Jewish Communities in Kurland

In memory of my native town Windau

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JEWS settled in Kurland earlier than in other parts of Latvia.

According to the historian Reuven Wunderbar, Jewish settlement there began in the 16th century. The first-comers originated from East Prussia. They came by sea as merchants, and eventually established their home in Hasenpot and Pilten. The Bishop of Pilten encouraged Jews to stay, realizing the usefulness of their trading between Prussia and his district. The greater part of Jewish immigration into Kurland, however, came across the southem border, namely from Lithuania.

Kurland was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1795. Its Jewish population at that time amounted to less than 5000 souls. It is interesting to note that only 20% lived in towns, while 80% found a livelihood in the countryside, on the large estates of the German Barons, as petty artisans, innkeepers, land tenants and peddlars. In 1850, fifty-five years later, the Jewish population in Kurland had grown to 22,000; and by the end of the century, in 1897, it reached the impressive number of 51,000.

Economic Developments at the End of the 19th Century

During the second half of the 19th century important developments took place in Russia's foreign trade, its export being channelled to a great extent through the Baltic sea ports of Riga, Libau and Windau. Two important railway lines were laid for the export of Russian grain through the two latter ports: The Romni-Libau Line and the Rybinsk-Windau Line. These two ports had the advantage over Riga of being open for shipping all the year round, whereas the big port of Riga was closed during the winter months because of massive ice. To store the grain at the exit ports, huge silos were built with modern facilities for speedy loading into vessels. Libau had a further economic asset, namely a naval port where part of the Russian Baltic fleet was stationed.

These economic changes had a great impact on the port cities, which prospered and grew fast. However, inland towns like Goldingen, Talsen, Sasmaken, Zabeln, and others had only a small share in the economic expansion and remained almost untouched in their idyllic quaintness. Zabeln, Kandau, Talsen and their surroundings were called the "Switzerland of Kurland" for their romantic beauty. (The name Talsen is supposed to be a combination of the German words "Tal" and "See", meaning "valley" and "lake".) Goldingen on the shore of the Venta river, with its waterfall, its wonderful big park in the heart of the town, its classic German gymnasium and entirely German atmosphere, had a particularly provincial character, with practically no change for generations in spite of its industries: A match factory (Hirschmann), a needle factory, and a flourmill, all belonging to Jews.

Mitau was the seat of the central government administration, where the Governor of Kurland resided.

Tukkum had the advantage of two railway lines meeting there; while Hasenpot, for example, enjoyed its position on the crossroads from Goldingen to Libau, with which there was a narrow gauge railroad from Hasenpot.

Cultural Influences from East and West

Kurland was not part of the Pale of Settlement (the part of Russia where Jews were permitted to live), and only those who were born there had the right of residence. In spite of restrictions, however, the influx of Jews from other parts of Russia, and in the first place from Lithuania, was very considerable throughout the 19th century. There had always been neighbourly ties of all kinds between Kurland and the adjacent sections of Lithuania. There were no Yeshivot (Talmudical academies) in Kurland. For this reason well-to-do Jews in Kurland sent their sons to study at the famous Yeshivot of Volozhin, Slobodka, Telsh, Mir, and others. They also chose learned young Yeshiva students as husbands for their daughters. Eventually these students became rabbis or teachers, who were badly needed in Kurland. Most of the rabbis in Kurland who established a succession of renowned rabbinical families originated in Lithuania. To mention only a few: The Rabbis Eliasbere (Bausk), Samunoff (Windau, Mitau), Lichtenstein (Tukkum) and Nurock (Mitau, Libau). Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook resided in Bausk, and later became Chief Rabbi of Israel. Thus Lithuania had a considerable share in Jewish religious education and spiritual leadership in Kurland.

However, winds of knowledge and education also blew from the West. Famous educators came to Kurland from Germany. Thus David Friedlander, a pupil of Moses Mendelssohn, and Professor Marcus Hertz of Berlin, both resided in Mitau for several years. The Emancipation and the ensuing urge for contemporary education in neighbouring Germany did not pass without infuencing the Jews in Kurland who, in fact, were quite perceptive to Western culture, their language being German (Kurisches Deutsch), even if they also spoke Yiddish. Indeed, long before Friedlander and Hertz came to Kurland, the German cultural influence on the Jewish population there was paramount. The historian Wunderbar remarks in his book, which appeared in 1853: "As to their (the Jews of Kurland's) education, it is most satisfactory. Even the poor do their utmost to give their children a fair education, and among the adults there are practically none who do not command the German language."

As it happened, there was no competition between East and West in guiding the Jews of Kurland. On the contrary, both complemented each other. Where the East took the lead in Jewish religious education, the West cared for the secular aspects.

All these developments and currents created the unique type of the Kurland Jew, often named "Kurischer" by his brethren from other parts ot Latvia. It meant the Jew from the province, straightforward, not too smart, observant but not very learned, a person with a distinctly German background who at the same time was responsive to cultural and spiritual influences from the Russian provinces.

Emigration

The favourable economic developments during the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century were a blessing to the Jewish population in Kurland. However, not all parts of the country enjoyed the economic upsurge to the same degree. As already mentioned, the sea-port cities of Libau and Windau were prospering. They attracted Jews from neighbouring communities. Libau gained new residents from Grobin, Hasenpoth and Goldingen; Windau from Pilten (virtually the entire Jewish population gradually moved to Windau), Zabeln, Talsen, Sasmaken and Kandau. However, Libau and

Windau, and even the big city of Riga, were unable to absorb all those who struggled for a livelihood. With the approach of the 20th century, emigration to the United States of America set in, expanding considerably with the terror and persecution following the abortive revolution of 1905, and reaching South Africa and England. In this context it may be of interest to mention a historical episode which took place 60-65 years earlier, namely in the year 1840, when 341 Jewish families, consisting of 2530 souls, emigrated to the south of Russia (Kherson Guberniya) to work on the land there. The emigrants were mainly from Mitau, Bausk, Hasenpoth and Goldingen, the communities which suffered most from lack of gainful occupation. This enterprise was sponsored by the Russian Government, but also by some Jewish leaders and educators from Germany like Dr. Max Lilienthal, who called for the productivisation of the Jewish masses.

The Revolution of 1905

In spite of the fact that Kurland scarcely had an organized labour force among its Jewish population, Jewish youth took an active part in the rising against the Russian Government in 1905. They paid a high price for their participation, when the reaction set in and the Revolution was smashed with an iron fist. To liquidate the revolting Latvian peasants who rebelled against their landlords the German barons, chasing them out of their estates and setting their mansions on fire, the Russian Government sent a punitive task force consisting of Cossack and dragoon detachments to Kurland. Latvian peasants in hundreds were executed on the spot, while Jewish revolutionaries -- real or suspect -- were not spared either. In Windau two Jews, Meir Wulfson and young Behrman, were shot by the Russians. Fearing pogroms, Jews and Latvians organized a common self-defence which did not abstain from attacking the government forces wherever possible.

High government officials representative of the Tsarist regime were assassinated. On a Saturday morning the District Commissioner, Colonel Brown, was shot dead in Windau on the way to his office. The assailant was never identified. In Tukkum, the town commandant and 17 dragoons were killed by revolutionaries; which, of course, led to condign punishment on the part of the authorities. An entire section of Tukkum was wiped out, including several Jewish families. Shaul Berman and Jacob Blumenthal from Tukkum were sentenced to death for taking part in the rising, but managed to escape before it was too late. Israel Friedman of Bausk, a locksmith, was accused of making arms for the self-defence and was executed.

The authorities did not abstain from taking hostages either. In Tukkum two Jewish notables, Gerschon Paul Berner and Leonard Gerson, were held as hostages and released only after payment of a heavy fine. (These details have been told by Dr. Meir Berner, a native of Tukkum now residing in Israel.)

Talsen suffered more than any other town in Kurland. The Russian dragoons surrounded the town and fired indiscriminately, setting it on fire. Half of the place went up in names. There were several Jewish casualties, among them a young man by the name of Ludwig Thalberg.

World War I and the Expulsion of April 1915

World War I broke out in August 1914, and had an immediate effect on life in Kurland. The German border was not far away, and in spite of initial victories of the Russian army in East Prussia, the dangers of hostilities spreading to Kurland and of a possible German occupation were imminent. The Autumn and Winter passed without spectacular changes, except for a standstill in many fields of the economy. The snow of the first winter had hardly melted away, however, when a strong German offensive began,

endangering the right wing of the Russian front. The Russian Army leaders, seeking excuses for their defeats, had the answer ready: The Jewish population was in sympathy with Germany, and was spying for the Germans. They therefore demanded that Jews be removed at least 50 kms from the front.

The Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Army, Nikolai Nikolaevitch, an uncle of the Czar, Nikolai II, decreed on April 28, 1915 that the entire Jewish population of Kurland should be expelled within twenty-four hours. The confusion, anxiety and panic of the Jews on that memorable day of April 28, 1915 can hardly be described. Jewish leaders appealed to the authorities, but all they could achieve was a postponement of several days. Five provinces (Guberni) in the heart of Russia were designated for the resettlement of the expelled Jews; namely Mogiliov, Chernigov, Poltava, Voronezh and Yekaterinoslav. The greater part of the Jewish community of Windau chose the town of Orsha in the Mogiliov district.

Why Orsha of all places? The writer recollects exactly how the choice was made. To a certain extent, he was responsible for the selection. When the five Guberni were announced, my sister and I, the best-educated members of the family, opened an Atlas to see where those five Guberni were situated. We found that the least distant was the Mogiliov Guberni, and the first town to be reached on the way would be Orsha. Father was enlightened on the geographical situation, and accepted our suggestion. When neighbours, relatives and friends came in to ask the fateful question: "Where do we go"?, we replied "Orsha", stressing its geographical advantage, and everybody found our choice reasonable enough. There was actually no reason whatsoever to choose Orsha, other than its being the least distant point from Kurland. Apparently the choice was dictated by the secret hope of the expelled that they would be able to return to their homes before long.

The brutal decree struck the Jews of Kurland as an overwhelming blow. It meant leaving everything behind, their homes, businesses, and properties, and setting out on an adventurous journey to an unknown Russian land without even knowing the Russian language. At that time families were blessed with plenty of children. The writer belonged to a family of seven children, aged from 4 to 18. The concern and worry grew even greater when it was announced that there would be no accommodation in passenger trains, but special freight cars (cattle trucks) would be provided and only the most necessary personal belongings could be taken along.

The day when several hundred families gathered at the railway station of Windau, to entrain in the long row of cattle-trucks prepared for the fantastic journey into the unknown, will not be forgotten by those who participated in the nightmarish adventure. The platform was crowded with men, women and children of all ages, old, young, fit and sick, all sitting on their bundles, the miserable remains of their households, now the only property left to them; the women weeping, some of the men uttering prayers. When the doors of the cattle-trucks were opened the people started crawling in, stowing their bundles, suitcases, and prams st the sides of the trucks. It took several hours until everybody was settled somehow -- relatives, neighbours and friends together as far as possible. By the time the doors were shut and the long, sad freight train left the station in the direction of Riga darkness had fallen. Most of the people fell asleep on the floor at once, resting their tired and heavy heads on their bundles, their children next to them. There were probably many heads of families who could not find sleep at all, their minds turning over the fateful question: What were they to expect over there? How would they make a living, where would they house their families?

Next morning the train arrived in Riga, after several stops during the night. In Riga, at the freight yard where freight trains normally stop, a surprise was in store. A delegation of Riga Jews came to make us welcome and put heart into us, greeting us with fresh rolls, cheese, sausage, tea, sweets for the children, and a good supply of food for the rest of our journey. The delegation also brought the gratifying message that a public committee consisting of prominent Jewish leaders (Lazar Ettingen, Mordechai Nurock,

Professor Paul Mintz, Mendel Luloff and others) had been formed to provide help for the suffering Jews of Kurland. Similar committees had immediately been organized in other towns with a Jewish population. On our long journey we were met in Dvinsk, Polotsk, and Vitebsk in the same friendly and hospitable manner as in Riga.

We arrived in Orsha on a Saturday morning before dawn, after a journey of almost a whole week. Here in Orsha, a town of 50,000 Jews (only 5000 non-Jews) a further surprise awaited us. We were literally carried out of the cars on the hands of those who came to greet us. Jewish men and women, mostly students, accompanied us into the station hall where long tables had been set with tea and fresh food. We were not allowed to carry our bundles. That was done by the students themselves. We were their guests, and under their protection and care. This remarkable devotion and brotherly love on the part of Russian Jews was manifested not only in Orsha but in all places where the expelled Jews chose to settle. Russian Jewry proved to be a solid and dependable protector of the poor Jews from Kurland, who had suddenly become homeless through no fault of their own.

Outside the station hall a new day was coming to life, a lovely sunny early summer day. The newcomers were now carried to town in all sorts of carriages and settled temporarily in schools, synagogues, and private homes. Our family was split. The five younger children remained with our parents in a schoolhouse, the two older ones were accommodated in the house of a wealthy farmer outside Orsha, who came to the railway station to share in the reception of the newcomers and give a hand. The Jews of Orsha spared no effort to give every possible assistance to the "refugees", as we were misleadingly described. We were not refugees. We did not run away from our homes, but were expelled by order of the military authorities. Help was extended in a public organized way, and very frequently in a private manner. It soon became plain that we were not the only Jews who needed help. Many more "refugees" landed in Orsha and became the responsibility of the local Jewish community.

Two years later, when the German armies were approaching the Dnieper Line, the good Jews of Orsha became refugees themselves. Some of them found shelter in Riga, which was still in Russian hands. This was unfortunately the fate of our benefactor farmer, his wife and his two children. An irony of fate indeed, but it gave my parents, who in the meantime had managed to return to Riga, a welcome though sad opportunity to reciprocate and repay the kindness and hospitality they themselves had enjoyed a few years earlier.

The expulsion of Jews from Kurland had far-reaching consequences. Many perished in Russia. Others remained there for good. Few returned to their homes. It is estimated that of the 40,000 people expelled in 1915, only 16,000-17,000 re-settled in the old places. It can be said without exaggeration that the expulsion of 1915 was a major tragedy in the history of the Jewish community of Kurland.

Jewish Duma Members from Kurland

The abortive Russian revolution of 1905 was not entirely in vain. It produced the so-called constitutional regime and its parliamentary expression, the Duma. There were four Dumas in all. The first was elected in 1906 and included 12 Jewish members from the whole of Russia. Kurland elected Dr. Nissan Katzenelson of Libau, an outstanding Zionist leader. This Duma had a very short life of about three months only. Its composition was not to the taste of the Russian Government, which did not hesitate to dissolve it. The progressive members, among them the Jewish representatives, protested against this action of the Government and signed the famous "Vyborg Declaration". All the protesters, among them Dr. Katzenelson, were imprisoned for three months and disqualified from serving as members of the next Duma.

The Second Duma began its sessions in February 1907, but as it appeared to be even more leftist than the first it was dismissed in June 1907. To the Second Duma only three Jewish members were elected, among them a representative from Kurland; namely Jacob Shapiro of Windau, a timber exporter and a well-educated man of liberal views, who was highly esteemed by the community. The Third Duma (1907-1912) saw only 2 Jewish representatives from the whole of Russia, one of them again a representative from Kurland -- Dr. Lazar Nisselovitch, a lawyer, a native of Bausk. He engaged in very keen parliamentary activity, particularly on Jewish issues. This was not an easy task, since the third Duma was particularly reactionary and anti-Semitic.

Also in the Fourth Duma (1912-1917) Kurland had a Jewish representative, Dr. Yehezkiel Gurvitz, a physician from Jacobstadt. Although the number of Jewish members was cut to a minimum of 2-3, we find a representative from Kurland in all four Dumas. This interesting feature is undoubtedly a great achievement on the part of the Jews of Kurland. However, it should be pointed out that this was only possible thanks to pre-election agreements concluded between Jews and Latvians or Jews and Germans. As a result of such agreements the Jews managed to get one of the two representatives accorded to Kurland. The Duma representatives did their share to obtain more rights for Jews in the days of Tsarist Russia.

The Zionist Movement

The Jews of Kurland were in many respects a homogeneous group. For instance, with very few exceptions they were strictly traditional. Saturdays and holidays were observed throughout, with all shops and business closed, and full attendance at synagogues, kosher households, traditional Friday evenings, and so on. There were very few fanatical members of the community, and even fewer non-conformists.

It can be said in the same way that all Kurland Jews, with very few exceptions, were Zionists. In the early stages of the Zionist Movement the participation of Jews from Kurland was particularly evident. In 1885 a "Hovevei Zion" Organization was founded in Libau by Nissan Smolitzinsky, with some 300 registered members. Kurland dispatched three delegates to the Hovevei Zion Convention in Druskeniki in 1887. They were: Dr. Hillel Klein and Joseph Zakheim of Libau, and Rabbi Zvi Rabinovitch of Mitau. At the close of the Convention the Hovevei Zion Organization in Libau published a declaration which was signed by well-known Rabbis like Mordechai Eliasberg, Shmuel Mohilever, Naphtali Zvi Yehuda Berlin and Jacob Reines, and was distributed in the cities of Russia. In 1902 the famous all-Russian Zionist Convention in Minsk took place. The delegate from Kurland (Mitau) was Rabbi Mordechai Nurock who eventually published a report on this Convention in the form of a book. According to his report there were 22 Zionist organizations in Kurland in 1902. Dr. Nissan Katzenelson of Libau took part in the Third Zionist Congress at Basle. He was elected to the Directorate of the Jewish Colonial Trust. He was a close friend of Dr. Theodore Herzl, who invited him to accompany him to St. Petersburg in 1903.

The Zionist idea struck deep roots among the Jews of Kurland. It was the only Jewish national or political movement in Kurland to speak of before, and in great part after, the independence of Latvia. Thanks to Zionist activities many hundred Jewish youths emigrated to Palestine as pioneers, and escaped the fate of their brethren who remained in Kurland. Today one can meet Kurlanders in kibbutzim and moshavim, also in cities as manufacturers, businessmen, Government officials, high-ranking army officers, doctors, lawyers, engineers, artisans, and workers.

This essay consists largely of personal reminiscences. Thus it conveys incomplete and sometimes

fragmentary information on memorable events, important trends and developments. It does not pretend to be more than a modest contribution to a true portrayal of the distinguished Kurland Jewry which was so cruelly and inhumanly destroyed by the Nazis, and which has perished almost completely. It is dedicated to their blessed memory, with deep and genuine affection. Very few who can tell the story of Kurland Jews are left, and it is doubtful whether more publications on their life will see the light. Therefore this essay is, I trust, its own justification. Its shortcomings will, I hope, be tolerated and forgiven.

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