The Traders of Wystiten: The Border as a Modernization Factor for Litvaks in Transnational Space in 19th. century

My investigation lasting several years on the topic "Experiences of borders and exclusion: Jews in East Prussia 1812-1942", from which I take one aspect in the following talk, began with an observation. This was the fact that the Jews of the East Prussian region, who were primarily grouped in and around Königsberg in the 19th and 20th century – and about whose township Stefanie Schüler Springorum successfully wrote a doctoral thesis around seven years ago[1] – largely originate from the nearby Russian-Lithuanian-Polish border area. These migrants, who all belonged to the Litvak group, had only gone short distances, and moreover retained their close familial and economic relations with their old homeland for decades. The question arose, among others, which motives the representatives of this group could have had for leaving a situation of relative majority in the *Stetl* of the "old homeland" for a situation of more or less complete diaspora? Why were Litvak Jews attracted to Prussia, even in the second half of the 19th century, when it became fashionable to go to America or to try one's luck in South Africa, while the very virtuous at this period entered formation for the first wave of emigration to Palestine?

A central aspect of the process of research was for me the heuristic interest in discovering inventories of practice and knowledge which were significant for the migration process of these concrete groups of people. (At the same time, through synthetic description of cases I hoped to be able to display the interplay and the flexibility of actions and attitudes of the people involved in concrete situations of interaction.) Extensive source material for this was offered by the holdings of the files of the administrative district of Gumbinnen in the secret state archive of Berlin, as well as private documents of Jewish families from the Central Zionist Archive (Jerusalem), Yad Vashem, the Leo Baeck Institute (New York), and holdings which I have collected myself over the course of the last six years. The longer I dealt with the practice of border crossing, the clearer it became that the border itself or its change of significance in the "long" 19th century was to be the focus of interest within this work. Today I will be speaking about precisely this aspect. (Other research issues within my work have to do with the various processes of migration, and the social networks as well as the transnational social space which developed in the first third of the 19th century in this region.)

The timeframe of my investigation can be described briefly as follows: Jews began to migrate to Prussia to a greater degree after the enactment of the Edict of Tolerance in 1812. About 70 years later, in 1881, the Jewish immigrants at the easterly Prussian border were brought into the political focus for the first time when German legislation regarding the "defectors" was made more stringent, and it was made obligatory for Jewish existence to be combined with a clear confession of belonging to and acceptance of the German state. (Only sixty years later, in June 1941, it was exactly at this point in the border that the first mass shootings of Jews took place.)

In today's talk I wish to sketch highlights of the constellations of Jewish Latvians in the Prussian-Russian-Lithuanian border area at the beginning of and in the middle of the 19th century, particularly indicating changes in the "general perception" of each border in topographical and structural respects.

The actual role of the border was and is dependent on the perspective of the actors. Hence in my depiction I also take into account how in the course of time the general population attempted to benefit from the border.

Kindly allow me to say a few words on the subject of borders in general as an introduction: the present-day classic concept of a border as a line is a pure abstraction which has emerged from the border space (or the border area). The border areas belonging to it are far more difficult to describe comprehensively, define, or indeed delimit. Border

areas are generally seen as a kind of seismograph, or according to another picture as zones of enormous dynamicity. Although finding the borders or delimiting areas of different structure and features has been practised for a long time, to date there is no comprehensive theory of borders. A border was, is and can be a barrier, sometimes it is seen as a zone of conflict, but also always as an area of contact. In most cases it exerts differing forces of attraction or repulsion on different groups. The French philosopher Etienne Balibar coined the memorable term of the "polysemy of the border", which he uses to express the fact that "in practice *[...]* it does not have the same meaning for everyone*"*. The border area as a social space is generally shaped by various groups of actors and various, often conflicting systems of norms. Because of this border areas were and are seen as places of intercultural communication. Often dividing lines between territories are reduced to solely political artefacts, and yet the consideration of cultural borders, which by no means always run parallel to political ones, is considerably more interesting and productive. As Lucien Febvre notes: *"Eine Grenze besteht erst dann, wenn jenseits einer Linie eine andere Welt beginnt, ein Zusammenhang von Ideen, Gefühlen und Begeisterungen, die den Fremden überraschen und verwirren.* [A border only begins to exist when another world begins on the other side of a line, a combination of ideas, feelings and enthusiasms which surprise and confuse the outsider.] " *"*[2]

The point in time at which my investigation begins is not set arbitrarily. It has to do with the Edict of Emancipation of 1812, which gave citizenship to the Jews in Prussia and awarded them freedom of trade, the right to settle and freedom of movement. East Prussia suddenly became attractive as a target area for moves. Before the edict around 800 Jews lived in East Prussia, but this figure had tripled by as soon as 1817. At this time who had experiences with the border?

Until the beginning of the 19th century there still existed a certain no-man's-land between the localities on either side of the border. The border area was delimited by the last horse post station and the customs office, which was also located there before the border, up to the next post station as well as the customs office on that side behind the border line. This last section of the route was about 20-25 km in length. At the same time it should be noted that scarcely anyone knew the actual boundary line, unless he himself had crossed it, as a trader or a traveller. This means that the experience of the border was still in the singular.

Political knowledge of the border played no part among the general population. Maps were not widely available, or were only used by travellers. Exact maps were not drawn and made widespread until the development of the country road system (from 1816 onwards in East Prussia).

The political events around the turn of the 19th century, the divisions of Poland and the acts of war connected with the Napoleonic Wars in East Prussia produced a side-effect: displacements of the border and border crossings were seen as a new norm, such that now private crossings of the border now became more and more commonplace. There was a large-scale border crossing for the first time in 1812, when Napoleon's *Grande Armée* marched to Russia. Numerous Jewish tradesmen here caught wind of the business opportunity of their lifetime and travelled with the convoy or followed it. The troops left considerable marks of their passing and war damage at the Prussian-Lithuanian border. The towns had been thoroughly plundered, and the private purses could yield no more. However, flexible Litvak traders had managed to gain a fortune through skilled war-time trading and, as registered army suppliers for the Napoleonic troops, had attained favourable positions in the East Prussian border area. Wood and cereal traders in particular built up a peaceful existence and made an application for "naturalisation", in other words for Prussian citizenship.

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[1] Stefanie Schüler-Springorum: *Die jüdische Minderheit in Königsberg/Preußen 1871-1945,* Göttingen 1996.
[2] Lucien Febvre: *Der Rhein und seine Geschichte*, Frankfurt a.M., S.163-164.

In the years after the war the number of Litvak Jews who practised trade with the neighbouring country in various forms, legal, semi-legal and illegal, increased immensely. For this reason the Tsarist government began to place greater pressure on the Jewish local authorities association, in order to restrict the illegal trade. These measures, however, were half-hearted. Traffic across the border grew despite all Russian restrictions, and more and more Litvaks moved into this region, which was economically, socially and culturally attractive for them. For this reason they were confronted with the repeated ukases ending with the harsh ruling of 1843 which ordered the resettlement of all Jews who had settled up to 50km from the Prussian border. The reason given was the Jews' tendency towards smuggling. However, 19 small towns successfully resisted the resettlement of the Jews.[31] The ukase on settlement is sufficiently well-known, however it is not well-known that it could not be accomplished in practice. In any case, a separate chapter is devoted to the phenomenon of "smuggling".[4]

We will take a look at the border area in the period between 1860 and 1880. Seen politically, Russia was unambiguously associated with images of the enemy for German Democrats and Liberals until the middle of the century. The Crimean War further increased this hostility, but its results changed the view of the German public, who now saw their neighbour as being considerable weaker than they had always thought. The fear of a Russian threat had receded. Admittedly the Russian customs barriers continued to burden the economy, but the expansion of trade which had begun in the 50s could no longer be blocked, and the volume of trade increased continuously. Technical development accomplished one further thing. The industrialisation which had been taking place in Germany since 1850 and the economic growth resulting from this only reached East Prussia to a small extent, particularly as a result of the lack of raw materials there and the inadequate transport connection to other growth regions. Only larger towns such as Königsberg were able to develop extensively. The most easterly province of Prussia remained an agrarian region in which cereal and wood export continued to play a considerable economic role. The construction of the railways provided what was no doubt the most important impulse for the modernisation of East Prussia. I have already given talks on various occasions and published on this significant modernising factor at the border, but also for the government of Kauna.[5] Here I will only summarise that the railways gave rise to a *densification of spaces*, not only in topological understanding, but also in the *social dimension* - processes which can be represented by the terms mobility, communication and social change.

In this way life at the border changed at a tearing pace at the end of the sixties. The newly created train tracks led not only up to the border, but even beyond it. Border officials, customs offices and the transport companies sprouting up were no longer surrounded by no-man's land, but were integrated in the infrastructure of places which had recently come into existence. Border traffic took place more or less before the eyes of the public. The disappearance of the "traditional journey space" between two points meant conversely that localities became considerably closer in perception, in other words they displayed other cognitive separations. More and more extensive structures developed in the border area. If the boundary line had still been situated outside of general perception at the beginning of the 19th century, it was now very clearly present in the awareness of the population on both sides. In the meantime, based on an agreement with the Russian empire, a limited opportunity to cross the border had been created for occupants of a strip 10 km on both sides of the boundary line. Border passes were distributed for

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[3] http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/Kvedarna/kve-history.html

[4] See: Ruth Leiserowitz: *Schmuggel als Lebensform an der Grenze. Einblicke in Grenzwelten des 19. Jahrhunderts,* in: Acta Universitatis Klaipedensis X., Kultūriniai saitai abipus Nemuno: Mažosios Lietuvos reikšmė Didžiajai Lietuvai spaudos draudimo metais (1864-1904), Klaipėda 2004, p. 70-77.

this purpose. This opportunity to have a relatively flexible existence led to locations near the border being heavily settled, although previously they had possessed no particular attractiveness. The increased border traffic required an infrastructure which also blossomed into its own border culture with the opening of public houses, shops, coach companies and exchange offices.

The East Prussian border area and the hypothesis of the Jews being the constitutive element within it can be understood as a *transnational social space*[6] according to the definition formulated by the Bochum sociologist Ludger Prieß as a space which is stretched plurilocally between different living spaces and residential locations. This social space is not congruent with unitary areas on either side of the border, but instead is a new creation, a product of identificational and socio-structural elements of the regions of origin and arrival. On the one hand this space is configured by the living practice of the migrants. On the other hand through the migration - a transmigration - the relationship between areal and social spaces is determined afresh. Here a type of transmigrant can be observed with the following characteristic: for them migration is no longer seen as a move between two places taking place only once or twice. Instead the frequent movement back and forth is seen as a genuine component of continuous lives whose socio-areal configuration is made up of bonds to several localities. The social spaces in which transmigrants move consist of several socially structured extensions of area which are not congruent with the areas of regions of origin and arrival of classic emigration/immigration.

I will take the example of Vystitis from my study in order to illustrate the phenomenon of Litvakian transmigration: the border with Prussia was lined with many small cities on the Lithuanian side, but none of them was so immediately close to the border as Wystiten, which was situated at the lake of the same name and already belonged to the German side. The town itself had existed since the 15th century. Hardly any place in this region could claim as many different varieties in the spelling of its name: the Russians and Jews wrote *Wishtinetz*, the Poles *Wisztiniec* or *Wysztyniec*, the Lithuanians *Vistytis* and the Germans *Wysztyten* or *Wischtiten*. The great number of variations in the name of the place is a clear first indication of the variety of its inhabitants.

The Wystiten Jews were considerably more mobile than the other residents of the small town. They frequently tried to secure their living by cross-border trading. Many Jewish traders traded on the other side of the border, only rarely came home and were then able to tell a great deal about German customs and mannerisms. Among other things they spread knowledge about Prussian insurance. What they said about fire insurance was of particular interest.[7] These ambulant traders transferred not only wares of the most diverse nature, but also extensive cultural and social knowledge.

In the course of the 19th century an unusually high total number of Wistyten Jews settled in nearby East Prussia and acquired Prussian nationality. At the same time the courses which their lives took were quite diverse. *Hirsch Chaim Nowitzki*, for instance, came to Tilsit to live with his brother as early as 1811, at the age of eleven, was trained as a wood trader and made an application for citizenship in 1847, by which time he was already able to display a wealth of over 10 000 Thalers. From the papers which he enclosed it can be seen that *Nowitzki* had a storage site for lumber and timber at his disposal which was of great use to the town and the region, since he, unlike other wood traders, sold wood all year round. At the same time he

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[5] Ruth Leiserowitz: *"Naujas pasaulis". Modernizacijos pasekmės Rytų Prūsijoje,* in: Acta Universitatis Klaipedensis X., Kultūriniai saitai abipus Nemuno: Mažosios Lietuvos reikšmė Didžiajai Lietuvai spaudos draudimo metais (1864-1904), Klaipėda 2004, p. 36-39.

[6] Ludger Pries: *Transnationale Soziale Räume. Theoretisch-empirische Skizze am Beispiel der Arbeitswanderungen Mexiko-USA* In: *Zeitschrift für Soziologie,* Jg. 25, H.6, p.456-472 and Ludger Pries, *Transnationale Migration* (=Soziale Welt, Sonderband 12), Baden-Baden 1997.

gave poorer craftsmen credit on moderate conditions and helped them to begin earning properly. Numerous property owners and tradesmen from the district therefore supported his naturalisation. *Nowitzki* had also to some extent worked towards the status of a respected Prussian citizen for half his life. It can be assumed at the same time that for years nothing except formal naturalisation had distinguished his mode of life from that of a Prussian citizen. There were other sources of income besides wood. The trader *Ruben Levin Silberstein*, who also came from Wystiten, asked for naturalisation in 1843 and demonstrated that he had traded mainly in cattle and horses since 1811 in Prussia. He had made himself a name as an upstanding trader with many property owners, and at the time of his application he was able to display a wealth of 5000 Thalers. Behind these two names lie quite different and rather personal decisions which they took with respect to the existence they were striving for in the neighbouring country. A great proportion of their former neighbours, their friends and relatives moved around the border area for years or decades, on both sides of the border, and had a territory which was located in a number of places, although they were not primarily seeking Prussian citizenship.

The majority of the traders travelled by horse or on foot. They generally used side roads, because it was precisely there that there were more customers than at the large places on the country roads. The preferred merchandise for private use included materials, particularly cloth, in other words heavy woollen materials which were used primarily for winter clothing, as well as silk materials. The wares which the peddlers traded often could not be obtained at all or could only be obtained with difficulty from other sources. The regular selection which ambulant trade offered improved supply conditions in the countryside and created new needs. Jewish and Christian salesmen contracted peddlers as in-betweeners. The customers seemed to accept the peddlers and to use their services to a greater and greater extent. This is the only way to explain the growth in wealth of various traders from Wystiten, who finally managed to found their own premises in East Prussia with their business.

Sources show that numerous traders from Wystiten looked for a firm area of trade, built up a constant body of regular customers there, tried for a permanent night-time residence and with time became well-known personalities who were able to receive certificates of their good name from the mayors on request. These were frequently asked for when the peddler planned to stabilise his local trade connections, i.e. to settle permanently and to make an application for naturalisation. If the customers were satisfied, they would gladly support the wish to settle, since they saw the obvious advantages for both sides.

A high level of mobility and rich life experience characterised these peddlers, who can be described as wanderers between the worlds.[8] The active sales practice which brought these traders directly to people's doors gave them very exact knowledge about the environment and their customers' needs. This accumulated knowledge played a considerable part in their planning of a permanent settlement in Prussia. Coupled with other factors, such their knowledge of the place and people and the social competencies which had developed from these, this formed the foundation for a secure business future.

Wolf Sandalowski is an example of those who worked for and gained such a perspective. Born in Wystiten in 1826, he had himself naturalised, along with his wife Freida Rochmann, who came from the same place, his 14-year-old son Abraham David and his six-year-old daughter Taube. The daughter had been born in the

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[7] Bert Oppenheim, *The Oppenheim Family History 1750-1995*, San Francisco 1995, p. 70.
[8] Christian Glass, *Mit Gütern unterwegs. Hausierhändler im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, in: Hermann Bausinger u.a.(Hg.):*Reisekultur. Von der Pilgerfahrt zum modernen Massentourismus*, München 1991, 62-69, here 66.

village of Lablack, where the family was resident. Like many other Jews who settled in the countryside in the district of Labiau, *Sandalowski* also had to commit to keeping his place of residence for the next three years.[9] At the same time other traders from Wystiter gained Prussian nationality without any great difficulties and settled in various villages. These included, among others: *Abraham Jankel Wartelski*, with his wife *Liba Belka* and 6 children, who now lived in the village of Kobbelbude-Kragan[10], *Joschel Salomon Alpert* and his wife *Peschel Mitenthal* with 4 children, who went into Moosbruch in Timber[11], *Joseph Sandelowski* and his wife *Emma Neumark*, who opened a shop with a licensed house in Alt Sussemilken.[12]

Migration to the village and individual existence there was only possible with the aid of communication networks. Being related and sharing a homeland served as a vehicle for economic development and consolidation. The majority of the family fathers listed here brought their wives with them from Wystiten after they had commuted between their place of origin and the new place for a long time and had built up an extensive network including both Jewish contacts (connections with colleagues, competitors and acquaintances who came from the same place) as well as non-Jewish contacts (knowledge about customers, acquaintances with mayors).[13] The value of sharing a homeland, of having a common origin, always seemed to play a considerable part, while at the same time because of the strong relationships between relatives a distinction could scarcely be made between relatedness and friendship.

The railway provided a considerable improvement to trade possibilities, since new buying and selling markets could be accessed, greater turnover was achieved and the city and the countryside came closer to each other. The mobility between city and country increased, and so the influence of the city on the countryside increased. The freshly-established traders imported fashionable clothing, modern furniture, bicycles, sewing machines and the telephone. They themselves were the first consumers of these products and equipped their houses in an urban manner with them. The expanding middle and upper class of the Jews in the villages oriented themselves according to the urban bourgeoisie in their consumer behaviour and soon also in individual modes of life. Here we could say that an acculturation took place at a great distance, which also led to new requirements in education. The children, who thanks to the railway were often sent to school in the nearest town, most clearly represented the parents' desire to ascend into urban Jewish bourgeoisie. Not infrequently the entire family then moved into the next small town and from there often into a city. In each major large-scale Jewish township in East Prussia in the 20th century there were many descendants of families from Wystiten, and in Tilsit alone before the turn of the century four families were naturalised from the well-known location at the border: the traders *Itzig Epstein* and *Isidor Michalowsky* as well as the horse dealer *Julius Michalowsky* and the salesman Isaak Kowalsky.[14] In the township list for Königsberg from 1927 the families *Sandelowski* and *Wartelski* even took up several pages, and there were a not inconsiderable number among them who had managed to go from *peddlers* to *honoratiors,* figures of honour.[15]

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[9] PA (Olsztyn), 1588/10, earlier: Rep. 18, Landratsamt Labiau, Abt. VIII Nr. 2Acta des königl. Landrathsamtes Labiau. Betreffend: Die Ein- und Auswanderungen 1856-1869, 51., 111., 137.RS

[10] GSTA: I.HA, Rep. 77, Tit.226b, Nr. 17, Bd.5 "Acta betr. die Einwanderungen aus dem Königreich Preußen in die Preußischen Staaten,", 72-74.

[11] GSTA: I.HA, Rep. 77, Tit.226b, Nr. 17, Bd.5 "Acta betr. die Einwanderungen aus dem Königreich Preußen in die Preußischen Staaten,", 112-114.

[12] Familyarchive Zviah Geller

[13] About Migration networks: Douglas Massey, *An Evaluation of International Migration Theory*, in: The North American Case// Population and Development Review 20, 1994, . 699-751.

[14] Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt, Sammlung Brilling: A 153 Juden in Tilsit. Bürgerrolle 1754-1855 and 1872-1905.

[15] LBI (New York), Koenigsberg Collection

To formulate a summary, it may be noted that the Litvak Jews at the East Prussian border represented a constitutive factor in the border region. In the 19th century they were able to distinguish themselves within the economic and social space. At the end of the century their role was not only pushed back by political factors, but also by the degree to which the experience of the border became common property, and all actors at the border wanted to profit from it.

Summary

In this article is taken the example of Vystitis to illustrate the phenomenon of Litvakian transmigration to Eastprussia in 19 c.. The town called by Russians and Jews wrote *Wishtinetz*, the Poles *Wisztiniec* or *Wysztyniec*, the Lithuanians *Vistytis* and the Germans *Wysztyten* or *Wischtiten*. had a great number of Jewish inhabitants.The Wystiten Jews were considerably more mobile than the other residents of the small town. They frequently tried to secure their living by cross-border trading. Migration to the Prussian villages and individual existence there was only possible with the aid of communication networks. The example of the Wystiten Jews shows, that the Litvak Jews at the East Prussian border represented a constitutive factor in the border region.

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