanse' them of Jews. In a report submitted to Heidrich on 31 January 1942 all *Judenrein* places were marked on a map by a coffin.

In summary we may state:

(1) The birth-rate and natural increase of the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe were decreasing before the Second World War. In spite of this, there was still a considerable rate of natural increase among Polish Jewry, which was considered therefore as the 'granary' of the natural increase of Ashkenazi Jews.

(2) The greater part of the Jews in these countries, and especially in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Esthonia, vanished in the process of the Nazi 'final solution'. Some fled to Russia and are today an integral part of Russian Jewry.

(3) It is improbable that the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe will grow by natural increase, and it is doubtful whether they will be able to keep their numbers up.

(4) As a consequence of the above-mentioned developments, a profound change occurred in the place occupied by Eastern Europe on the demographic map of the Jewish people. The weight of the remnants of Eastern European Jewry in the total of the Jewish people is slight.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Paper read at Second World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 1957, Section 'Demography of the Jews'. See 'Chronicle', p. 133 below, for recent figures on the Jews in the U.S.S.R.

<sup>2</sup> J. Lestschinsky, *Contemporary Jewish Record*, Vol. III, p. 522.

<sup>3</sup> *Jewish Affairs*, Vol. I, no. 1, p. 2. *Jews in Nazi Europe*, Baltimore 1941, p. RU-8.

<sup>4</sup> J. Lestschinsky, *Jews in Soviet Russia* (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv, 1943, pp. 56-67.

<sup>5</sup> J. Lestschinsky, in *Papers in Jewish Demography, Statistics, and Economics* (Yiddish), Berlin, 1923, pp. 71-5.

<sup>6</sup> F. Lorimer, *The Population of the Soviet Union*, Geneva, 1946, pp. 94-7.

<sup>7</sup> L. Isserlis, *Vital Statistics of Jews*, Ose-Rundschau, Vol. V, no. 8, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> See 4, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> There are many references to prove it. Some are: A. Ruppin, *Sociology of the Jews*, I (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv, 1934, pp. 195-201. R. Baker, in *Papers in Jewish Demography, Statistics, and Economics* (Yiddish), Berlin, 1923, p. 154. J. Segal, *ibid.*, pp. 170-3. B. Blau, *Jewish Social Studies*, 1950, Vol. XII, pp. 163, 166. J. M.

Meulenhoff, *De Bevolking van Amsterdam*, Amsterdam, 1936, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> See 4, p. 60. S. M. Schwarz, *Antisemitism in the Soviet Union* (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv, 1953, pp. 36-8.

<sup>11</sup> L. Hersch, *General Encyclopaedia—Jews*, Vol. I (Yiddish), p. 333. J. Lestschinsky, in *Jewish Economics* (Yiddish), 1937, p. 91, and in *Yivo Bletter* (Yiddish), Vol. XXIII, p. 324. A. Tartakower, *Zydzi w Polsce Odrodzonej*, Vol. II (Polish), pp. 186-7.

<sup>12</sup> Tartakower, *op. cit.*, p. 381.

<sup>13</sup> *Concise Statistical Yearbook of Poland*, 1938, p. 50.

<sup>14</sup> Hersch, as in 11, p. 386. C. Tietze, in *Population*, Vol. IV (French), pp. 364-5.

<sup>15</sup> Lestschinsky, *Probleme der Bevölkerungsbewegung bei den Juden*, Padua, 1926, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Hersch, as in 11, p. 379. R. Bachi, *Marriage and Fertility in the Various Sections of Jewish Population* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1944, pp. 174-5.

<sup>17</sup> J. Lestschinsky, in *Lithuania*, Vol. I (Yiddish), New York 1951, pp. 829, 839-44.

<sup>18</sup> Hersch, as in 11, p. 353.