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# Population Studies in Minsk Gubernia in the 18th and 19th Centuries

by Vitaly Charny

I am from Minsk, Belarus as are almost all my own and my wife's ancestors. We have lived already 18 years in America. I am interested in my particular family but also very interested in helping other researchers who may not speak Russian or understand the Russian records. As a hobby I collect, translate and analyze Jewish records from Minsk Gubernia and have added many of them to JewishGen's Belarus SIG static databases.

## How I Conducted my Research

Before one can conduct a study of an area in Russia, it is important to understand the Administrative units during the time period one is going to study. For example, in 1901 Minsk, the administrative divisions were: *Gubernias* divided into *uyezds* (districts). These *Uyezds* were divided into *volosts*, earlier called *povets*, which were similar to counties in the United States. In most cases, the names of *volosts* are derived from the name of the *volost's* main town (but not always.) Two to four *volosts* formed a *uchastok* (section). *Uchastoks* were administered by *nachal'niks* (managers) who reported to the governor of Minsk. *Uchastoks* also had judges. To understand the administrative divisions is quite important because some records refer not to a town/village but to *uyezd* or *volost*. If you know the *volost* and know that there are (as usual) one Jewish settlement, you will know what the records are about. In most cases the *volost* name is derived from one of the local settlements, but not necessarily the town you looking for.

In tabulating the data for the towns and villages of the Minsk Gubernia with references to administrative division of the Gubernia begins in the early 1880s, I used data mostly from *Volosti i vazhneishie seleniya Imperii, vyp. V"* (*Volosts and Most Important Settlements of Empire, 5th edition*) of 1884 and several other sources. I selected more than 500 settlements (most of them with populations of 300 people and more) and documented the names of the *volost* and *uyezd* to which they belonged. I also marked settlements where I had information about Jewish communities or just percents of Jewish population at the time (1884). Earlier or later in time, the picture might be different. I was puzzled by the absence of reference to such well known Jewish settlements as Shchedrin (Seliba) of the Bobruisk *uyezd*. Possibly some other locations are also missing. I left the *volosts* names in the feminine form in nominative case as it written in Russian. So, for example, Lyakhovichy *volost* is written as Lyakhovichskaya [*volost*].

## Surnames and Towns of Origin

I am particularly interested in collecting Minsk surnames and the towns in which they appear. There were several shtetls in Minsk Gubernia where one or two last names pre-dominated. This unusual situation must have a reason as the policy was to establish last names in order

to identify related families and distinguish them from other lines. I believe that in most cases a family relation was the reason for local authorities allowing people from the same settlement to take the same last names. However, in some places, especially in Slutsk *uyezd* of Minsk Gubernia, each family received a different name. In the course of my research, using many different kinds of records, I have gathered information on more than 8000 surnames. This information is interesting in several ways for genealogical research. For some local surnames it may be possible to find the town of origin, if a researcher does not already have this information. Of course, there are many surnames where it is possible to find references from more than one town. This may be because the name originally was taken in various other locales, or due to a migration pattern the surname appeared in other towns as members moved. Nevertheless, several times I have found the town of origination using cross references when other family surnames were known to come from the same location.

For example, when I collected data for my own surname, Charny, and other surnames from Minsk Gubernia, I could make a distribution map that, in connection with dates, types and number of records, could recreate a history of the family from the 18th to the 20th century. It was even possible to postulate a way in which they had settled in the area. For instance, the Charney's were originally established as rich merchants in Mir during the rule of the local feudal landlords, the princes Radziwill. With the fall of importance of the town and the nobilities residence, the growing Charny family moved to the south and to the east, settling in the middle of 19th century, in twelve shtetls of Minsk Gubernia, including Novogrudok, Slutsk, Minsk, Borisov, Igumen and Mozyr *uyezds* and at that time working mostly as craftsmen of different kinds.

I have reviewed many of the Jewish surnames that appeared in records for the Bobruisk *uyezd*. Most of the records that were reviewed came from the *Minskije Gubernskie Vedomosti* of the 1870s to 1890s. The *vedomosti* were the official newspapers published in every gubernia from 1838 through 1917. For each surname there is one or more towns listed. In my charts, (see following) the first town listed is where the surname was most common. If the surname was equally common in more than one town, then the towns are listed in alphabetical order. In some cases, no town is mentioned in the original records, so the 'town' column will say "Bobruisk *uyezd*". If a surname was found in five or more records, then the town name will be in capital letters.

- Towns that have information in brackets (i.e., "Rakov (from Pukhovichi)") show additional data about where the people came from (if from different gubernia or *uyezd*).

- The names shown under the 'Similar surnames'

column have the same Daitch-Mokotoff soundex as the name in the surname column. Since spelling in records of this era was not consistent, look at the alternate spellings shown in the 'Similar surnames' column.

### Example of Surname Table for Minsk Gubernia

Tracing one name, from the above example, and using data from Revision Census and *Minskie Gubernskie Vedomosti* we can trace the origin and route of several generations of Krivitsky. The original families probably took

SURNAME	Main Town	Other Towns	Similar Surnames
KHODAS	Glusk (From Nesvizh)	Bobruisk Uyezd (from Myadel, Vilno) Bobruisk (from Vilno)	Khodash, Khodesh, Khodosh
KHLODNY	Bobruisk		Goldin, Kaltun, Kholodny, Koltun
KRIVITSKY	Svisloch	Bobruisk Uyezd (from Kharkov)	

their name from the shtetl Krivichi after they had moved to their new shtetl. Although there are four shtetls with this name not far from Minsk, the shtetl Krivichi, Kshyviche, Krzywicze located at 54°43' 27°17' may be the correct one. In the 1795 Revision Census for Kobylnik (present-day Narach), several descendants of Naftel and Leib had settled among the newly arrived from unidentified places in Minsk. By 1816, these families had taken the surname Krivitsky with various spellings. They seemed to be interconnected with families in Svir, a shtetl to the West of Kobylnik. The following examples were culled from *Minskie Gubernskie Vedomosti*:

#### KRIVITSKY 1884

*Zaslav volost' of Minsk uyezd Administration is looking for Abram Zalmanov KRIVITSKY, a meshchanin of Kobylnik, Svetsiansky uyezd. He is required to report November 1, 1884 to second draft office of Minsk uyezd to undergo age determination for military service. It is necessary because of contradiction of his age stated in draft registration issued by the Administration January 12, 1882 #26 with information from family listing.*

#### KRIVITSKY 1900

*#264 Town of Minsk Police Department is announcing that Leiba Aronov KRIVITSKY, meshchanin of Svir', Svetsyany uyezd, reports he lost his passport issued to him December 12, 1892 by Svir' Meshchane Administration.*

#### KRIVITSKY 1901

*Minskie Gubernskie Vedomosti 1901 #47 list of draft dodgers families who are subjects to military fine of 300 Rubles.*

*#327 Dovid KRIVITSKY, his mother Tsivya (or Tsipa) his brothers Ura and Elya and sister Ester.*

### Archival Records

The Minsk surname project started with the most obvious records for Minsk Gubernia. These are the 19th

century Revision Censuses and the vital records which have been microfilmed by the LDS. These films and their film numbers are listed on the JewishGen Belarus SIG website and have been part of a large translation project by the Belarus SIG. A detailed inventory of sixteen microfilms of Belarus records at the Family History Center can be viewed at <[http://www.jewishgen.org/belarus/detailed\\_inv\\_16\\_rolls.htm](http://www.jewishgen.org/belarus/detailed_inv_16_rolls.htm)>

Another source that can be useful in finding surnames, and more about individuals with those surnames, is the *Russian Jewish Encyclopedia* published in Russia in sixteen volumes in 1913.

Aside from Revision Lists, records microfilmed by the LDS include the *Religious Personnel of Minsk Gubernia, 1836-1838* and *Minsk school records 1900-1917*. The later is a small collection of documents related to school applications, birth certificates and report cards.

Among vital records from Minsk City and Minsk Gubernia towns, there were some that did not seem useful at first glance. However, in the birth records there is mention of the names of *berit milah* performers. To be sure about who those people were, I read about them in the *Russian Jewish Encyclopedia*. As I expected, they were not family members. It was customary to have two names entered: one of a *Tzadic* and another of a *mohel*. The *Tzadic* was a congregation representative and *mohel* was a specialist who performed *berit milah*. This tradition came to run contrary to Russian law—which required that any religious rite be performed by a priest (in our case, a rabbi). Because in Russia, religion was a state business, religious laws were under state supervision. Disobedience of such laws was persecuted by the state. To be a mohel, in some periods, was a dangerous occupation. Only a rabbi, by Russian state law, could perform *berit milah*. (stat'ya #1325 ustava inostranykh veroispovedaniy). However, by Jewish tradition it was not the rabbi's duty, and was not commonly performed by the rabbi. In later birth records, the performer of *berit milah* mentions just the official rabbi of the town (in 1861 for instance) or the rabbi with participation of mohel in 1851 and at the end of the XIX century.

We might also assume that the people who were mentioned in the records as *berit milah* performers were members of the communities and possibly prominent members. Many names were repeated multiple times and it brings additional information to who the members of the community were and the years when they were active there. Some records have not only the given names and surnames of these men but their patronymics as well. By analyzing the reappearing names, it is also possible to track spelling variations. For instance: Borukhin, Brukhin, Bryukhin, Brokhin are variations of the same person's surname. Often when a person had two first names, which was very common, almost always his name was written using only one of them (and sometimes not the same one).

## Newspapers and periodicals

With limited archival data available in many places of Belarus for use in obtaining materials about family history, Jewish contemporary life, or Minsk demographics, I began to study old local newspapers that published records and lists of different kinds: voter and draft registration, documents lost, police and court announcements and many other kinds of announcements. This source is not available in English and archival clerks will not search old newspapers for researchers. I was able to purchase these newspapers on microfilms from the company that produced them. The are also available from several libraries in United States and Russia. *Minsk Gubernskie Vedomosti* (MGV) are available from New York Public Library and from Harvard.

The use of newspapers lend themselves to very varied types of research. For example, this list of Minsk victims of Stalin's terror from the late 1930s to the end of 1940s was sent to me by friends from Minsk. This was only one page from a longer article found in the local newspaper *Vyacherny Minsk* (*Evening Minsk*). On this page starting with the letter "B" was the name of my wife's grandfather, Iliya Bindler. Aside from the name, the list included the dates of arrests and executions, accusations and convictions. All "trials" were closed, performed by "the Threes"—representatives of an internal security organization similar to the KGB. Iliya Bindler and his elder brother were arrested in beginning of 1938 in Minsk and shot several days later. At that time, his family—pregnant wife and two children—never knew of his fate. She became known only as wife of an "enemy of the people". Only after Stalin's death was my wife's grandmother officially informed that her husband was dead and that he was innocent. She received about 300 rubles of compensation. There were many Jewish names on this one page. The numbers of Stalin's victims in the USSR is comparable to the losses of WWII—20 millions—or even more.

## Examples of Demographic Studies

Using the *Minsk Gubernia Vedomosti*, it is possible to analyze demographic information. For example, I made an analysis of the Minsk Jewish death records for the year 1889. A study of these records reflects the reality of life of Jewish people in a major Jewish community in Belarus. There were 703 death records (399 male and 304 female) registered in the community in that year. If we compare these numbers with the birth rates, taking the numbers from the closest year's available records, in 1882 there were 936 birth records (628 male and 308 female) and in 1895, there were 1541 birth records (904 male and 637 female). From these numbers we see that birth rates in these time periods exceed the death rates. These numbers demographically indicate several other factors:

1. There was a rapid growth in the Jewish population in the city of Minsk in the period of the 1880s to 1890s.
2. There was an obvious lack of compliance in the vital records registration.
3. There were an unrealistically low number of female records when compared to male records and probably not all males were registered.

## Example 1: The Death Toll

The largest death toll was among the youngest children: Twenty percent of deaths were registered for children in their first year of life and twenty-seven percent for children from one to four years of age. All together forty-nine percent of Jews who died in Minsk in 1889 had not reached 10 years of age.

Age Group	Deaths in %	Cause of Death
1-10	49	Colitis, Diphtheria, Meningitis, Croup
11-19	5	Typhus, Heart Disease
20-29	7	Tuberculosis, heart disease, Typhus
30-39	5	
40-49	4	
50-59	8	Pneumonia, Natural Causes
60-69	11	
70-79	9	
80-89	2	

## Example 2: The Jewish population 1897-1898

Minsk Gubernia	355015	(2147621)
<b>In Towns</b>	<b>133617</b>	<b>(224945)</b>
<b>1. Minsk Uyezd</b>	<b>65029</b>	<b>(227149)</b>
<b>Minsk City</b>	<b>47561</b>	<b>(90912)</b>
<b>2. Bobruisk Uyezd</b>	<b>49708</b>	<b>(225935)</b>

Minsk Uyezd	Entire Population	Poor
Minsk City	10651	(4900)
Koidanov	1401	(900)
Stolptsy	900	(500)
{Novy] Sverzhen	370	(250)

Complete tables may be viewed on  
<http://www.jewishgen.org/belarus/Vitaly/Poor.html>  
<http://www.jewishgen.org/belarus/Vitaly/Town.html>

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## Historical Factors that Affect Research 18th and 18th Century

My grandmother told me that her a richer Polonsky relatives collected money to send their sons to America when they got closer to conscription age. This is a typical story that you might hear about why your ancestors left Russia. Conscription and taxation were reasons also to keep your children off the census rolls while still living in the shtetl or town.

A story from the book "Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews. The transformation of Jewish society in Russia 1825-1855." by Michael Stanislawski has a story of how the grandfather of the Jewish memoirist Yehezkel Kotik provided the yearly "welcome" for the tsars "reviser" in the Jewish community of Kamenets. By his word this "conversation" always ended with official quickly pocketing 200 rubles. Actually it was 250 Jewish families in Kamenets at this time with up to 2/3 not registered until universal conscription was introduced in 1874. "One Russian demographer" mentioned in the book wrote about dynamic of Jewish population at that time "The number of birth begun to fall especially steadily since a thirty kopeks (better kopeykas - V.C.) fees was introduced for the registration of new births." From the same source I found down the page next passage: "Vilna communal rolls showed that from 1850 to 1856 9,244 Jews died and 5,619 were born, a loss of 3,625 person. If this should God forbid, continue, in 1875 Vilna will have no Jews". It not happened at that time. When I checked dynamic of Vilna Jewish population in 1830-1851 it showed growth from 36,947 to 45,760. Up 38% but what interesting - with fluctuations difficult to explain by natural cause. The very poor level of registrations, censuses and undeveloped demographic service could explain this. Therefore, we might conclude that not all of our ancestors in tsarist Russia were registered which is something to consider when during research.

## Conscription and Immigration

A list of surnames draft-dodgers records from 1900-1914 was scattered throughout the MGV (Minsk Gubernia Vedomosti). Over 20,000 records were collected and the listis published on the Belarus SIG. There is no reference to particular towns.

In 1903 to the Russian Army drafted people born between Oct.1 1881 and Oct.1, 1882 In Minsk gubernia more than 850 Jews avoided draft in 1903 (and officials found out about it). For Minsk gubernia that supplied Russian Army with total numbers of draftees about 10,000 yearly (Jews and non-Jews) it would seem quite noticeable. Nevertheless the Russian Army did not suffer from this. Even more: for the same mentioned period of 1903 in Russia 3.5% more Jews had been drafted than required by norm. Makeup for Jews skipped military service was made by other Jews, plus Jews had to make up for converted Jews who skipped service as well. Physical/medical requirements for military service were less restrictive for Jews than non-Jews. Jewish men who immigrated from Russia were not excluded from draft lists, so it made higher percentage of Russian Jews who had to serve in the Army.

Meanwhile the Russian government made a profit

from it. Jewish families of skipped military service draftees (parents and step parents, brothers and half-brothers and even their sisters until 1904) were fined a total of 300 rubles that led many of them the loss of their property. Possibly most of those draftees hid somewhere or immigrated. Altogether it explains why many Jews did not choose to immigrate and leave the rest of the family behind to suffer even more. A similar policy was in use in Soviet Union to hold immigration down. This data was originally published in local official periodicals. These published lists did not include draftees and their families that were not caught breaking the law.

In looking through the vital records microfilms for information pertaining to my Charny ancestors, I found that Abram Charny (1822-1906) from Ostroshitsky Gorodok, Belarus, was recorded not like all other Jewish population "meshchane" (town dwellers) or "zemledel'tsy" (working on land) but "otstavnoy ryadovoy" (retired private) together with one more man of his age from the town. Such people occasionally had rights to settle out of Pale but generally that was a privilege of converts. After service in Army, men of that time got special social status called among common people "Nikolayevsky Soldat".

## Jewish children in XIX c. Russian Army

In the time of the Tsar Nikolay I (1825-1855) when young Jewish boy served from age of 8 as "Cantonists" up to age of 18 and after it as much as for 25 years more. There are a lot of materials on the topic. Most of its are eyewitnesses stories. These books written in Russian.

- Beilin S., *Iz rasskazov o kantonistakh* (From stories about Cantonists)
- ·Voronovich N., *Iz byta russkoy armii* (About everyday life of Russian Army)
- ·Itzkovich I., *Vospominaniya arkhangel'skogo kantonista* (The Memoirs of Arkhangelsks Cantonist)
- ·Leshchinsky N., *Stary kantonist* (Old Cantonist)
- ·Maimion M., *Istoriya odnoy kartiny* (Story of a Picture)
- ·Stanislavsky, S. K., *istorii kantonistov* (History of Cantonists)
- ·Usov G., *Evrei v armii* (Jews in the Army)
- ·Fliskin E., *Kantonisty* (Cantonists)

## Conclusion