History and Geography As Crucial Factors In Determining Where to Look for Baltic-Area Archival Records—with Emphasis on Latvia

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Knowledge of the history and geography of the region in which one's ancestors lived is essential for determining where to look for archival records of their lives. Towns situated along a border frequently have belonged to one country in one period of time, and later (or earlier) to another country. Researchers must study the history of an area to know when the area was dominated by whom.

Additional factors also must be considered. Consider political treaties between nations of interest. For example, given that Latvia, Lithuania, as well as Estonia, were controlled by the Soviets for a long time, ask if records in the former USSR might pertain to a search for records from the various Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

General History of Latvia

The history of the Baltic States is the story of unceasing struggles to dominate Baltic warm water ports and outlets. There never was a time that Muscovy, or Russia as she was known later, did not covet dominance over the ports on the Baltic Sea. At different times, various areas of the Baltic States were in the hands of the Germans, Swedes, Danes, the Polish-Lithuania Commonwealth, numerous princes and mardukes and Muscovy-Russia.

Present day Latvia never was a homogeneous land. It is composed principally of three different areas, each with a dissimilar history and having different population sources. Genealogists need to understand the background of each area in which ancestors settled in order to determine the likely place to look for earlier generations. The following discussion of the three areas, Courland, Latgale and Lipland (also called Livonia and Livland) details their histories in relation to the lives and treatment of the Jews in each. This could facilitate the next steps in searching for the trails of ancestors whose tracks have disappeared—whether they lived in Belarus, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Prussia, Russia or Ukraine. The contrary also may be true. If ancestors from any of these areas cannot be found, consider looking for them in any of the various provinces of Latvia.

The differences in the Jewish populations may be seen clearly in the birth, marriage, divorce and death records from the three areas. Differences in ages at which couples marry and have children, or the reasons given for divorce, may correlate to some extent with historical conditions. The social history of Jewish families was written by the historical accidents that affected them, that caused families to wander further or stay put, to pursue a particular occupation, to become involved in something else or to choose a

spouse from one family or from another.

Early History

The German Knights (*Schwertritter*) began penetrating the area of contemporary Latvia in the second half of the 12th century. At that time, they joined with the Teutonic Knights and together took over Livonia. In these areas, independent power developed in the burghers, the permanent city citizens who had the right to vote and to serve on local councils. Later, these burghers played a heavy-handed role in the fate of the Jews.

With the passage of time, the princes of Moscow exerted increasing military pressure on the area—especially in Latgale. The knights, finding themselves in an untenable position, turned to the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania for help, with the result that the knights' rule effectively ended in 1561 in Livonia, their lands going to Poland-Lithuania. Courland, except for the extended area of Pilten which was privately owned, was declared a dukedom under the nominal protection of Poland. The deal was sealed when the Poles guaranteed to keep the knights as rulers and the Lutheran Church as the predominant religion. They also promised to continue the knights' law forbidding the settlement of Jews.

18th Century

Polish rule in Livonia continued until the Swedes conquered it in 1629. During the so-called "Northern War," and the fall of Sweden in the Battle of Poltava (1709) to

Peter I, the Czar of Russia, the area passed into Russian hands in 1721 and became Lipland guberniya. Earlier, in 1710, Riga had already surrendered to Russia.

Courland had only a few years of skirmishes with her big neighbors, Denmark, Poland and Sweden. Courland flowered under the mercantilist rule of Duke Jacob Kettler (1638–82) who intensively developed industry and both a merchant and a military fleet. Mitau was the Duke's capital and everything continued as it had been under the German knights. The German Parliament (*Landtag*) sat in Windau (today Ventspils) and served the interests of the nobles and landed gentry as it always had.

Courland came under increasing pressure from Russia in the middle of the 18th century, and under the terms of an agreement in 1783, the Baltic coast around Riga passed into Russian hands, including the settlements of Dobeln, Majorenhoff and Schlock. Finally, in the third partition of Poland (1795), Russia absorbed the entire Dukedom of Courland.

Privately owned Pilten, which included Grobin, Hasenpoth (today, Aizepute) and part of the Windau district, was owned by the Bishop of Pilten. He sold it to the King of Denmark who gifted it to his brother, Magnus of Holstein. Upon Magnus' death, Pilten also passed into Russian hands in the third partition of Poland in 1795.

Russia constantly tried to take over Latgale, but in 1582, it was incorporated into a special Polish district called Inflantickie Ksientwo, or Inflantia for short. The ruler of the area was appointed by the King of Poland and a local parliament for the nobles was formed. The nobles were extremely cruel and oppressed the Latgale peasants to such an extent that even visiting gentry were appalled. The peasants were forced to accept the Catholic religion, and their servitude was abolished only in 1881. Polish government in Latgale continued for many generations until the first partition of Poland in 1772, when it too passed to Russia.

19th Century

By the end of the 18th century, the entire area of contemporary Latvia was in the hands of Russia. The administration was divided as follows:

• Lipland (Vidzeme) included Riga, Valka, Walmar and Wanden (Cesis)

• Courland included Libau, Pilten and Windau

• Latgale had three districts: Dvinsk (today, Daugavpils), Luzin (Ludza) and Rezekne. Latgale was included in the district of Polotsk and, after 1802, in the district of Vitebsk.

Russification occurred systematically from the beginning of the takeover, mostly at the hands of governmental functionaries. In the villages, the Germans still had the greatest influence, especially in local councils where the German nobles and burghers sat. As a rule, the further away from Russia, the more influence the Germans had. In the westernmost areas, i.e., Courland, German influence held sway in both village and city. In terms of the economy and public organization of society, the area lived a westernized life style—something totally different from that experienced in Russia. The law, the courts and the schools all continued to run according to German standards and expectations.

Primarily because of her ports and the industrial infrastructure that had been in place for years, the economy of Latvia flourished—and the Jews had more than a little to do with its economic success, being major factors in trade both in products from factories and estates. In 1897, 142,315 Jews lived in Latvia, about 7.4 percent of the general population.

20th Century

On the eve of World War I, about 2.5 million people lived in Latvia. It had 782 factories that employed approximately 93,000 workers. World War I, which saw the expulsion of the Jews from Courland with only 24 hours notice, totally destroyed Latvia's economy. All the basic vital industries were moved inland to the Russian interior. The rest were destroyed in the war. Commerce froze and about half of the agricultural farms were destroyed. The general population shrank to about 1.6 million,

Jewish History in Latvia

Jews of Livonia (Lipland). These Jews probably came from Lithuania and Poland as early as the days of the Knights—who treated them as unwelcome enemies. Proof of Jewish presence by at least the 16th century is apparent from a 1591 agreement between the Teutonic Knights and the King of Poland. The agreement forbade the Jews of Livonia to work in commerce, to farm taxes or to collect custom taxes. Nevertheless, Jews continued to come into the area under Polish rule. They engaged mostly in petty trading, peddling in the villages, the leasing of inns and commerce that brought them into contact with the landowners and local nobility.

During this time, Jewish merchants were dealing with agricultural products from Poland-Lithuania. In exchange for flax, grain, honey, wood and the like, such items as coffee, salt, steel and tobacco were imported into Poland-Lithuania where they were in great demand. Jewish merchants took their products overseas as well, thereby increasing Polish and Russian exports via the port of Riga.

Great Jewish success in these areas awakened the jealousy and hatred of the local townsmen, especially the German merchants who made repeated requests for the Jewish traders to be forbidden both from living and from even entering the area, especially Riga.

From 1592 onward, the burghers exerted constant pressure to have the Jews expelled and their trade prohibited. Periodically, the nobles agreed to limit the peddlers, but within a short period of time, things reverted to what they had been. The Jews continued to act as a bridge between the city and the village within the feudal framework. During the 16th and 17th centuries, the numbers of Jews who lived in the areas surrounding Riga was much greater than the num-

ber within Riga itself although, in fact, the number of Jewish residents in Riga actually increased.

No changes benefited the Jews during the Swedish period in Lipland (1629 to 1721), but they continued to come into the area because of their ties with the Poles and the Litvaks and their excellent commercial talents. Largely unsuccessful Swedish encouragement of the Jews to convert to Christianity characterized the entire period. The exception generally was the lone Jew, the socially problematic one, who could be convinced and then baptized in a public ceremony for the Jews to see and feel humiliated.

Russia took over Livonia in 1721 but no changes were made in the status of the Jews until Catherine I, in 1727, declared that Jews would be expelled from Russian cities. In Lipland, the expulsion finally occurred in 1742 after a long series of attempts, primarily by the local governor, to thwart or divert the decree on the grounds of the economic damage this would entail, especially to Riga.

Some Jews returned to Lipland in 1764 when the imperial Russian government made an attempt to have Jews move south to settle the "New Russia." A way to return legally was found in 1785 when Shlock and some other areas around Riga fell under Russian rule. Catherine II (the Great) offered open settlement without regard for "race and religion." Jews from Courland and elsewhere were included in the offer. By 1811, 430 Jews had officially taken up residence as "citizens of Shlock" or "merchants of Shlock." Although Jews were limited to a stay of between three and eight days in Riga in 1788, in 1822 the "citizens and merchants of Shlock," along with their children, were given permission to remain in Riga. On market days, they even had permission to trade anywhere in Lipland, and by 1834, 532 Jews lived in the province.

Eventually and after much discussion, the government decided to allow even those Jews with no legal status to stay. By 1881, the Jewish population of the Lipland/Riga area was 25,916. Jews were drawn to Riga from Kovno, Vitebsk and Courland. Indeed, although the All-Empire Census of 1897 enumerated 26,793 Jews in Lipland, all but about 4,800 lived in Riga.

Courland Jewry. Even though Jews were forbidden to settle in Courland during the reign of the Teutonic Knights, it appears that they came anyway sometime between the 14th and 16th centuries. They came via the sea from Prussia and what later became Germany. The Jews settled first in the northern areas, in Hasenpoth and Pilten. Because of Pilten's autonomy, Jews settled there as Schutzjuden (protected Jews) and were able to work in commerce and handicrafts and to develop kehillot (communities) with everything that entails, such as synagogues, mikvot (ritual baths) and cemeteries. By the end of the 17th century, many Jews of the area possessed immovable property, a sure sign that they felt secure.

The majority of Jews in southern Courland came from Lithuania, Samogitia or Zamot especially, and from Poland, particularly after the 1648 Chmelnitzki pogroms. During this period, the Jews generally engaged in peddling, leasing

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Mirgration from Latvia to Ukraine

[Jewish emigrants from Latvia sometimes moved to additional places as well. See below. Ed]

The Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP) in Jerusalem has collected documents relating to the 19th century Jewish populations in selected towns and agricultural settlements in Kherson Guberniya, Ukraine. We have identified and purchased copies of genealogically useful documents from several and are in the process of raising funds to translate them. Many, if not all, of the settlers migrated from Latvia to Novopolatavka in the years 1840-43. The Latvia National Archives has confirmed possession of documents about these individuals and funds will be needed to translate the Latvian records as well.

Documents purchased from CAHJP are fromNovopoltavka and the nearby Jewish settlements of Beryslav, Dobre, Lvove, Malaya Romanovka and Seydeminukha. They include correspondence regarding the establishment of Jewish settlements in Kherson, lists of Jewish settlers, life in the colonies and similar material. The Latvian archives reports that it holds Russian language material from all the towns in Courland—Bausk, Goldingen, Grobin, Hasenpoth, Jacobstadt, Libau, Mitau, Pilten, Polangen, Tukkum and Windau.

We have created a JewishGen Ukraine SIG Fundraising Project to acquire documents, pay professional translators and to create datasets for posting to the JewishGen Ukraine Database and the Ukraine SIG Master Name Index. Full translations will be posted on the appropriate KehilaLinks websites.

To donate, go to www.JewishGen.org/ JewishGenerosity/v_projectlist.asp? project_cat=22. Scroll down that page to Kherson Settlements Document Acquisition and Translation Projects. For additional information write to Sylvia Walowitz at ruthw95@yahoo.com.

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of inns, making of wine and brokeraging. In Courland too, the local city burghers rose up against the Jews in the 17th century. The nobles, however, wanted the Jews for their trading talents and connections and for the money they could squeeze out of them for a *Schutzbrief* (letter of protection). Although the Jews were permitted to stay, the merchant class exerted constant pressure to expel them.

In 1719, the Landtag wanted to give the Jews the right to settle legally in exchange for 400 Albert Thalers per head of household. (At that time, a horse cost between 10 and 12 Albert Thalers.) The discussion continued for approximately 20 years during which time the authorities extorted higher and higher prices for the right to stay. The pressures became so great that many Jews chose to leave, albeit temporarily. Eventually, the argument drifted down to the general public and pamphlets on the subject began to appear. The first, in 1787, was entitled "In Favor of Tolerance towards the Jews in the Duchy of Courland and Zamgalen."

A parallel phenomenon was occurring in Germany at the same time. Nevertheless, the Landtag continued to delay a decision until it, along with the Duchy of Courland, came to an end with the Russian annexation in 1795.

When the Russians acquired Courland and the area of Pilten, about 10,000 Jews lived there, but only 20 percent lived in the towns of Goldingen, Hasenpoth, Jacobstadt and Mitau. Aside from a few hundred Jews living in Mitau and the Pilten district who had the right officially to declare themselves *commerçants* (trades people), the remaining city Jews occupied themselves with petty trading, buying and selling used clothing and brokering, even though these trades were expressly forbidden to them. It was even harder for the rest of the Courlander Jews who lived on estates and in the villages. They distilled wine, rented inns and were petty traders. Some were forced to earn a living as travelling peddlers wandering from village to village.

When Courland became an integral part of the Russian Empire, its Jews requested a decision regarding their status. Most of them and their forebears had lived in the area for two centuries without any legal status. The petition went unanswered, but finally on May 12, 1799, a law was enacted that gave Courland Jews the right of citizenship, the right to live in Courland and the right to do business and handicrafts without interference. Nonetheless, the non-Jewish merchants (832 of them compared to 101 Jews) continued to pressure the authorities to limit the right of other Jews to enter the area. Eventually the government yielded to the pressure and ruled that only those Jews registered at the time of the law's passage in 1799 could stay.

The Christian Mitau merchants then lobbied for increased restrictions and a new law enacted in 1835 ruled that only those Jews who had been counted in the last census could be considered locals; all others would be expelled back to the Pale of Settlement. That law remained in effect almost the entire time that the Russians ruled Courland.

Although no deportations occurred, the Jews were encouraged, indeed pressured, to leave Courland to colonize new areas. About 341 families, 11 percent of the Jewish population of Courland, went south to "New Russia," especially Kherson guberniya. Many who remained died in a cholera epidemic in 1848.

Even though the number of Jews remaining in Courland was reduced, the threat to those Jews who arrived after 1799 did not abate. Despite the constant threat of expulsion hanging over their heads, Jews continued to flow into Courland, because it was close to the overcrowded and impoverished Pale of Settlement and because the established, legal Jews were fully integrated into the Courland economy; indeed, they were at its forefront. Newcomers could attach themselves to these established businesses and eke out a far better living than was possible in the Pale.

At one point in 1904, Russia considered including Courland in the Pale of Settlement, but the resident Germans objected so strenuously that the plan was dropped. At that time, about two-thirds of the Jews of Courland were living in cities and towns (as opposed to estates).

The burghers sorely feared competition with the Jews and from time to time the police expelled Jews who either were in Courland illegally or who, although permitted Courlanders, only had a license to engage in handicrafts and were working at something else.

Even though Stolypin, the Minister of the Interior, ordered the police to cease the expulsions, they continued to occur as long as the czarist regime ruled Russia. The most brutal and vicious mass expulsion came at the beginning of World War I when the army needed a scapegoat for its losses and claimed that the Jews sympathized with the Germans. The expulsions came on May 14–15, 1915, during Shavuot. All the Jews—both legal as well as illegal—were given 24 hours to leave. The only Jews spared were those living east of Bauske and about 10,000 from Grobin, Hasenpoth and Libau, areas that already were occupied by the German army.

Those expelled were shoved into railroad cars and shipped to various districts in Ekaterinoslav and Poltava, as well as to Adimer and Veroneze in the Russian interior. The

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Jews were permitted to bring only clothing and food. Anything of any value—work tools, valuables and merchandise—had to be left behind, as did all communal possessions. Some Jews died in the railway cars; some had to go long distances on foot trying to carry their small children. Some became ill from various diseases while others had nervous breakdowns. In the end, about 40,000 Courland Jews were expelled; the few who remained suffered greatly at the hands of the Russian Army.

From the time that Russia annexed Courland, the Jews demonstrated a marked tendency to move to the cities from the estates in the country. In 1797, only 20 percent of the Jews lived in cities, but by 1897, 67 percent resided in cities. Concomitant with the shift to the cities was a flowering of commerce and culture, which drew even more Jews into the city; city directories show many Jewish property owners.

Despite the obstacles, the Jews of Courland and Lipland achieved a high degree of civil rights when compared to other places within the czarist Russian empire. Most spoke German, with some Yiddish.

Latgale Jews. Because of its great distance from the large urban centers of Poland and Lithuania, Jews were not particularly drawn to settle in Latgale (also called Inflantia). A mass movement of Jews began only in the second half of the 17th century, pushed by the destruction of the Jewish communities in the south. Those who came engaged in inn-keeping, tax farming, and wine making—the same thing

Jews did in other areas already described. Most settled in small villages and estates. In the 18th century, large numbers of traders, craftsmen and other Jews began to move to the population centers of Dvinsk, Kraslava and Kreitzaburg (also known as Krustapils). According to a census taken for tax purposes in 1766, only about 3,000 Jews (not counting infants) lived in the area.

Latgale was included in the Pale of Settlement when Russia took over in 1772. It soon became crowded with Jews and suffered from the same maladies as other areas of the Pale, overcrowding and difficulty eking out a living.

Latgale must be looked upon differently from Courland and Lipland. Its Jews were more connected to the eastern area of present-day Belarus, and in religious practices, to Lithuania.

In Courland especially, Hasidism made no inroads and its Jews were more relaxed about religion. The Jews of Latgale on the other hand were more deeply rooted in strict religious practice. The language of the Jews of Latgale, both at home and in society, was Yiddish.

In Courland, where the majority of Jews spoke Yiddish, as late as a century after Russian annexation, a full 30 percent still considered German to be their mother tongue. In the 19th and 20th centuries, growing numbers of Courlanders and Liplanders were university educated, especially at Tartu University in Dorpat, Estonia. Jews from Latgale had no such opportunity and should be considered as fully integrated into Russian Jewry.

Examples of Movement from Lithuania into Latvia

The following examples of the author's research in Latvia demonstrate the frequent movement of Jews from Lithuania.

• Of 285 marriages recorded in Sassmacken, Courland, between 1860 and 1905, 69 males and 36 females are recorded as coming from Lithuania; place of origin is not specified in every case so the numbers may be even greater.

• In Sassmacken, divorce records for 12 couples, between 1862 to 1888, include 3 individuals from Lithuania.

• In Bauske, Courland ,between 1854–1901, more than half of the individuals involved in divorces were from Lithuania.

• Slightly fewer than 50 percent of the individuals on the Riga list of Jewish residents for the years 1885–86 are noted as having come from Lithuania.

Most of the movement from one country to another, at least from the mid-19th century, was in a northwesterly direction. Jews moved from Lithuania to Latvia. Thus, if no traces of a family from Kovno guberniya can be found, look for them in Courland and the rest of Latvia.

The fate of the area's Jews ultimately was sealed when approximately 98,000 Jews were murdered by the Nazis and their Latvian collaborators in World War II, ending the constant struggle of the Jews to succeed and prosper in the area that became Latvia. To this day, Latvia has not recovered economically from their loss, and it remains an economic backwater in the European community.

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