

Ruth Leiserowitz, To Go To or Through Prussia?

**TO GO TO OR THROUGH PRUSSIA?
Litvak Migratory Decisions in the Second Half of the 19th Century and Their
Consequences**

INTRODUCTION

My research deals with the northerly section of the border region between Lithuania and the Kingdom of Prussia. The time period, about which I would like to present a few thoughts for your consideration today, encompasses the years between 1860 – 1885. At that time the Lithuanian territory belonged to the Czarist Empire, and directly on the border were the governorates of Kovno (today's Kaunas) and Suwalki. These made up the most western part of an area referred to as the Jewish settlement district. During these decades, on the left (or south) side of the border, there was a change from it being the Kingdom of Prussia to being the German Empire. This border region experienced in the second half of the 19th century continuous streams of Lithuanian, Polish, and Jewish migrations moving to and through Prussia from the areas near the border. In what follows, I want to examine the Jewish migratory movements of this period, being guided by the following key questions: (1) What decisions affecting migration were made? and (2) How were they acted upon? I will conclude by summarizing a few of the consequences of these decisions from the point of view of those Litvaks who remained in the border region.

THE CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH

The focus of the research done so far has paid more attention to the centers of Jewish life rather than to the regions with Jewish populations. Consequently no larger works have been done so far on the Jews in the governorates of Kovno and Suwalki. The history of the Jews in East Prussia has been investigated primarily from the perspective of local centers, as in the monographs by Andrea Ajzenstein and Stephanie Schüler-Springorum.¹ And with regard to the migration during that time period, it is essential to mention the work of Steven Aschheim

¹ Andrea Ajzensztejn, *Die jüdische Gemeinschaft in Königsberg*, Hamburg 2004; Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, *Die jüdische Minderheit in Königsberg/Preußen 1871–1945*, Göttingen 1996.

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and Jack Wertheimer.² However, borders and in general the regions around them and how they pertain to the Jews have not yet been the subject of research. A part of this gap will be filled by my monograph "The Prussian Periphery from the Jewish Perspective" (which will be published at the end of the year). In it I make a plea that more attention be dedicated to the border regions as well as to the processes that played themselves out there in the second half of the 19th century. Decisions were made in those days which later, in so many ways, had far-reaching consequences.

SOURCES

The first large group of sources is found in the files which the Prussian authorities in the governmental district of Gumbinnen (the border region being studied) compiled about Jewish and stateless citizens. A further body of sources is the set of documents and first person documents of Jewish immigrants and those in transit which I have collected in the course of the last seven years. The collection of these latter sources from places around the world was possible solely with the help of the Internet. And I have compiled a data bank in order to interlink and analyze the different sources.

THE LOCAL SITUATIONS

a) Lithuania

At the end of the 19th century, Jews made up 13.8% of the inhabitants of the governorate of Kovno. Of that number, 43.4% lived in the cities of Kovno (Kaunas), Panevežys, Ukmergė (then called Vilkomir) und Šiauliai, 56% had settled in Shtetl, and just barely 3% lived in the countryside.³

Even though a massive migration toward West Europe and the United States began in the last third of the 19th century, the Jewish population of the governorate of Kovno still increased by about two and a half times between the years 1847 and 1897. In addition to the emigration, internal migrations took

² Steven A. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers. The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923*, Madison 1982; Jack Wertheimer, *Unwelcome Strangers. East European Jews in Imperial Germany*, New York, Oxford 1987.

³ Levin (2000), S. 79.

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place: one into the interior of the country and the other into the border region with Prussia. The rule, in general, was that social advancement was only achievable through geographic mobility. Whoever among the Litvaks wanted to climb socially had to choose between the centers and the periphery. The cities experienced increasingly strong growth since people expected to find better possibilities for work and earning a living there. The border was the place to find other new possibilities. In the localities located on the border there were many inhabitants who were there only medium-term. If a good opportunity to leave the Czar's empire came up, then Jewish immigrants from the interior immediately moved in to take their places.

In the small cities right on the Prussian border, the Jews made up around 40-60% of the population in the 19th century. Differently than in the interior, which was shaken by various crises, on the imperial periphery one found life and movement. The Polish rebellion in January 1863 sent ripples even into the border region. In addition to the economic problems, famines, and epidemics, there was also increasing political pressure being applied by the Czarist system.⁴

b) Prussia

With the beginning of the Crimean War in 1853, the situation on the Prussian-Lithuanian border changed radically. During the length of the war from 1853-1856, Russia experienced a trade boycott imposed by all sides (with the exception of Prussia).⁵ As a consequence, the Czarist government had to unblock the border with Prussia. All imports into the expanses of the Russian empire were now conducted over the border, through Memel and Tilsit. Driven by these economic factors, a sudden and politically unintended liberalization of the border control took place.⁶ The border was virtually open and later these times

⁴ Stanislaw Chankowski, *The Attitudes of the Jewish Population of Augustow Province Toward the January (1863) Insurrection*, in: *Landsmen* 2, S. 2–3.

⁵ Christian Friese, *Russland und Preußen vom Krimkrieg bis zum Polnischen Aufstand*, Berlin/Königsberg 1931; Paul W. Schroeder, *Austria, Great Britain, and the Crimean War: The Destruction of the European Concert*, Ithaca 1972; Winfried Baumgart, *The Crimean War, 1853–1856*, London 1999. The effects of the war on the Russian economy and the Prussian periphery have hardly been researched.

⁶ This sudden liberalization took place not just on the border. During the war, the Jews in all of the Russian Empire were allowed to bring their markets to where the troops were even though there

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went down as golden years in the history of the region. Nor could this ad hoc liberalization of the border control that happened be brought into check again for quite a while. Beginning in 1861 there was a regulation for the local border traffic within the 30 km zone, whose permission slips were valid for three days. The newly emerging economic relationships, the noticeable differentiation of commercial and transport traffic, as well as the growing number of people all resulted in the participation of more strata of the population in the commerce that was reaching across the border and it created primarily for the Jewish immigrants new commercial arenas in Prussia. The residency rules for non-citizens were relatively generous and in those years Prussian citizenship was granted without much problem.

c) Industrialization and Space

Until the beginning of the 19th century a kind of no-man's land had existed between the small towns on the one or the other side of the border. The border region was demarcated on the one side by the last post horse depot and the customs office also located there and on the other side by the next post depot and customs office. Admittedly, hardly anyone knew where the actual border line was if he had not crossed it on business or on a journey. The experience of the border was still a unique experience.

The railroad, which had been crossing the border in this region since the end of the 1860s, brought about some far-reaching changes. The new investment in an extensive infrastructure led to a new structuring and settling of the whole of what was earlier the no-man's land and caused what was the border region to shrink down to a perceptible border line. The invention of this new form of transportation led to a significant increase in traffic; contrary to all predictions, the railroad quickly developed into a mode of mass transit.

In addition to all these effects, changes in mental attitudes were also not lacking. The new perspective of physical space increasingly influenced decisions that determined the future course of people's lives. The disappearance of "traditional

were restrictions against staying near the troops sutler's trade. See: Jeschurun, Zweites Beiblatt zum Augustheft, 15. August 1855, S. 1.

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travel zones”⁷ between two points meant that small towns were now perceived to be considerably closer together. What were previously inaccessible towns now became part of the neighborhood. Thus, the railroad had become a medium for socialization. The Russian Empire, the Jewish settlement district, which was quite quickly had railroad tracks crossing it, and the governorate of Kaunas were now seen with new eyes. The map in one’s mind was made not only larger and more colorful by this invention, no, additional depths, dimensions, and colorfulness were added to it that no one would have thought possible. These experiences caused a part of the Jewish community to have a much keener perception of their own life-world (Lebenswelt) and new thoughts about their own connection to their local town. In many cases, these considerations led to losing the idea of being bound to their town and to deciding to emigrate – it made no difference to which place or continent.

STRATEGIES

By tradition, the Litvaks were duty-bound to strive to acquire education, status, and financial security. Jewish parents dreamt of their sons becoming a rabbi. But with the Enlightenment, new challenges appeared on the horizon. At the same time, hindrances along the path to new careers made themselves clearly apparent. The existing injustice could be borne using one’s own sense of self-worth. For many young people, the old world did not offer any challenges. Russification or Prussification were in both cases no longer bearable for a part of the new generation who did not want to make any further compromises. They simply longed for America.⁸ This theme was already rooted in people’s heads well before economic pressure and political situations caused the non-Jewish as well as the Jewish exodus to America to become a mass phenomenon.

After the famine of 1867/68, the Lithuanian emigration from the governorates of Kaunas and Suwalki became massive. Nevertheless, the numbers did not reach those of the Russian Jews and the Poles. The emigration of Russians

⁷ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise. Zur Industrialisierung von Raum und Zeit im 19. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt a. M. 2002, S. 39.

⁸ Cf. Milton Meltzer, *A History of Jewish Life from Eastern Europe to America*; Northvale 1996.

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themselves was comparatively low since in the second half of the 19th century their labor was particularly needed to exploit the mineral wealth of Siberia. The emigration of ethnic minorities, on the other hand, was accelerated by the czarist policy of Russification. However, the czarist bureaucracy at first would not approve any emigration and as a result kept no emigration statistics. Added to that, most emigrants left the Russian Empire secretly. The czarist administration used every means to battle against the emigration and required the governorates as well as the local police to do the same.⁹

How were the departures organized? Often parts of the family went in very different directions. Pious Jews went rather early on to Palestine; South Africa was considered a good address for young, risk-ready persons; England was preferred by those who, among other things, balked at the transatlantic journey; and whoever was without means, almost always chose America as the emigration goal. Sometimes those who wanted to leave worked for months, even years, in Prussia in order to earn their ship's passage.¹⁰ Those who had at least some funds, settled in Prussia. As with so many others, the paths of the Direktor family from Wystiten went in different directions. Chaim Jehudah Direktor, at age 16, the youngest son and without any means, boarded a boat in Hamburg for America, while his older brothers David and Aron Direktor went over the border to Goldap and opened a brush factory there.¹¹ At the beginning of the 1880s, for example, the brothers Sternfeld left Wystiten before they turned 17 and could be drafted into military service.¹² They followed their relative Albert Sternfeld, who had been born and grew up in Labiau, but who at age 22 legally left Prussia in order to seek his luck in America.¹³ David Sternfeld went to Kimberly in South

⁹ The data about the issuance of passports, the different kinds of temporary visas, and gender of the emigrants were first collected from about 1865 onward. The yearly reports from the governors of Vilnius, Kaunas, and Suwalki to the Czar reliably present the economic situation and the status of emigration. The documents in the Russian Central State Archive in St. Petersburg show how strongly the czarist administration fought against illegal emigration.

¹⁰ Cf.. Robert E. Mitchell, „David Mitchell, his Parents, Wife and Siblings from Vistytyis (Vishtinetz). Draft Genealogical Report“, March 2000, in Archiv JOP.

¹¹ E-Mail from Joel L. Friedman, 28. Oktober 2000, in Archiv JOP.

¹² Bericht von Jane Starfield, 28. November 2004, in Archiv JOP.

¹³ AP Olsztyn, 1588/10, Landratsamt Labiau, Ein- und Auswanderungen 1856–1869, früher: Rep. 18, Landratsamt Labiau, Abt. VIII, Nr. 2, S. 52.

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Africa, where there were diamond mines, but when gold was discovered in Wiatersrand in 1886, he moved there. His brother Chaim, a rabbi by profession, also emigrated to South Africa, but within a few years went to Palestine where he settled in Petach Tikvah.¹⁴ Their sister, Taube Leah, stayed in Wytiten. Either no one could come up with the money for her ship passage, or as the last child, she had to stay with the parents. In many letters sent overseas, the young girl, now left behind, complained that it was becoming more and more difficult to find a husband. The small city had become known for its surplus of clever and pretty and marriageable young girls.¹⁵ Young Jews from remote areas came to the border in order to go to Wytiten to find a wife.

TRANSIT

By the end of the 1860s, more and more people – Poles, Jews, Russians, Lithuanians, and Germans – were crossing the border of East Prussia to get to the territory of the North German Confederation or what later was the newly formed German Empire.¹⁶ Their stays were sometimes short or for a longer period. In the biography of the well-known American anarchist Emma Goldman it reads: “born 1869 in Kaunas, Lithuania. At 16 emigrated to the USA.”¹⁷ In between these two dates of 1869 and 1885 lies a four year period in her life that is not widely known, yet it was formative for her life story as young Emma lived in Königsberg with her grandmother.

„I had only had three and a half years of Realschule in Königsberg. [...] The régime was harsh, the instructors brutal: I learned scarcely anything. Only my teacher of German had been kind to me. My teacher worshipped the royal house; Frederick the Great and Queen Luise were her idols. I, too, became a devotee of Queen Luise.”¹⁸

¹⁴ One of the first Jewish settlements of the 19th Century in Palestine, founded in 1878.

¹⁵ Oppenheim (1995), S. 46.

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¹⁷ Emma Goldman (1869 Kaunas – 1940 Toronto), Anarchistin, Autorin.

¹⁸ Emma Goldman, Living my Life, London 1988, S. 116.

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Even if in Emma's life (and those of the other border crossers) many other cultural influences followed, the moments of the transit through Prussia left memories with them for a lifetime. Emma's family was not an isolated case. Between 1870 and 1885, hundreds of Jewish families and individuals crossed the border, which had now been brought so close by rail connections, and settled temporarily in East Prussian cities, towns, and villages. They were just a fragment of a mass movement of people, Jews and non-Jews, who were striving to leave Poland, the Baltic region, and Russia.¹⁹ Predominantly it was the members of the lower class and the lower middle class who were leaving.²⁰

At that time, the way from the Lithuanian Shtetl did not yet run directly through to the embarkation harbors and on to the new world. The more or less linear route was first formed in the decade of the 90s in the 19th century. In hindsight, an imagined straight path from the decision to emigrate to the migration that followed were images that came solely from the perspective of those looking back on it. In fact, the emigration in those days was accompanied by varying dynamics. Among them was, for one, the central economic question: How to finance the move? Only a few brought the sum for the ship's passage with them directly from Lithuania. But doubts and fears about the uncertain future were also a moment for pause: should one really leave the continent? Were the chances in Europe really so limited? Could one not just establish oneself on the other side of the border as other friends or acquaintances in Prussia had done? These and other reasons persuaded many immigrants, Jewish and non-Jewish, during the long decades from 1860 to 1885 to make a stop over in East Prussia, where they could pause and await further developments.

¹⁹ See. Eidintas (2003); „Viele von jenen Auswanderern kamen zunächst nach Deutschland, um sich hier das Fahrgeld zusammenzusparen. Manch einer gab allmählich den Plan auf, und so kam es, dass mit den Dienstmädchen und Knechten, die als Sommerarbeiter nach Deutschland gekommen waren, im ganzen etwa 3.000 Litauer jährlich den Sommer über in Deutschland waren [...].“ He further describes their lives and neglected conditions. „In den katholischen Grenzpfarreien entfielen zuletzt 25–30 % aller Taufen auf litauische uneheliche Russenkinder.“ Siehe Johannes Wronka, *Kurland und Litauen*, Freiburg i. Br. 1917, S. 135.

²⁰ That is true for the Jewish part of the population as well as the German which migrated in the 19th Century to the USA. Among the Germans, about 95% belonged to the lower class / the lower part of the middle class. See Jahnke (2004), S. 329–344, here S. 330.

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In this period of waiting, the Litvaks who had begun the journey also looked back toward their country of origin and waited for news, often entertaining unrealistic hopes that perhaps changes might have happened back there. But in fact the economic conditions in the western governorates of the Czar's empire worsened dramatically. Each new piece of news from home actually reconfirmed for those who were in transit that the decision to leave had been the right one. Frequently another family member came and joined them; drawn in the wake of the other's decision, they also finally decide to leave.

The straightest line was taken by the young men who were fleeing the military draft. Usually they were free of social responsibilities and brimming with a desire for adventure. Moreover, they were often under pressure to leave the continent as quickly as possible. For families, however, it was more difficult to quickly begin the journey. Unexpected events and illnesses frequently forced them to defer their enterprise or to completely re-arrange their plans.²¹ In addition to young families seeking a future, individual young women also left home to find their fortune or to follow after the one they loved.²² Women with whole flocks of children were underway. The fathers had gone ahead to America to check out the terrain and to work to earn the cost of their passage. If the longed-for letter finally arrived, the whole family set out on the journey. However it also often happened that the men sent back no word after they left. In that case, the rest of the family sat in a village on the Prussian border and waited.²³

As a result, in the first decade of the German Empire, a group of emigrants accumulated on the edges of the province of East Prussia. They had already left

²¹ Sara Tittmann, who was twelve years old, had to stay behind with relatives in Memel because she was sick. It was arranged that she should follow her family once she was well again. A part of her family died in a fire on the ship filled with emigrants. Sara stayed in Memel and got married there. Her siblings only saw her again when through their help in 1939 she received an entry visa to the USA and then was able to see her family again.

²² Z. B. GSTA, XX. HA, Rep. 12, Abt. 1, Tit. 3, Nr. 19, 1885–1904 Nachweis der Überläufer I–XII, Bd. XI Tilsit, Nr. 66 Jeanette Guttmann (geb. 1865), nach Amerika (IV/86).

²³ The publisher of *Hamagid*, Eliezer Lipmann Silbermann, published on the back page of his newspaper, among the other announcements and advertisements, requests for information about husbands who had disappeared. In 1869 he complained that the weekly newspaper, even if it appeared daily, still would not be able to print all the messages from abandoned wives. See Mark Baker, „The Voice of the Deserted Jewish Woman, 1867–1870“, in: *Jewish Social Studies* 2, no. 1 (1995), S. 98–124, here S. 100.

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their home areas in the Lithuanian province and found themselves in the middle of their journey in search of a new existence. My work looks at an infinitesimally small area of the European continent. But overall these observations, being used to look at the virtual transit area that had come into being there, seem in that same time period to be valid for all of middle Europe.²⁴ In many places in the border region, Jewish (but also non-Jewish) immigrants took up temporary residence, financed a way of living for the time being, and collected information about future prospects. This imaginary transit area stretched from Memel through Berlin, Bremen and Hamburg to Antwerp and further to other embarkation harbors.²⁵ The mental attitude of the migrants can best be described with a term from the 20th century: *on the road*. This migration process was a profound family experience which left its impression on a whole generation.²⁶ They lived in a sphere which gave them access to information from the old and the new world. There were numerous contacts with others who were also in search of a new center for their lives, yet they also met those who were returning disappointed or having failed from England or the new world, as well as others who earned their money by establishing themselves as permanent travelers between the two worlds. People did not simply disappear once they emigrated. Now and then a few people came back.²⁷ Many sent letters describing their experiences, sent money or tickets for the passage to relatives, friends, or neighbors.²⁸

²⁴ Elias Marwilsky from Wystiten lived for a year in Paris before he went to the USA. See „Vishtinetz (Wisztyniec/Westitten)“, Landsmen (1991), S. 32.

²⁵ Breslau was also a stopping point. See Till van Rahden, „Einbürgerung und Ausweisung ausländischer Juden in Breslau“, in: Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte XXVII/1998, S. 47–69, hier S. 51; This transit can also be referred to as a Thirdspace as suggested by Edward Soja, see Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places*, Cambridge, USA 1996.

²⁶ Vgl. Elke Jahnke, „Primäre soziale Beziehungen deutscher Amerikaauswanderer im 19. Jahrhundert“, in: Matthias Beer/Dittmar Dahlmann (Hg.), *Über die trockene Grenze und über das offene Meer. Binneneuropäische und transatlantische Migrationen im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, Essen 2004, S. 329–344, hier S. 330.

²⁷ GSTA, XX. HA, Rep. 12, Tit. 3, Abt. 1, Nr. 19, Bd. III–XII, Nachweisungen der russischen Überläufer 1886–1902.

²⁸ Vgl. David Blackbourn, „Das Kaiserreich transnational. Eine Skizze“, in: Conrad/Osterhammel (2004), S. 302–324, hier S. 311.

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THE ABRUPT END IN 1885

At the beginning of the 80s, Prussian politicians, influenced by anti-Semitic movements and attitudes, began to put a halt to the migration into Prussia and to deport non-citizens.²⁹ The East Prussian transit area of the long decades (1860-1885) was destroyed by the targeted anti-Jewish deportation practice of the Prussian state. The long-term intention was to create a national border and to do so it was necessary to form congruent political and cultural borders. In that moment, the individual decision-making process of the Jewish immigrants was called into action; they took a deep breath and either sought citizenship or decided to move on.

While on the one hand during this time, the view from the centers of the German Empire, was to fixedly secure and strengthen the borders, for economic reasons on the periphery a further process of border crossings developed in which Jewish migrants moving through the area without a passport were tolerated by the Prussian government.

To the extent that the administered border in the late middle of the 19th century contracted itself territorially from a zone down to a line, the process of crossing the border was also speeded up. What earlier had in no way been restricted crossings, now were increasingly limited to the defined straight transversal of a *third country*, and in doing so even the definition of third country (or transit country) became clearer. Not just the length of time for crossing was shortened immensely, also the 'business' of leading migrants to or through Prussia significantly diminished. The kind of decision to cross made individually gradually disappeared. By the beginning of the 90s, because of the increasing political and financial interests of the authorities, transit corridors developed from the East

²⁹ See: Helmut Neubach, Die Ausweisungen von Polen und Juden aus Preußen 1885/86. Ein Beitrag zu Bismarcks Polenpolitik und zur Geschichte des deutsch-polnischen Verhältnisses, Wiesbaden 1967; Richard Blanke, Prussian Poland in the German Empire: 1871–1900, New York 1981.

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Prussian border (and other sections of the imperial border with the Russian Empire) to the harbors of embarkation.³⁰

CONSEQUENCES

With the beginning of the national socialist persecution of the Jews in the 30s, the Litvak families that still lived in Prussia renewed their familial contacts with those in other countries. These family relationships, given the lack of any need to justify reviving contact, were relatively easy to mobilize again. As a rule, these relatives had left at the beginning of the 80s in the 19th century when the family on the other side of the border went different ways to pursue their own individual plans for their lives. The interval of about 50-55 years was for the most part still present in the family's memory, and this allowed for the re-connection. Families were supported by their relatives in their efforts to emigrate in the USA or South Africa, or to help send their children to Great Britain with what were called children's transports.³¹ Litvaks who had decided in the 19th century to pursue prospects in Prussia, by the second generation had to recognize that in spite of all their local commitments and responsibilities, they found themselves on a deadly one way street. The only chance to be saved from it came from assistance from this private, transnational network.

³⁰ More about see: Tobias Brinkmann, "From green borders to paper walls: Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe in Germany before and after the Great War", in: *History in Focus*

³¹ Children's transport was the designation for a exception given by the British government for the temporary immigration of Jewish children between the ages of 14 and 17 from Germany to Great Britain between December 1938 and 1. September 1939. Vgl. Rebekka Göpfert, *Der Jüdische Kindertransport von Deutschland nach England 1938/39. Geschichte und Erinnerung*, Frankfurt a. M./New York 1999.