

The Jewish Presence in Eastern Europe

The Beginnings

I assume that for most people encountering the words *Eastern European Jewry*, what immediately comes to mind is Ashkenazic Jewry, whose roots are in the German-speaking areas of Western and Central Europe. Thinking of a name of an early Jewish scholarly figure from Eastern Europe, such as an author of a rabbinical work, the earliest ones coming to mind would probably be, if Poland were to be included (though most Poles of today would no doubt take exception to their being labeled part of Eastern Europe), the sixteenth-century Ashkenazic rabbis from Cracow, R. Moses Isserles (ca. 1530–72), known by the acronym Remu, and R. Solomon Lurie (1510–73), known by the acronym Rashal. This is understandable, since the great figures of the previous generation, like R. Yakov Pollak (1460–1541), considered the first Polish rabbinic authority (though born and raised in Germany), and his pupil R. Sholem-Shakhne of Lublin (1495–1558), the teacher of both Isserles and Lurie, have barely left us any writings of their own.¹

If we move east of Cracow, to Lviv (aka Lwów, Lemberg), Minsk, or Vilnius in search of names of early scholars, the situation is no better. Moscow I do not mention at all, since Jews were not normally found in the Muscovite state until fairly recently, in the modern period, as indicated by Solzhenitsyn in the ambiguous title of his not entirely unpartisan 2001 book *Dvesti let vmeste* (*Two Hundred Years Together*), referring to the relations between Russia and the Jews between 1795 and 1995—that is, after the partitions of Poland in 1772 and 1793, which brought under the rule of the Russian Empire hundreds of thousands of Jews living in the areas that from 1791 onwards made up the greater part of the *Thum ha-moshav*, the “Pale of Settlement.”

Nevertheless, the Jewish presence in East European lands precedes the migrations from Ashkenaz and perhaps even the formation of Ashkenazic Jewry. The Jewish population in Eastern Europe before the arrival of the Ashkenazic Jews is

considered by scholars to stem from the south, mainly from Byzantium, Persia, and Babylonia, and, according to some scholars, to some degree also from Khazaria (see M. Weinreich 1956, 623; for a detailed discussion of the southern origins of this early Jewry, see Brook 2003a and the literature cited in note 1). However, details about this Jewry and a fortiori studies of its cultural and intellectual activity are scarce.²

Here, in brief, is the little we know about the early history of the Jews in Eastern Europe and their intellectual activity before the Ashkenazic Jews, arriving in Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in ever growing waves in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with their superior erudition and dominant tradition, took over and practically obliterated whatever local Jewish tradition may have existed in these territories.³

The ancient city of Kyiv, the first capital of Rus', had a Jewish community by the early tenth century—that is, well before the Christianization of Rus' by the Kyivan prince Vladimir in 988. This is evidenced by a Hebrew letter from the Cairo Genizah (a synagogue storeroom) discovered by Norman Golb in the Taylor-Schechter Collection of the Cambridge University Library in 1962 and published by Golb and Omeljan Pritsak in 1982. The letter (see excerpt below) relates the misadventures of a certain Yakov bar Hanukkah, hardly an Ashkenazic name, imprisoned as the guarantor for his brother's debts (see appendix 1). The brother had borrowed money from gentiles, but was killed by robbers and his money was taken. Then the creditors had Yakov arrested as guarantor and he remained chained and shackled for a whole year, after which the community decided to bail him out, having already paid sixty silver ingots; however, there remained forty ingots due. The letter of pleading for help on his behalf is addressed to all Jewish communities that the bearer of the letter may encounter, and it is signed by several leaders of the Jewish community, who refer to themselves as “the community of Kyiv” (*qahal shel qijov*).

The letter is dated paleographically to the middle of the tenth century—that is, to the time when Kyiv was still a pagan town. The names of the signatories, such as Hanukkah bar Moshe, Kupin bar Yosef (or perhaps Kopin, Kufin, Kofin—the Hebrew script does not permit further precision), and Sinai Bar Shmuel, do not sound Ashkenazic either.

Slavic sources, too, confirm the early presence of Jews in Kyiv and their interaction with the local residents.⁴ The *Primary Chronicle*, also called *The Account of Bygone Years* (*Povest' Vremennykh Let*)—a compilation made in Kyiv, whose initial stage is considered to date to the end of the eleventh century or the beginning of the twelfth—has an account (possibly apocryphal) under the year 6494 from creation (= 986 CE) about Prince Vladimir of Kyiv, while still a pagan, being approached by representatives of the monotheistic religions in order to choose the “true religion”, setting off a contest to which representatives of several religions

were invited, a contest that was won by the Greeks from Byzantium with their variety of Christianity.

Among the religions invited to present their case were representatives of Islam, who naturally lost the contest because abstention from drinking wine was unthinkable for the Rus'. At the contest there appeared also "Khazarian Jews," though they are the only ones of whom it is not said that they were invited. Their case was rejected on the ground that if they were indeed the people chosen by God, as they claimed, then why were they in exile and not in their promised land (see appendix 2)?

We are not sure what the term "Khazarian Jews" signifies here.⁵ It may refer to Jews arriving from the Khazaria for the contest, or to Jews originating from Khazaria but residing in Kyiv, which, until the middle of the tenth century, had been a western outpost of the Khazarian Empire, with a resident governor. According to Omeljan Pritsak, it is this governor who also signed and approved the Genizah letter with the word at the bottom left of the letter (see fig. 1), which he proposes to read *huqurum* ("I have read") in some variety of Khazar Turkic (see, however, the objections raised by Zuckerman 2011, 11ff. and further literature quoted there). In any case, the statement by these Jews about Jerusalem being ruled by Christians casts further doubt on the authenticity of the whole account of the 986 debate about the "true religion," or at least on the date of its insertion into the *Primary Chronicle*, since Jerusalem was conquered by the crusaders only in 1099 (as noted, e.g., by Weinryb 1962 and Birnbaum 1973).

In another East Slavic source, the *Life of Saint Theodosius of the Caves Monastery in Kyiv* (d. 1074) we read about the strange custom of the saint to go out at night from the monastery and debate with the Jews of Kyiv. We must be cautious, however, about the historicity of events depicted in the hagiographic genre.

mnogash'dy v noshchi vstaja i otaj v'sekh iskhozhaashe k zhidom i tekh ezhe o khriste prepiraja korja zhe i dosazhaja tem i jako otmenniky i bezakonniky tekh naricaja. zh'daashe bo ezhe o khristove ispovedanii ubien byti.

Many times he rose at night, and unknown to all he went to the Jews and debated with them about Christ, he refuted them and reproached them calling them Apostates and Lawless, for he expected to be killed preaching for Christ. (See Abramovich and Tschizewskij 1964, 65.)

Kyiv was devastated by the Tatars in the 1240s and we do not hear about its Jews for two centuries—until the middle of the fifteenth century. By then, however, Kyiv was no longer the capital of Rus', but a small principality soon to be integrated into the rising Grand Duchy of Lithuania (see map below).

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries we have some evidence of a Jewish presence in the territories of Halych-Volhynia, to the west of Kyiv, which were less affected by the Tatar invasion. Thus, we read in the *Galician-Volhynian Chronicle*



FIGURE 1. The Kyivan letter, Cambridge MS T-S 12.122. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Cambridge Library.



FIGURE 2. Expansion of the Grand-Duchy of Lithuania thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. Map by M.K. 2006 provided by Wikimedia Commons licensed under CC BY-SA 2.5.

in the year 1288, that, on the passing away of the local prince Volodimer Vasilkovich, everyone mourned his death, including the Jews (see Pritsak 1988, 13ff.; Kulik 2004–5, 15):

i zhidove plakakhusja aki vo vzjat'e Ierusalimu egda vedjakhut' ja vo polon vavilon'skii.

and the Jews wept as during the capture of Jerusalem, when they were led into captivity in Babylon.

Over the course of these centuries, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland annexed these lands, which subsequently (1562–1795) came to form an integral part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

It is generally agreed that the Jews of Kyivan Rus', just like their coreligionists everywhere in the diaspora, adopted the local language and spoke a Jewish variety of it; in our case, that would be a Jewish variety of East Slavic, referred to in Jewish historiography as (Eastern) Knaanic (on this term, see appendix 3).

We do actually have an early testimony of Knaanic (sc., Slavic) being spoken by Jews in a letter of reference from the community of Salonica to the neighboring Jewish communities, dated to the eleventh century. In the letter we are told about a rather unusual phenomenon in Jewish history—namely, a monolingual Jew. He is described as a Jew “from the community of Rus'” (*miqahal rusiya*) who is on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and requires assistance and guidance, since, the letter says, “he knows neither the Holy Tongue [Hebrew] nor Greek or Arabic, but only the language of Canaan spoken by the people of his native land” (see appendix 4).

Another piece of evidence that Jews in Rus' knew the local vernacular, including its lowest obscenities, comes from the thirteenth-century scholar from England R. Moses ben Isaac ben Hanessiah, who, in his grammatical study titled *The Book of Onyx* (*Sēfer ha-shoham*), under the root *y.b.m.* quotes a piece of information that he had received orally (*amar li*—“he told me”) from his disciple R. Isaac from Chernigov (near Kyiv)—namely, that the verb *yabem* means “to copulate” in the language of “Tiras,” that is, in the language of Rus' (see appendix 5).

The assumption that the Jews of medieval Rus' spoke a variety of local Slavic does not, however, entail that they wrote Slavic, and if they did, which I find unlikely, we have no testimony to corroborate such an assumption. Judging by their poor level of learning and erudition, they did not. This poor level is noted in the early thirteenth-century work by the author of *Or Zarua*, R. Isaac of Vienna, citing a responsum by R. Eliezer of Bohemia to R. Yehuda he-Hasid of Regensburg on the hiring and salary of *hazzanim* (cantors), where R. Eliezer affirms that “in most locations in Poland, Rus', and Hungary where there are no Torah scholars, due to their poverty, they hire an educated man wherever they can find one, and he serves them as cantor and rabbi and teacher for their sons” (see appendix 6).

And indeed, despite their antique origins, the Jewish communities in these lands did not produce any prominent scholars.

We do read, here and there during the twelfth through fourteenth centuries (see Pereswetoff-Morath 2002, 2:18ff.), of Jewish scholars going to Rus', and of Jews coming from Rus' to study at the renowned rabbinical academies in Germany, France, and even Spain.

We thus read in the *Sēfer hayashar*, edited in the second half of the twelfth century by the disciples of Rabbenu Tam (R. Jacob ben Meir) from Ramerupt, Champagne, about a scholar from Kyiv named R. Moses (R. Moshe ben Yosef, also called "Moses the First"), who is mentioned as part of the line of transmission of a ruling allowing the use of wine that had been touched by gentiles if it is used for a purpose other than drinking, such as being mixed into ink in order to improve its quality. R. Moses of Kyiv is said to have received this ruling orally from Rabbenu Tam (*mi-pi rabbi moshe mi-kijov mi-pi rabbenu tam*—"from the mouth of R. Moses of Kyiv from the mouth of Rabbenu Tam").

R. Moses of Kyiv is also mentioned in the work on the genealogy of halakhic scholars *Jihussej tanna'im ve-'amora'im* (first printed by R. N. Rabinowitz in Lyck in 1874) authored in the second half of the twelfth century by R. Yehuda ben Kalonymos ben Meir of Speyer, as addressing a legal question on levirate marriage to the rabbinic authority in Baghdad, the Gaon Samuel ben 'Ali, about what should come first, *yibbum* or *ḥalitzah*.⁶ He is also mentioned in the *responsa* of the thirteenth-century R. Meir ben Barukh of Rothenburg (Maharam), as receiving a reply from the same Gaon Samuel on divorcing a rebellious wife (*moredet*), a ruling that enabled any woman who so desired to end her marriage by declaring: "I can't stand the sight of him" (*me'is 'alaj*—lit., "he is repulsive to me"), despite a contradictory ruling in the Talmud (see Kulik 2004–5, 15; 2012, 375).

Given that R. Moses, originally from Kyiv, studied in Ramerupt under Rabbenu Tam, it may well be that the correspondence mentioned took place between Baghdad and Ramerupt, not Baghdad and Kyiv.⁷ In any case, regardless of these mentions, we do not have any written work by R. Moses from Kyiv or by any other contemporary scholar from Eastern Europe; nor can we see in these mentions evidence of "the existence of Jewish intellectual activity in Kiev for a certain period" (Pritsak 1988, 9).

There remain nevertheless some traces of intellectual activity of the early pre-Ashkenazic Jews of Eastern Europe. These traces appear in the form of *translations*, mainly but not exclusively from Hebrew into East Slavic. Such translations have survived in Russian and Ruthenian texts written in Cyrillic script, and are preserved in Christian codices.

There can hardly be any doubt that these translations were made with the participation of Jews with a knowledge of Hebrew, whether they were practicing Jews or converts to Christianity. This assumption is made necessary by the fact that in Eastern Europe, unlike in the West, there were no Christian Hebraists. This absence, in turn, is owing to the fact that in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance there were no universities east of Cracow,⁸ indeed there were no institutions of higher learning until well into the early modern period.