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### TRADITIONAL JEWISH EDUCATION, HEDERS AND MELAMEDS BEYOND THE PALE OF SETTLEMENT

*This article examines the issue of Jewish education in the Russian Empire during the long nineteenth century. An important aspect is the study of how such education functioned in cities beyond the Pale of Settlement. Education in the Heder was a formative experience for most Jewish intellectuals. Stereotypes and perceptions of Heders were shaped by these personal stories. Traditional Jewish education was not limited to Heders, but other levels were inaccessible to the minority. Unlike the neighbouring Austrian Empire, the Romanov state was for a long time unable to offer the Jewish population an alternative, primarily regarding elementary education. The situation began to change only in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the establishment of the education system. The early 1880s, a turning point in historiography, raises questions about the functioning of the educational system in cities beyond the Pale, particularly in the Kharkiv province. The problems of this period were also characteristic of previous decades. Jewish communities that needed to open Heders and invite Melameds faced bureaucratic delays, legal technicalities, and the reluctance of various government officials to take responsibility. Nevertheless, the demands of the Jewish population, whose numbers were constantly growing, often overcame these obstacles.*

**Keywords:** Jews, Education, Heder, Melamed, Russian Empire, Pale of the settlement, Kharkiv.

Артем Харченко (Харків)

### ЄВРЕЙСЬКА ТРАДИЦІЙНА ОСВІТА, ХЕДЕРИ І МЕЛАМЕДИ ПОЗА СМУГОЮ ОСІЛОСТІ

*У статті досліджено питання початкової єврейської освіти в Російській імперії в довгому дев'ятнадцятому столітті, в якій основним осередком було навчання в хедері. Домашнє навчання було альтернативою доступною для заможних родин, і важливою опцією для навчання жінок. Важливим аспектом у дослідженні є аналіз функціонування початкової освіти в містах поза Смугою осілості. Навчання в хедері було життєвим досвідом більшості єврейських інтелектуалів, зокрема дослідників у єврейських студіях, від їх становлення. Стереотипи і уявлення про хедери великою мірою були сформовані на підставі цих персональних історій. У нових дослідженнях з проблематики хедери поступилися увагою альтернативним видам освіти, жіночій освіті. В той же час, персональний досвід, через дослідження біографій інтелектуалів та публічних персон залишається актуальним. Традиційна єврейська освіта не обмежувалася хедерами, але інші рівні були доступні меншості. Бейт-мідраш та ешива зберігали свою значущість, але в очах нової єврейської еліти все більше поступалися університетському диплому. На відміну від сусідньої Австрійської імперії держава Романових довгий час не могла запропонувати єврейському населенню альтернативу, в першу чергу стосовно початкового навчання. Ситуація почала змінюватися лише у другій половині XIX ст., зі створення системи освіти. Переламний в історіографії період початку 1880-х рр. ставить питання про функціонування системи освіти у містах поза Смугою осілості, зокрема Харківській губернії. В той же час, всі проблеми цього періоду були характерні і для попередніх десятиліть. Єврейські громади які мали потребу у відкритті хедерів і запрошеннях меламедів стикалися з бюрократичними зволіканнями, юридичною казуїстикою і небажанням того чи іншого представника влади брати на себе відповідальність. Тим не менш, вимоги єврейського населення, чисельність якого постійно зростала, нерідко долали ці перешкоди.*

**Ключові слова:** євреї, освіта, хедер, меламед, Російська імперія, Смуга осілості, Харків.

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\* к.і.н., доцент Харківського національного університету мистецтв імені І.П. Котляревського, докторант Дніпровського національного університету імені Олеся Гончара

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PhD, Associate Professor, Kharkiv I.P. Kotlyarevsky National University of Arts, doctoral student,  
Oles Honchar Dnipro National University  
[orcid.org/0000-0002-3314-5084](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3314-5084)  
[artem.kharchenko@num.kh.ua](mailto:artem.kharchenko@num.kh.ua)

**Formulation of the Research Problem.** Since the nineteenth century, the issue of education for the Jewish population was one of the important for observers<sup>1</sup>. Both conservatives and reformers had their own views on this matter. While the traditional education system remained unchanged, the state sought to create an alternative one. Ultimately, in the second half of the century, the state succeeded in establishing a system of education that was more widespread than ever before. Although the Orthodox Church was present in it through the teaching and participation of priests in ceremonies and through the holding of religious services on the grounds of educational institutions.

There was a widespread stereotype among the Jewish population of Eastern Europe that literacy rates among them were higher than among their non-Jewish neighbours<sup>2</sup>. This statement is relative, since the average literacy rate among Jews was indeed higher than among the Orthodox, predominantly rural population. At the same time, this rate among Jews was nearly half that of Catholics, Mennonites, Lutherans, and Karaites, and was significantly lower than among Anglicans. It should be noted that all groups with such high literacy rates were small and were more urbanized than the Jewish population. In the sources, only those who practiced Judaism were classified as Jews, and it also have been overlooked that Jews could speak languages other than Hebrew or Yiddish. In this case, the strong emphasis on education within the Jewish population coincides with gaps in the sources, prompting a close examination of the historiographical tradition regarding this issue.

**Analysis of recent research.** Research on educational issues requires attention to many additional factors that have had a significant impact; however, given the purpose of this article, they will be addressed briefly. The issue of Jewish education was likely not in the middle for scholars of Jewish studies from the origin, but it was present in many works. The sphere of education had already attracted the attention of scholars in the nineteenth century, and the focus was primarily on so-called traditional education. For the majority of Jewish intellectuals in the late Russian Empire, it was precisely traditional education that served as their first steps, preceding their studies in gymnasiums or universities<sup>3</sup>. In their reflections on the Jewish education system, they sought out the advantages, using these to explain their subsequent successes. There were also those who criticized it, viewed it as part of an archaic tradition<sup>4</sup>.

Several historiographical fields intersect in the study of education, particularly primary school. In addition to studying education as a process and a system that encompasses all participants in this activity, should be paid attention to the history of childhood and adolescence. The history of childhood itself is important, because education was primarily aimed at children, and a minority were able to continue their studies into adolescence<sup>5</sup>. Gender history is also of importance, without polarity between the male and female, but to shed light on the specific characteristics of how men and women were raised<sup>6</sup>. First and foremost, this concerns the construction of gender roles in traditional Jewish and, more broadly, imperial society throughout the nineteenth century. What was considered masculine or feminine? What were the expectations regarding their fulfilment of social roles? What behavioural standards did their social environment impose on them? An important focus is on family relationships, both between partners — husband and wife, but also between parents and children<sup>7</sup>. Intellectual history and the biographies of persons who were active in the public sphere are also related<sup>8</sup>. The sphere of legislation, which influenced the Jewish population and its education, especially in the case of Jews beyond the Pale of Settlement, is of great significance<sup>9</sup>. Researchers in the field of Jewish studies may choose one of the previous aspects or few of them, but these issues can also be examined within the framework of broader studies of the social or political history of Jews in the Russian Empire<sup>10</sup>.

Shaul Stampfer's book has become a classic in the field of Jewish education, literacy, and, above all, women's education<sup>11</sup>. The author draws on a long tradition of research in the field, proposing new hypotheses and raising new questions for researchers. Steven Zipperstein devoted his article specifically to the topic of heders (elementary educational framework among Jewish population in the Russian Empire) and attempts to transform them within the empire<sup>12</sup>. Zipperstein notes that the phenomenon of Heders persisted at least until the interwar period of the twentieth century, and indeed, the Soviet system could not allow private educational initiatives to operate. Nevertheless, recollections from that time, from outside Soviet Ukraine, indicate that heders played a role prior to the events of the Holocaust and the deaths of millions of Ashkenazim Jews<sup>13</sup>.

In his comprehensive study of the «world of the shtetl», Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern devotes couple chapters to issues the Jewish family and the diverse history of reading of the Jewish population in the Ukrainian lands<sup>14</sup>. Books by Benjamin Nathans, Jeffrey Veidlinger, and Svetlana Natkovich shed light on how, at the initiative of the empire but with the participation of various actors, alternative educational institutions for Jews were established; how universities became a window of opportunity for Jews; and how new and shifting identities were formed within these processes and spaces<sup>15</sup>. David Fishman wonders how, amid such

diversity, where there was a demand for both innovation and the preservation of traditions, a modern Yiddish culture emerged, one that encompasses literature and theatre and had the potential for further development<sup>16</sup>.

In the publications on the history of childhood in the late Russian Empire, Ekaterina Oleshkevich not only sheds light on some aspects but also proposes new methodological approaches<sup>17</sup>. In 2023, Oleshkevich completed her dissertation at Bar-Ilan University on the topic «History, Culture, and the Experience of Jewish Childhood in Late Imperial Russia». Her autobiographical approach is followed by Oksana Drach and Oksana Babak, who focus on gymnasium education for Jewish girls at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries<sup>18</sup>. Anna Varanytsya addressed issues of tradition and education through the lens of the modernization of Jews in Western Ukrainian lands (Austrian Empire)<sup>19</sup>.

Beyond the topic, Victoria Khiterer offers a new perspective in her article on Jewish education following the collapse of the empire in the newly established Ukrainian People's Republic<sup>20</sup>. The same period is the focus of researcher Anna Umanska, who is working on her dissertation «Kultur-Lige as the Phenomenon of Jewish Cultural and Educational Activities in Kyiv in the Period of 1918–1930»<sup>21</sup>.

The most scholars now focus on the alternative institutions the empire offered to Jews in an attempt to acculturate them, as well as on the new system of gymnasiums and other institutions that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. Traditional education and elementary education are becoming less and less of a focus of interest. Evidently, the answer lies in a complex of factors, such as insufficient coverage of women's education in earlier periods, or a lack of sources describing heder compared to universities.

**Formulation of the aim and objectives.** The article examines the issue of primary education for the Jewish subjects of the empire in the Ukrainian lands. The elementary school was a focal point for both traditionalists and reformers at a time when the general literacy rate of the population was quite low. Another important aspect of this issue is the existence of such education in cities beyond the Pale of Settlement, particularly in the Kharkiv province.

**Presenting main material.** The traditional educational system in Ashkenazi Jewish communities (the definition of the Jewish population who spoke Yiddish in its various dialects in Central and Eastern Europe) took shape at the turn of the early modern and modern period and persisted in its general form until the mid-twentieth century, when the standardization of educational systems in the region and assimilationist trends, and later the events of Second World War and the Shoah (The Holocaust), shattered the traditional Jewish world. Significant changes also took place at the beginning of the long nineteenth century, when the followers of Haskala (the Jewish Enlightenment, an ideological and social movement that developed in Eastern Europe) invented a new tradition that emphasized respect for education and the definition of gender roles. By the end of the century, the ideas of Zionism and left-wing parties were no less influential<sup>22</sup>.

A key feature of Jewish education was its bilingual nature, in which both Yiddish, the native language of Jewish men and women, and Hebrew, the language of the Torah and Talmud (the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and a central focus of the education of Jewish males), were used simultaneously in various ways. Ashkenazi Jews at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continued to use Yiddish as their primary language, relying on German or Polish for communication with the authorities, and Ukrainian or Belarusian for economic activities. In the case of the Jewish population in Ukrainian lands, which in the first half of the nineteenth century was most concentrated on the former Commonwealth lands, in small towns where Jews often made up more than half the population, Yiddish was the main language, while Polish, Ukrainian, or Russian existed as a tool for communication with neighbours — in economic or other matters, or in relations with the authorities.

Traditional education had several key characteristics: first, it was an education that introduced religious norms, thereby continuing family-based rules on a basic set of prayers, daily rituals and behaviours, and dietary practices; second, education was directed primarily at men, and under any circumstances, the curriculum available to women was less extensive and demanding; third, most of those who received an education completed it at a relatively early age, and only a minority were able to continue their studies into adolescence or later in life. In traditional Jewish society, the educational system reinforced social stratification and promoted social selection at every stage of the educational process<sup>23</sup>.

The first, and for most Jews, the final stage of education was a heder. Almost all men, and some women attended a heder. The heder had several levels, ranging from simply reading sacred texts and commentaries by renowned rabbis, in Aramaic (one of the foundational languages in Jewish literature) and Hebrew; later reading the Torah with commentaries; to the highest level — the reading of the Talmud, which form specific methods of thinking and textual analysis.

This education was standardized, but it was not formalized, did not involve grading, and did not lead to a diploma. The duration of the program was also not specified. Typically, children entered the first stage of heder at ages 4–6 and completed the Talmudic level around age 13, the bar mitzvah age (one of the stages of the Jewish life cycle for male with coming-of-age ritual). The end of schooling at this age depended not on religious requirements but on the family's expectations regarding the child's entry into the workforce.

Girls' education was less standardized. There were separate heders for them, where the curriculum included reciting prayers, arithmetic, and writing in Yiddish and sometimes in Russian. To a certain extent, girls' education was more practical than boys' education. A woman educated in a heder could write in several languages, while men might not possess this skill at all. Wealthy families organized lessons that lasted about an hour a day for their daughters at home. There were also commons heders, but girls left them once they reached the level of studying the Talmud. During this period, the most popular book for women was the Yiddish-language «Tz-Enah Ur'Enah» (צאײַנה וואַײַנה), which was called the «Women's Humash» (the Pentateuch)<sup>24</sup>. At the turn of the century, this collection was a text that came under sharp criticism<sup>25</sup>. Women recognized the value of men's education and knowledge; there was no turning back, and moreover, there was a stereotype about women's lack of education<sup>26</sup>.

The teacher in the Heder, the melamed, played a significant role. Education activities could be held in his own home, but also in a space rented for this purpose. In cities beyond the Pale of Settlement, renting such a space was the norm. Supporting the functioning of the Heder was the responsibility of the entire community, funded by cost from the «Korobochny Sbor» (a special tax on Jewish food and clothing, the income from this tax has been in part devoted to the maintenance of Jewish educational institutions). From the mid- nineteenth century, the «Korobochny Sbor» was issued by the authorities for the communities in the Pale provinces. However, its existence was not foreseen in the communities beyond the Pale. Nevertheless, despite the authorities' stance, the communities continued to collect funds to support its institutions, including educational ones. For instance, one of the court cases in Kharkiv attests to the existence of the box tax and the allocation of a certain amount from it for the activity of a heder<sup>27</sup>.

Parents' social status and financial resources also played a role. Wealthier parents chose a better teacher whose abilities were well-known. At the same time, those with fewer means hired a less expensive one. A better and more expensive teacher could limit the number of children in a heder in order to give each child more attention<sup>28</sup>.

Melameds had no special training and determined the level of cheder they offered themselves. The empire over time tried to unify their training. Thus, melameds had to teach the disciplines specified in special certificates received from the management of rabbinic seminaries — state institutions for Jews, according to the programs of the Ministry of National Enlightenment, and from 1893 they were forced to renew their certificates every year<sup>29</sup>.

For researchers in Jewish studies, the biographical method is quite common, and in modern texts it has acquired a high level of criticism. Researchers note that the authors of ego-documents often presented their own childhood experience as general. The memoirs of Jewish intellectuals, public figures, laid the foundations of the perception of Jewish education, in particular heders. Thus, from the memoirs of lawyer Henrikh Sliozberg we learn about how a child's education took place in Poltava at the turn of the 1860s and 1870s<sup>30</sup>. It all started at the age of five and reading «humesh», at seven the study of the Talmud began. The study lasted from nine in the morning until lunch. Shabbat was also held with a melamed, when the students read the Mishnah (the first written collection of the Jewish oral traditions that are known as the Oral Torah). Every week, the older men in the family checked their progress in studies, and accompanied this with physical punishment.

Beatings during his studies in the heder are also a constant in his memories. To learn Russian, a gymnasium student or other person could be invited to the heder, who would apparently charge a reasonable fee. A potential option was to study in a yeshiva (the traditional institution training young men to study formative texts and traditions), to obtain the Semikhah (the traditional term for rabbinic ordination in Judaism) — status of a rabbi, at the age of 14–15. Sliozberg gives the example of his own uncle, who was studying in a yeshiva at that age, and his father himself was a melamed. An alternative was to study in a «Russian school» (a state educational institution), as was the case with the famous writer Sholem Aleichem, who began attending it after Jewish elementary school.

Jewish intellectuals were concerned about the issue of reforming education in the heders. Thus, Alexander Zederbaum in «Berdychiv Secrets» wrote about the youth who, despite the influence of the Hasidim (a movement of religious revival with a distinctive social profile), to whom the author obviously had an unfriendly attitude, learned Russian and German<sup>31</sup>. He described the local Talmud-Torah — a charitable educational institution, which was a two-story building on a dirty street. The Jewish community maintained

this institution, with 9 melameds and 190 students. Education was reduced to mechanical memorization of texts. Physical punishment of children was part of the educational process.

Zederbaum proposed a plan for changing the education system, which was based on the creation of two or three primary heders per street in the city, and a total of 15 institutions for Berdychiv. Each heder was to accept 100 students, divided into two departments. Children from the age of six were to learn the alphabet using a new method. The next level would be offered by ten schools, which were to prepare for secular and religious life. The most talented could continue their studies in a yeshiva, a progymnasium, or a craft school. Zederbaum calculated the budgets of such schools, including the cost of premises and teachers, heating and lighting. The poor could not pay, while others would have to pay a fee ranging from 12 rubles for primary school to 20 rubles for higher grades. The heders were to be supervised by a committee of religious and secular circles.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Jewish Colonization Association (a philanthropic organization, founded in 1891 in London, in 1892 its branch was opened in Saint Petersburg, headed by Horace Günzburg) conducted a study that formed the basis of the «Collection of Materials on the Economic Situation of Jews in Russia»<sup>32</sup>. The study covered many focuses, from economic activity, which was the dominant topic, to charity and education. These areas were part of the general description, but provide rich material, given the scope of the committee's work, which involved about one thousand correspondents to carry out statistical work. To verify the collected data on the situation in education, the committee's analysts used the 1897 census data, reports of school district administrations, and materials from the Society for the Promotion of Culture among the Jews of Russia (OPE — an educational and civic association devoted to the acculturation of Jews in the Pale of Settlement).

Among the identified macro-regions of the empire, which were mainly the provinces of the Pale, the Ukrainian lands were also described. However, the research also covered the «internal provinces». According to it, in 1894, in the Russian Empire, in more than 13 thousand heders, which was probably half of the real number, more than 190 thousand boys and a little more than 10 thousand girls studied. This applied to both male and female heders. Women studied for about four years, men for about nine. Regional characteristics were significant. Thus, in Odessa, the number of women studying was three times higher than in Central Poland. The difference between large cities and the province was also noticeable. In Berdychiv or Vilnius, there were less than 1% of illiterate people, and in Horodyshe in the Kiev province, almost half of them were illiterate<sup>33</sup>.

Those who could afford it continued their studies in bet midrashim (a voluntary, public institute for Torah learning). These were free spaces, without an examination system and diplomas, where students enjoyed the freedom to attend and independently chose the style of text analysis. There was no fee, and the community provided additional financial support to students. In particular, in the form of «day/esn teg», when one of the families could offer the student a home-cooked meal. For the family, such an action was an asset of social capital.

The highest level of Jewish education was yeshiva. The support of large yeshivas was recognized as a common Jewish cause. At the same time, the position of rabbi was not the pinnacle of aspirations in the career of young Talmudists. The ideal combination of wealth and education was the wealthy merchant who could afford to work a little and devote more time to Talmudic studies<sup>34</sup>.

Each of the denominations of Judaism in the long nineteenth century fought for its influence in the field of education. These or other communities became supporters of the Maskilim (supporters of Haskalah), Misnagdim (common name for rabbinical opponents of the Hasidic movement), or Hasidim. The Maskilim criticized community leaders, rabbis, for their lack of support in the issue of educational reform. At the same time, their views could coincide with the imperial bureaucracy, which saw acculturation as the solution to the «Jewish question». In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the influence of socialists and Zionists was increasingly noticeable.

At the end of the period, social changes in the Jewish population affected the perception of traditional education. For the new Jewish elite — wealthy merchants, successful lawyers and doctors, a son-in-law with a university degree or knowledge of European languages was more attractive than a yeshiva graduate<sup>35</sup>. The stratification of the Jewish population was growing, and the new elite was wealthier than the old, and the demographic explosion led to the pauperization of the Jewish community.

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