

Yearbook of International Religious Demography 2014

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What Made Jews a Demographic Avant-Garde in Modern Europe?

*Jana Vobecká*¹

Introduction

Although ‘avant-garde’ is not a term often used in demography, it precisely evokes the behavior of populations who were among the first to adopt a reproduction model that subsequently became nearly universal around the globe, in the process called ‘demographic transition’. The demographic transition is usually defined as the time when the fertility rate is declining in a sustained manner, accompanied or even preceded by a mortality decline. Jews in Bohemia (currently part of the Czech Republic) were the forerunners of the demographic transition in Europe and this paper brings the main evidence and arguments for that claim. It derives from a detailed analysis of aggregate demographic data of Jews and gentiles in Bohemia between the mid-eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries that is presented in detail in the author’s recently published book, *Demographic Avant-Garde: Jews in Bohemia between the Enlightenment and the Shoah* (Vobecká 2013). This paper firstly presents the key findings on trends in fertility, mortality and migration, as well as change in size and structure of the Jewish population in Bohemia. Second, it highlights the evidence of the early demographic transition among Jews in in Bohemia and debates the potential influence of cultural, social, and political factors on early transition trends. It concludes with a discussion of the factors that might be necessary for the demographic transition to be accomplished and highlight why Jews as a religious group were particularly likely to become the forerunners of this transition.

Demographers, sociologists, economists, and historians are still debating today what mechanisms preceded and triggered sustained fertility decline and to what extent these mechanisms are universal. The arguments can be classified roughly in two categories: ‘adjustment to innovation’ and ‘attitudinal evolution’. Adjustment to innovation hypotheses think of fertility control primarily as a forced adaptation to changes in the economic and social environment, that is, in external, out-of-household stimuli diffusion. By contrast, attitudinal evolution hypotheses stress the factors that make parity-specific limitation normatively acceptable (Carlsson 1966). Both types of explanations note that the transition has forerunners and followers. For the forerunners the mix of socio-economic

1 The author acknowledges the support from KAICIID Dialogue Centre and from the Institute of Sociology, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic research grant RVO: 68378025.

and normative conditions motivating reproductive behavior changes earlier than it does for others. As a result, the causes of the demographic transition are at once of a social, economic, cultural, and normative nature (Kirk 1996). Numerous comparative studies have shown that the fertility transition occurred under strikingly diverse socio-economic conditions (Knodel and van de Walle 1979; Coale and Watkins 1986). Cultural determinants of transition are even harder to identify and the possible cultural explanation is not easy to articulate. In this paper, this 'black box' generally labeled 'cultural determinants' is opened and speaks about concrete turning points that might have been instrumental in shaping Jewish attitudes and reproductive behavior.²

Jews between Tradition, Reforms, and Gentile Interventions

Over the centuries, Jews have existed as permanent strangers in the Christian majority in Europe (Slezkine 2004). This was primarily caused by their specific religion and culture but further reinforced and reproduced by the numerous restrictions imposed on Jews. Jewish communities in Europe were self-reproducing but not self-sufficient. The strict Jewish within-community reproduction was extremely sensitive to the conditions set up by the surrounding gentile majority. Jewish distinctiveness from the early Middle Ages until modernity is a result of the perpetual interactions between legal restrictions and the inherent cultural tradition of Jews. Jewish demographic behavior reflects these interactions.

Bohemian Jews shared the general fate of Jews in pre-modern Europe, albeit with some particular qualifications. The most important specific features were firstly the undisrupted Jewish settlement in Bohemia from the tenth century until World War II. Jews were never effectively banned from Bohemia, unlike in some other countries such as Britain, Spain, and Austria. Secondly, in at least the last three hundred years, Bohemia did not witness large waves of immigration of Jews from abroad, unlike many Western European countries and the United States that experienced significant waves of Jewish immigration and establishment of modern Jewish communities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is the physical and cultural continuity of the Jewish population in Bohemia that makes it an ideal case for studying demographic developments over time. Third, a specific feature of Jews in Bohemia was their predominantly rural settlement until the mid-nineteenth century. An exception to this was a populous Jewish community of Prague, a center of Jewish spiritual and economic elites.

In Bohemia, the traditional Jewish lifestyle and organization of its community proceeded without intervention from the gentile world for centuries. Jewish activities were only regulated when they came to interaction with Christians or their businesses. But this Jewish intra-community independence started to be limited since the eighteenth

2 The arguments in this article are based on the conclusion of the author's book (Vobecká 2013).

century. In 1726 the Habsburg ruler Charles VI imposed limitations on the legally allowed number of newly formed Jewish families in Bohemia under the Familiants Law; in 1780s Joseph II intervened in Jewish communal self-government and education introducing an obligatory secular basic education for Jewish boys and girls. These intrusions forced Jews to adjust and eventually become more open to gentile culture. The real turning point in the life of Jews in the whole Central European Habsburg monarchy (including Bohemia) was the revolution of 1848, ported by the un-satisfaction of the growing urban bourgeoisie with the old absolutistic system of governance, serfdom, and sclerotic power of estates. As a part of the revolution, equal civic rights were granted to all inhabitants of the Austrian monarchy and all restrictions against Jews were lifted. Thus, Jews also acquired civil rights equal to gentiles and could freely move, dispose of property, and interact with gentiles. Special Jewish taxes were banned and the Familiants Law was abolished. By that time Jews, more so than most gentiles, were ready to flourish economically and rise up socially through the majority society. Many Jews boasted good language skills, literacy, networks, and a positive professional bias toward rare-goods trading or becoming merchants. This resulted in rapid urbanization of the Jewish population, an intense spatial mobility within and outside the country, fast professional mobility (especially in business and trade), and high participation levels in higher education, both as students and teachers. The reflection of these events can be traced upon Jewish population development.

Population Trends of Jews in Bohemia

Between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, the Jewish population in Bohemia witnessed its fastest-ever population growth and it tripled in size (Figure 5.1).³ This growth occurred despite the legal restrictions imposed by the Familiants Law. Until the mid-nineteenth century, Jewish population growth was faster than that of gentiles, a result of higher marriage incidence and lower mortality rates.

On the other hand, the estimates of the crude birth rate (CBR) indicate that Jewish birth rates were lower than those of gentiles.⁴ The estimated CBR declined steadily for

3 The analytical observations and trend descriptions presented in this paper are based on collection and analysis of the aggregate data mainly issued from officially published sources such as vital statistics and population censuses published between 1754 and 1940. Some analysis rests on the author's estimates of trends based on the incomplete data and estimates of vital statistics published by Heřman (n.d.).

4 The CBR estimate is calculated as follows: The point estimate for 1785 is based on the natural increase rate of the total population and the Jewish crude death rate of 1785. The data estimate for the other points in time between 1785 and 1851 is an interpolation based on the computation of compound annual growth rate. The estimates cannot be based on the crude birth rates of Jews for the years after 1785 any further because those were under-registered between 1786 and 1851. The CBR Estimate in Figure 1 is a general trend of steady fertility decline conditioned upon allowing the total Jewish population growth that was

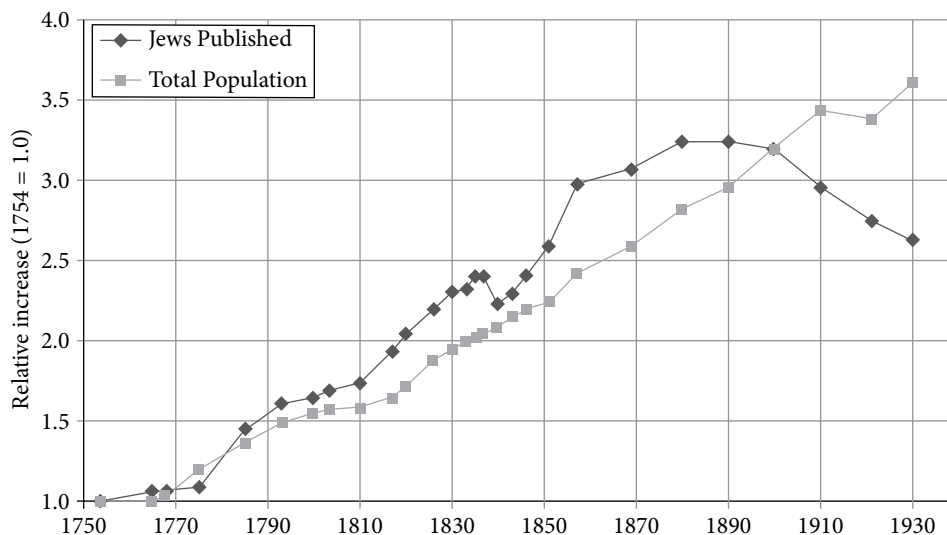


FIGURE 5.1 *Relative population increase of Jewish and total population in Bohemia, 1754–1930*

SOURCE: VOBECKÁ, 2013

about a hundred years, from about 36 per thousand in 1780 to 27 per thousand in 1880. Until the 1850s this fertility decline allowed for fast population growth, as the fertility decrease was accompanied by a proportionate decrease in crude death rates. After 1850, however, fertility decline exceeded mortality decline and the pace of natural increase slowed down. After 1880, the crude birth rate started falling steeply, reaching 12 per thousand in 1913. The size of the Jewish population was already shrinking from 1890 onwards, as population was lost through negative net migration and, and after 1904, by natural decrease. In the 1920s and 1930s Jewish fertility decreased still further. This decrease accelerated between the wars mainly due to religious disaffiliation of children born in mixed marriages. It can be assumed that more than half of these children were not registered as members of the Jewish religion (Vobecká 2013). Since the 1930s mixed Jewish marriages accounted for more than 40% of all marriages involving at least one Jewish partner. Religious conversions remained rare among Bohemian Jews and they did not significantly affect Jewish population decline. Jewish CBR declined under 20 per thousand already in 1890 and the demographic transition was accomplished before the end of nineteenth century. Between the world wars, the Jewish population in Bohemia was

observed. This trend is a crude assumption but closer to reality than the one derived from the registered data. The estimated crude birth rate (CBR) in 1851 equals the CBR in that year and is calculated from the number of births in 1851 published in the *Tafeln* and the estimated total Jewish population. The estimate of the total Jewish population was calculated as the annual average compound growth rate between 1793 and 1857 (the years for which there exists reliable data).

ageing, had a negative natural increase (already since 1904), had a contracting age structure, high heterogamous marriage rates, and a life expectancy at birth about seven years longer than the total population.

For understanding how, when, and why the Jewish population in Bohemia became a demographic avant-garde, a cohort perspective on the demographic changes is suitable. This perspective puts the reproduction of Jews in Bohemia into a context of social, economic, legal and political change that with no doubt have at least indirect impact on demographic behavior. Like religiosity, reproductive attitudes are formed during a person's teenage years and in early adulthood (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988), although they are not immune to contemporary socio-economic or other changes (Schellekens and van Poppel 2012). To some extent the attitudes and norms toward fertility and reproduction is a generational issue. The generations of Jews born in the 1740s and 1750s were still very strongly embedded in the traditional culture. They grew up in a still relatively closed traditional community, and for the most part could not write or speak German and were literate only in Hebrew. The generation of their children born in the 1780s and 1790s was already very different. A significant number of them received secular education as well as a traditional religious education and could speak and write in German as well as Hebrew. Those from wealthy families were likely to have private teachers not only for religious education, but also for languages, music, and literature (Niedhammer 2013). Some members of this cohort were already attending Prague Polytechnics or Prague University or studied abroad. While some of them continued to observe closely the Jewish traditions, many others became more relaxed. The generations born in the first decades of the nineteenth century were even more embedded in the gentile culture and society. These generations largely adopted for themselves and their children values and aspirations quite distinct from the traditional Jewish culture and lifestyle. Their ideals were no longer linked only to traditional religious values, but were also likely to be attached to successful careers in the gentile world, civic freedoms, and aspirations for a new Jewish identity within the German or Czech ethnic community.

The events of 1848 brought Jews civic freedom, but were also accompanied by an outburst of anti-Semitism and a growing animosity between more and more assertive Czech nationalists and the ruling German ethnic group. Despite this atmosphere, Jews took advantage of their newly acquired civil rights and legal equality to participate in the dynamic economic growth of industry, trade, and business. In the scope of two to three generations, they left the rural agrarian areas, the center of gravity of Jewish settlement before 1848, and moved to Prague and other dynamic industrial places in the country such as North Bohemia and Pilsen. Many went to Vienna, and by the end of the nineteenth century many others were migrating overseas. The generation behind the first waves of migration to areas of urban and economic growth was probably those Jews born in the 1830s. The transition to postponed and non-universal marriage started most likely with the generations born in the *1830s and 1840s*. From an accelerating decrease of the crude birth rate (Figure 5.2) and from the age structure by marital status from 1890 it can be deduced that the fertility of most of the *1850s generation* of Jewish women was already

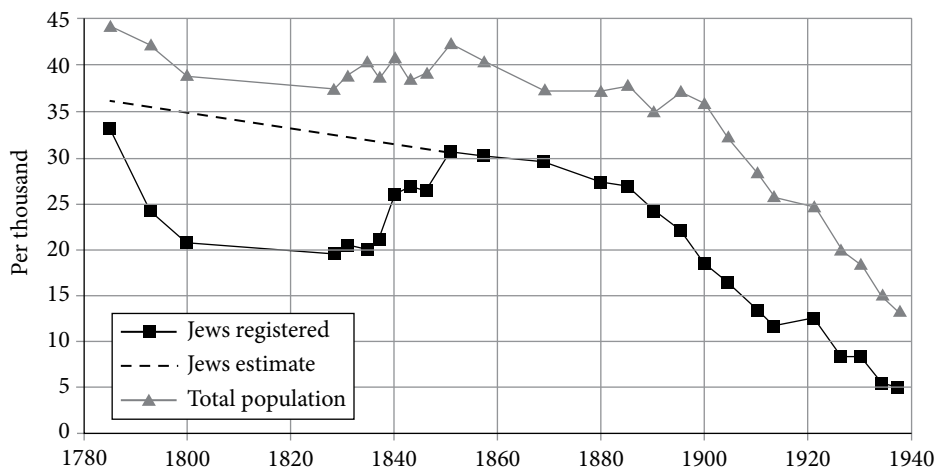


FIGURE 5.2 *Crude birth rate, Jews and the total population in Bohemia, registered and estimated values, 1785–1937*

SOURCE: VOBECKÁ, 2013

being limited, most likely in all three possible ways: a later start to reproduction, longer spacing between babies, and earlier stopping of reproduction.

Forerunners of the Demographic Transition

Both Jewish mortality and fertility levels were already lower than the total population by the time of the earliest available data (the 1780s). Both mortality and fertility continued declining after the 1780s (Figure 2). Since it is unclear when and from what level fertility and mortality began to decrease before the 1780s, it is difficult to confidently define the starting point of the Jewish demographic transition in Bohemia. Thinking about the timing of the demographic transition less schematically, the importance of changes in culture and individual values that imply an acceptance of conscious fertility limitation stands out.⁵ These are changes that Lesthaeghe and Vanderhoef (2001) define as a ‘readiness, willingness, and ability’ to embark on the demographic transition. In this model, ‘readiness’ refers to the calculation of the costs and benefits of fertility limitation, ‘willingness’ to normative (religious, ethical) values that are not opposed to the conscious limitation of reproduction, and ‘ability’ to have knowledge of effective contraceptive methods.

5 The main aspects contributing to the changes in reproductive values and attitudes at that time among Jews in Bohemia were the spread of secular education and of the ideas of the *Haskalah* by the end of the eighteenth century. *Haskalah* and its proponents advocated a more rational conception of Jewish beliefs in the spirit of the Enlightenment and gentile philosophy of the late eighteenth century. They supported greater Jewish openness to the gentile language, culture, and secular subjects within Jewish education.

Bohemian Jews appear to have already had the ‘willingness’ and ‘ability’ to embark on demographic transition by the end of the eighteenth century, as evidenced by a crude birth rate roughly one-fifth below that of the total population, despite the almost universal incidence of marriage. ‘Readiness’ is the most sensitive factor of external conditions. Fertility limitation can only be rational if having many children is perceived as a less valuable asset; that is, when the direction and magnitude of intergenerational wealth in most cases flows from the parents to the children (Caldwell 1976). Wealth is meant here in a broader sense than just monetary, and also encompasses social status and prestige. Jews traditionally invested more in their offspring than Christians (Vobecká 2013; Derosas 2003). The relatively greater Jewish readiness to nurture their children carefully in their childhood, to send them to schools, or to have more efficient institutions for orphans reflected a long-standing tradition embedded in religious rules, and it was one cause behind the lower mortality rates of Jewish children (Bachi 1976; Schmelz 1971). This cultural determination could then naturally be amplified when the external socio-economic conditions made desires for individual achievement more realistic for Jews. For example, a small Jewish tradesman in Bohemia in 1795 may have desired further business expansion in the main industrial area, capital accumulation, better housing, and better education for his children. But these were probably doomed to remain unfulfilled dreams because he could neither move outside nor do his business outside the ghetto, and he probably could not afford to pay for higher education for his children because of the high taxes on Jews. Under these circumstances, a reproductive strategy of strongly limiting the number of children would not have made much difference in his chances to pursue his dream. The external stimulus, the ‘empowerment’ was missing, even though the ‘readiness’ was there. Readiness awaiting empowerment is the key explanation for the fast and early onset of the demographic transition among Jews. Jews in Bohemia were already ready, willing, and able to begin limiting fertility by the first third of the nineteenth century, but empowerment through equal civil rights and equal opportunities to succeed socially and economically gave meaning to fertility limitation.

Conditions for the Demographic Transition and the Role of Religion

So what made Jews the (demographic) *avant-garde*? One must look back to their enduring status as strangers, the middlemen who provided the kinds of services for the local population that required mobility, occupational flexibility, and literacy. Jews were service nomads and ‘modernity was about everyone becoming a service nomad’ (Slezkine 2004, 30). Jewish readiness for modernity was truly *avant-garde*, an asset that helped them to achieve unprecedented and rapid upward social mobility. But was that enough for them to become the demographic *avant-garde*? Certainly not; other factors inherent to Jewish culture contributed to making the Jews the forerunners of the demographic transition, among them the culturally embedded emphasis on responsibility for one’s own life, the wellbeing of the family, the health of children, and the emphasis on developing human

capital. This had a positive impact on Jewish mortality, which was an important prerequisite for the onset of fertility transition. The cultural readiness of Bohemian Jews for the demographic transition depended on two elements of value and attitude change: a willingness to become a part of gentile society and the relaxation of religious tradition and practice that enabled greater individualism and the acceptance of limiting family size, also on moral grounds. In Bohemia, these factors were all present by the turn of the nineteenth century. The settlement structure of the Jews was also conducive to the spread of ideas necessary for the onset of the demographic transition. Prague, the one big Jewish center in the country and home to most wealthy Jews and intellectual elites, was where the cultural and religious orientation of the Jewish community in all of Bohemia was defined. This monopoly on values facilitated the rapid diffusion of new ideas to the rural peripheries, mediated to some extent by the curricula and teachers at secular Jewish schools. Jewish communities in rural Bohemia had small populations and were scattered across the land. Unlike in Moravia, Galicia, and other Eastern European Jewish communities, their small settlements did not have the capacity to develop a cultural or ideational alternative to compete with Prague. Urbanization was thus an enabling factor for cultural innovation and the onset of the demographic transition in Bohemia. But while the rabbis, teachers, and wealthiest members of the Prague community initiated the cultural changes that then spread to rural communities, the fact that the majority of Bohemian Jewry before the mid-nineteenth century lived in rural areas did have a positive impact on their overall mortality, through a more favorable environment (fresh water, better hygienic and epidemiological conditions) than the congested and polluted Prague ghetto (Vobecká 2013). Bohemian Jews were thus ready for the swift demographic transition by the mid-nineteenth century. The 1848 revolution resulted in new civic freedoms for Jews, which produced the empowering impulse. The generations born in the 1830s and 1840s were the first Jewish adolescents and adults who started their careers and studies in a legally unrestricted environment. They were the generations that truly jumpstarted the acceleration of the demographic transition.

Although the specific sequencing of the factors discussed in this paper is unlikely to be precisely reproduced in other contexts and at other times, the causal prerequisites for the demographic transition seem to be clear. First, culture needs to be open to what lies beyond the local community and to individualism, and has to be free of the monopolistic influence of rigid religious orthodoxy. Secondly, this cultural readiness needs to be empowered, such as through a shift toward universal secular education and a legal framework that assures the equality of all citizens and the freedom to migrate, and by socioeconomic conditions that allow individuals to fulfill their career aspirations. These two factors make up the causal constellation that explains why one particular group in time, Bohemian Jews, became one of the historical forerunners of the demographic transition in Europe. These may well be the factors necessary for the completion of demographic transition where it is still under way today.

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