

The Jewish Surnames in Bessarabia / Moldova

What makes our Surnames Unique

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Jewish Surnames always fascinated me. The names tell a story, maybe sometimes in encrypted form, and that makes them harder to decipher, but more attractive.

There are a number of published books on the topic of Jewish Surnames. I have two favorites: “To the History of Jewish Surnames” by Avrom Pribluda, 1987, Supplement to “Sovietish Heimland”, Moscow, in Yiddish, 64 pages and “A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire” by Alexander Beider, Avoteynu, NJ, 2008, 1008 pages. The first book introduced me to the topic and I got hooked on it. The second book opened my eyes to the whole new world of Jewish Surnames, their origin, history, classification, scientific research and more. I want to send my special thanks to Alexander Beider for this great work and for the help he provided in my research including in preparation to this session.

In the Russian Empire most of the Jews acquired hereditary surnames only at the end of the 18th century, and in Bessarabia even later, after the region became part of Russian Empire in 1812.

The first laws pertaining to the Jews in Bessarabia were published in 1818 and after that in 1835. “Every Jew must keep forever his hereditary surname or, according to the statutes, should get a surname...” April, 1835. By looking into the Revizskie Skazki (Revision Lists) of 1824 of the District of Khotin, among 2590 families registered we find that almost all Jews had surnames.

In documents of the 19th century there were Jews in Bessarabia without surnames. They were citizens of Moldova Principality (preceded Romania) and Turkey. In some records even from late 19th century these Jews still were registered in the old “Jewish” way, like Khaim ben Avraham, or Sara bat Leyb.

The research of Jewish Surnames was done on two sets of data: 80,000+ Revision Lists of the 19th century and about 30,000 cemetery records of the 20th century. All the results will be presented at the session.

All Jewish Surnames follow one of the categories:

- Acronyms and abbreviations;
- Rabbinical;
- Indicating Kohen or Levite lineage;

- Geographical, or toponyms;
- Occupational;
- From Masculine given name;
- From Feminine given name;
- Artificial;
- From Personal characteristics.

In this lecture we focus only on categories and surnames which are somewhat unique to the Bessarabia region, or could provide additional genealogical information.

In addition to these categories the important feature of the Surname is the language in which the surname was written. Several languages influenced Bessarabian Jewish Surnames: Russian, Yiddish, Romanian and Turkish. Russian and Yiddish languages were also found in the development of Jewish surnames in other regions of the Russian Empire. Romanian and Turkish languages influenced just the Bessarabian names. In many cases the surnames mean something in one of these languages, like APTEKAR means pharmacist in Russian, and SHRAYBER is a writer in Yiddish or DASKAL is a teacher in Romanian, and KANTARZHI is balance maker (accountant) in Turkish. There are about 55 Romanian words, and 6 Turkish ones which brought many Jewish surnames to life.

In many cases the ending of the Surnames provide information about the origin, and if it has a Romanian endings “-an”, “-u” or “-ul”- these name would have originated in Romania or Bessarabia, or even people might have moved to other places, like Belorussia, but have Romanian-Bessarabian origin. For example the surname BELTSAN is a geographical name from the town of Beltsy, Bessarabia, and the ending “-an” is Romanian. The same name with a Yiddish ending will be BELTSER, and with Russian ending – BELTSKIY. According to Alexander Beider there are 39 Jewish names with the Romanian ending “-an”, and several with the ending “-u”, like LUPU (wolf), KOGANU, MUNTYANU (Highlander, one from Muntenia, or Wallachia), SHTIRBU (toothless), SHTIRBUL.

There is another important Romanian name – BOTEZAT, meaning baptized in Romanian. Mostly likely it is not a Jewish Name, but the bearers could have been Jewish in the past. There was a small list of Baptized Jews at the Revision List, and many of them assumed a surname BOTEZAT.

The Geographical surnames are a very interesting category which tells us where the family came from or used to live before the surnames were acquired. Among 80,000 Revision List records there were 5455 Jewish Surnames and from that number 879 derived from a Toponym – place name. It could be a town, a shtetl, a region, a country, or a river. The preliminary research of such surnames connects our ancestors to many countries regions: 44 surnames are from Germany, 25 – Galicia, 18 - Austria, 18 – Romania, 11 – Poland, 8 – Bukovina, 4 – Bohemia, 4 – Turkey, 3- Hungary, 3- Holland, 3 – Italy, and from different Russian Gubernias: 56 – Podolia,

23- Kiev, 16 – Grodno, 10 – Vilna, Kherson – 7, 3- Lithuania, 3 – Courtland, 2 - Kharkiv, and the rest are from Bessarabia gubernia. That list is going to be expanded with the number of occurrences, and it may tell us where most of the Jews in Bessarabia came from.

Here are the 20 most popular Surnames from 80,000 Revision records:

<i>Surnames</i>	<i>Number of Occurrences</i>
SHVARTSMAN	962
KOGAN	819
ROYTMAN	774
VAYSMAN	760
KOYFMAN	593
RABINOVICH	573
SHNAYDER	573
LERNER	501
FISHMAN	437
<no surname>	435
PORTNOY	378
GOLDENBERG	368
FELDMAN	360
FIKHMAN	351
ZILBERMAN	350
GROYSMAN	332
KOFMAN	319
ROYZENBERG	316
VASERMAN	311
AKERMAN	310
Total	9822 ~12% of total (80,000)

The interesting part of the research is that the districts in Bessarabia differ in how our ancestors obtained their surnames. In some cases the most popular names in one district are from an Occupational category, and in another from a Patronymic.

Another area of research is to find the Bessarabian/Romanian surnames in other regions of the Russian Empire. That may provide information of where the Bessarabia Jews migrated to.

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