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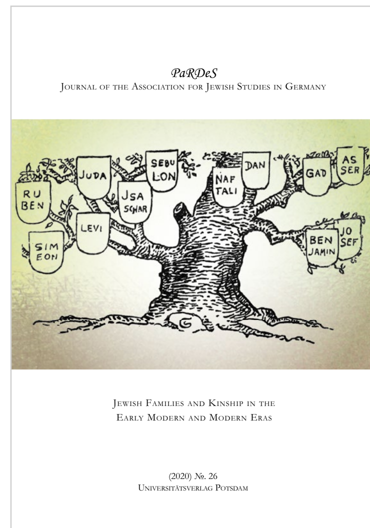

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The History of Jewish Families in Early Modern and Modern Times: A Discipline in Search of Its Roots and Roles

by Mirjam Thulin and Markus Krah

1. Jewish Family History in Search of Its Place and Function

"Genealogy was before history." This statement, attributed to Johann Christoph Gatterer (1727–1799), author of the *Handbuch der neuesten Genealogie und Heraldik* (Handbook of the Newest Genealogy and Heraldry), can make us think about the relationship between two key approaches to Jewish family research.[1]

Ancestry and lineage have always played an important role in history and, to varying degrees, in historiography. The cover of this year's PaRDeS issue, therefore, reflects the significance of families and the long tradition of tracing one's descent, ideally all the way back to Biblical times. It is, however, the logo used on the cover of the journal *Jüdische Familienforschung* (Jewish Family Research), which was published in Germany from 1924 to 1938. In the modern order of academic disciplines, family research is a part or, to put it more technically, an auxiliary discipline of history. It is essential for our understanding and representation of crucial historical processes, not least for the understanding of big historical narratives and their reflection in the small social unit of the family. Moreover, the title of Gatterer's book points to another defining feature of genealogy then and today: Genealogy stands at the intersection of many disciplines, in the humanities as well as natural sciences, and between the two.

1 Johann Christoph Gatterer, *Handbuch der neuesten Genealogie und Heraldik worinnen aller jetzigen Europäischen Potentaten Stammtafeln und Wappen enthalten sind* (Nuremberg: Verlag der Kaspischen Handlung, 1762). This work is digitized online: https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_AqpAAAAAcAAJ/page/n5/mode/2up, accessed June 9, 2020.

Reflecting the changes in the order of knowledge and the structure and relations of academic disciplines, genealogy has been shaped by vastly different forces over time. For Jewish family research in particular, the middle of the 20th century marked a decisive turning point in this regard: Before the Shoah and the Second World War, the natural sciences, biology in particular, had a great impact on the discourses in family research, which was increasingly called "genealogy." Today, in contrast, genealogy takes its name more literally and inspires amateur and professional researchers to examine the genes of family descendants and try to trace the origins of certain families. This research has taken on particular meaning as a search for identity drawing on roots, from which Jewish families were cut off in the Shoah. Such quests have the potential to touch larger audiences than the scholarly community, combining the intimacy of an individual fate with the large canvas of world history. Edmund de Waal's bestselling memoir of the Ephrussi family *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2010) may be the best-known example of popular family history. It uses the unlikely material object of Japanese miniature sculptures to retrieve a previously unknown story that spans the breadth of Europe from Odessa to Paris and five generations across the rupture of the Shoah.

It is in this complex constellation of different epistemologies and interests, various analytical methods and genres of texts, and against the background of not just the history of the academic discipline but of history at large that Jewish family history has to position itself and decide whether genealogy still comes before history.

2. What Is Jewish About Family Research? Sources, Origins, Motivations

Jews have been interested in family research and genealogy for many of the same reasons that non-Jews are, and used many of the same sources and methods. For general data on families, researchers use archival sources from the city, county and state. Besides dates of birth and death, the documents from the registry offices mostly note religious or confessional affiliations. Other "classical" sources of family history, e.g. for research on royal and aristocratic dynasties, have included official documents, family documents such as letters, notes, and diaries, as well as objects such as jewelry, books and their bindings, images and other art objects, and properties including their décor

and furnishings. Obituaries, eulogies, and epitaphs can provide additional information on individuals that cannot be found elsewhere.

Yet, the nature of the topic of Jewish families, its place in history and the religious tradition, and Jewish history itself have made for distinctive approaches that use sources specific to the Jewish family and are driven by interests shaped by the development of Jewish history.

Sources

Among the sources specific to Jewish family research are records of Jewish communities (*pinkassim*), communal *yiskor* books, prayer books (*siddurim*), and other liturgical books printed for Jewish celebrations and sometimes inscribed by individual (and successive) owners. Moreover, records of betrothal terms and marriage contracts (*ketubbot*) but also the responsa literature, imprimaturs by rabbis (*haskamot*), and yet other documents may serve as a valuable source in Jewish family historical research. These sources are used by amateur researchers, professionals, and scholars of different disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, religious studies, economics, medicine, biology, and others. The range of approaches reflects the particular role of the family in Jewish history and life.

The biological transmission of Jewishness through the mother and the traditional role of the family in the transmission of Jewish practices, cultural sensibilities, and identities have saddled the Jewish family with heavy responsibilities and, in turn, elevated its role. This has attracted particular interest from scholars and amateur researchers alike, who bring to the topic their own academic and personal interests, shaped by their individual contexts.

Institutional Origins

The early history of the field's institutional formation can show some of these developments. Its founders are almost unknown today, as they were part of a larger process of knowledge transformation in the 19th and 20th centuries. The beginnings of academic Jewish family research and history lie around 1900, when the academic study of Judaism, mainly in the shape of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, spread across the Jewish scholarly world. Scholars began to explore local and family histories, collected old and new material, and engaged previous assumptions that required critical revision. In 1913, a first step was

taken to give the new research an institutional framework, in the form of the first issue of the journal *Archiv für jüdische Familienforschung, Kunstgeschichte und Museumswesen* (Archive for Jewish Family Research, Art History, and Museology). In its title, the journal presented new fields in Jewish history that had recently developed; family history claimed first rank. The journal was edited by Max Grunwald (1871–1953), a rabbi in Hamburg and Vienna and author of several books on local Jewish history, family history, and folklore. Sadly, its ambitious plans never came to fruition. The timing of the new research agenda and the journal could hardly have been worse, on the eve of the First World War. The *Archiv* was given up during the war and never re-established afterwards.

This, however, did not mean the end of Jewish scholarly interest in family, kinship, and genealogy. A second attempt to institutionalize the topic came in the mid-1920s, driven by the Berlin-based physician Arthur Czellitzer (1871–1943). In her essay in the opening section of this issue, MIRJAM THULIN reconstructs his life and work. Czellitzer and his peers understood Jewish family research not only as a means to strengthen Jewish identity, but also as an academic enterprise, and intended to establish the topic in the academic realm. Therefore, Czellitzer made every effort to harmonize the traditional Jewish consciousness with the terms of an academically-oriented presentation of knowledge, in order to be taken seriously by the social scientists, historians, and biologists of the time. To this end, the *Gesellschaft für jüdische Familienforschung* (Society for Jewish Family Research) was established in 1924 – the second founding of an institution devoted to Jewish family research. The *Society* was mainly a network of natural scientists with a Jewish background, friends and proponents of Czellitzer's ideas, and Jewish institutions working historically on the Jewish past, such as the *Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar* (Jewish Theological Seminary) in Breslau and local Jewish communities and their archivists. It promoted a type of Jewish family history and genealogy that was shaped by the historical-medical discourse of the time.

Motivations

As many scholars attempted to harmonize and combine historical disciplines with the natural sciences approach, many medical experts and professionals became interested in what may be called "historical genealogy." BERND

GAUSEMEIER places Czellitzer within the eugenic discourse of the time, which Czellitzer linked to traditional Jewish norms and contemporary Jewish problems. This discourse included often ideologically motivated discussions of the "race" and "biology" of "the Jews," and was related to the issue of their nationhood, as many conflicting programs sought to address the "Jewish question:" from anti-Semitic approaches to Jews as a racially defined group to Jewish counter-narratives building on Jewish genealogical and family research, from scholars using biological insights to guide public health policies to Zionists advocating for clear lines of separation for their own agenda.[2] Most of the Jewish family researchers in the 1920s and 1930s were close to Zionist thinking, with Czellitzer and his companions apparently being exceptions. They brought their own needs and interests to family research, expressed by Max Grunwald and his peers: the perceived loss of the sense of family and the endangered self-assurance among Jews. These concerns mirror the larger-scale impulses of Jewish family history in Europe prior to the Shoah: balancing the urge for social and legal acceptance with the preservation of Jewish distinctiveness. Despite the ruptures that have fundamentally re-shaped Jewish life since Czellitzer's time, the discipline he founded has come into its own again, as FRANK MECKLENBURG's article shows, albeit under different circumstances and in the service of different needs today.

The persecution and eventual murder of most European Jews meant a watershed for Jewish family research, while interest in the topic persisted and took on new importance. At a scholarly level, many earlier approaches to Jews as a group were finally discredited (but, like notions of "race" lived on in new disguises). The extinction of much of European Jewry then had two tragically paradoxical effects: It meant the loss of family members as well as of memories, documents, data, and images, while at the same time this loss heightened the need for and interest in salvaging family histories, memories, and artefacts as a way to honor the dead and support the living.

[2] One of the earliest dicussions of the contexts and tendencies in (German) Jewry is: Joachim Doron, "Rassenbewusstsein und naturwissenschaftliches Denken im deutschen Zionismus während der Wilhelminischen Ära," *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* 9 (1980): 389–427. More recently, see: Veronika Lipphardt, *Biologie der Juden: Jüdische Wissenschaftler über "Rasse" und Vererbung 1900–1935* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2008). On the Zionist perspectives in the contemporary thinking and debates, see Stefan Vogt, *Subalterne Positionierungen. Der deutsche Zionismus im Feld des Nationalismus in Deutschland 1890–1933* (Goettingen: Wallstein, 2016), 113–143.

These impulses led to a new spike in the interest in family research, albeit with a delay by several decades. For many Jewish families, it was possible only fifty or sixty years after the Shoah to gain access to (their) Jewish family research and history: In the final decades of the past century, existing archives opened up to researchers and new archives were created; travel to previously inaccessible *loci* of Jewish and family history became easier and more affordable, and new technology offered greater opportunities of exchange among interested laypeople and experts across distances. Today, of course, the internet offers new forms of access to archives and family research platforms, as well as virtual communities of family researchers, often organized in associations, for which the *International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies* (IAJGS) forms an umbrella.[3] With regard to the biological dimensions of family history, new methods like genetic analysis became available to trace back family lineages and kinship.[4]

3. European-Jewish Family Life and Its Histories

Based on these sources and methods, and driven by such interests, historians and other researchers have over the past century produced a body of scholarship on the Jewish family that defies a passage-long summary. The following necessarily selective reduction of these findings can illustrate the central role of the family and family relations in the daily lives of a majority of Jews, especially as parental control and religious norms touched such central aspects of human life as marriage and sexual behavior.[5]

[3] *International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies* (IAJGS) website, https://www.iajgs.org, accessed June 9, 2020.

[4] On the dimensions and meaning for historical research, see Keith Waloo, Alondra Nelson, and Catherine Lee, eds., *Genetics and the Unsettled Past: The Collision of DNA, Race, and History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

[5] The following works are crucial when engaging with the history of Jewish families: Jacob Katz, "Family, Kinship, and Marriage among Ashkenazim in the Sixteenth to the Eigtheenth Centuries," *Journal of Jewish Sociology* 1 (1959): 4–22; Jacob Katz, "Marriage and Sexual Behavior at the End of the Middle Ages," Zion 10 (1945): 21–54 (Hebrew). Moreover, see the edited volumes: Steven M. Cohen and Paula E. Hyman, eds., *The Jewish Family: Myths and Realities* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986); David Kraemer, ed., *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Peter Y. Medding, *Coping with Life and Death: Jewish Families in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Sabine Hödl and Martha Keil, eds., *Die jüdische Familie in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin: Philo, 1999). Furthermore, see: Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Shaul Stampfer, "Was the Tra-

In early modern Europe, matchmaking was under parental control, meaning mostly under the control of the father as head of the family. The first important step when marrying off children was to settle the marriage and inheritance contract. This contract constituted the basis for the life of the newlyweds, and served as a financial start toward their independence from the parents. While it was clear that the sons would inherit certain parts of the parents'/father's wealth, the provision for the daughters was long a challenge for Jewish families. Starting in the late Middle Ages, therefore, setting aside half of a male heir's portion *(shetar hazi [helek] zachar*) for the daughters became a common practice. In the parents' last will and testament, it functioned like an inheritance and was meant to protect their daughters from poverty.[6] This instrument made it possible for daughters to receive a part of the family assets as dowry. However, the sum of the dowries depended on the father's written will, and his creditors had to be satisfied before the dowry was given to an unmarried daughter upon the death of her parent.

After their wedding, many Jewish couples lived with their parents or in-laws for one year or longer (*kest*). This form of multi-generational living was for a long time a necessity, providing a livelihood for all family members – including the newlyweds or married-in members. Beyond necessity, this living arrangement was or became a custom, and was also a constraint imposed from outside the Jewish community, as it forced parents to support large numbers of people in their family and household. Moreover, the necessity of multi-generational living was important for providing every member with a residence status before the non-Jewish authorities. Often, marriage and residence restrictions forced the postponement of establishing new, independent

ditional East European Jewish Family in the Recent Past Patriarchal?," in: *Families, Rabbis and Education. Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe*, ed. Shaul Stampfer (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010), 121–141; Jonathan Boyarin, *Jewish Families* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press, 2013). Eventually, lexicon articles define the subject, mostly in various ways and with different emphasis, see, for example: Louis Isaac Rabinowitz and Anson Rainey, "Family," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica.* 2nd ed., eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), vol. 6, 690–695; ChaeRan Freeze, "Family," in *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed June 9, 2020, https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Family.

6 Jay R. Berkovitz, *Law's Dominion: Jewish Community, Religion, and Family in Early Modern Metz* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2020), 276–279. On Jewish marriage contracts, e. g. in early modern Italy, see recently: Howard Tzvi Adelman, *Women and Jewish Marriage Negotiations in Early Modern Italy: For Love and Money* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

households. The households of Jewish court factors or wealthy Jewish families in early modern Europe, therefore, not only included their own children and their children's families, but also took in relatives and servants with their respective families as well, offering them their protection and privileges.

Gender roles – another aspect on which family research touches – were clear in the families and communities. Traditionally, women were occupied with childcare and the household. They often also helped the family financially through selling goods in the marketplace or by taking jobs as cooks, servants, or wet nurses. In scholarly families, women were sometimes the sole breadwinners.

With the onset of the modern era – in Jacob Katz's controversial view, a radical rupture for "traditional society" – key aspects of Jewish family life, kinship relations, order of inheritance, and lifestyle were fundamentally transformed. Legislation and social change either put the seal on internal processes of acculturation and assimilation, or marked the beginning of fundamental changes for and within the Jewish family. Moreover, legal regulations, such as with regard to the recognition of marital status, created across Europe completely new and different preconditions for marriage and family life. While, for instance, the civil marriage was absent in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, and later in tsarist Russia, the "Ehepatent" (marriage edict) made a civil marriage binding in the Habsburg Empire already by 1783.

Usually, urban Jewish communities were at the forefront of the changes, and were oriented toward the lifestyle of bourgeois domesticity of West European families. Most urban centers created social and cultural space for Jews to live private and reserved lives; religious observance was not as decisive as it had been before. Moreover, both the Jewish and non-Jewish views of marriage across social barriers changed more rapidly as well, opening up the choice of marriage partners. Also, while conversion had previously been the only way for a Jew to marry a non-Jewish (typically Christian) partner, interreligious marriages were increasingly accepted both socially and legally in cities. For example, Hungary officially permitted them in 1895. Farther to the east in Europe, modernization processes at uneven speeds changed the lives of Jewish communities and families in different ways.

Sephardic families and lifestyles were (and still are) as diverse as families and their histories in the Ashkenazi context. The large Sephardic and Converso communities in Amsterdam, Hamburg, and Vienna are basically well

researched, including some of their most remarkable family histories. In addition to the port and big cities, Sephardic Jews settled in Hungary and Transylvania under Turkish rule until the late 17th century. Most of them returned to the Ottoman Empire after the Turks abandoned these regions. After the treaty of Adrianople (1829), however, there was a great influx of Sephardim into the Romanian lands and Bucharest in particular. Still, at the risk of simplification and "Ashkenormativity," it could be said that the general statements and assumptions regarding early modern traditional Ashkenazic (family) life likewise apply to the Sephardic context.

Wherever Sephardic families settled in the modern era, old and new restrictions on the respective Jewish population, reactionary laws and mechanisms as well as political and social reforms implemented by the surrounding authorities affected Jewish family life similar to the Ashkenazim. A combination of internal change and exogenous factors shaped family lives and fundamentally changed their day-to-day practical dimensions in the modern era. Among these many factors, the (gradual) introduction of secular education, modern ideologies, and internal reform or *maskilic* movements, along with changing social, economic, and political realities, transformed the lives of Sephardic families in Europe and beyond in significant ways.

In the modern era, both Ashkenazic and Sephardic general attitudes and expectations toward the traditional Jewish family changed increasingly, but the processes were hardly uniform. In socially and economically less integrated settlements of Sephardim, the transformation and secularization of the Jewish family was usually slower and more reluctant than in urban centers. Beginning in the 19th century, the experience of childhood and youth changed and was strengthened through more formal education and interaction with other youths in new settings. Increasing support for the education of girls changed gender dynamics, whereas the ideologization of Jewish life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries touched the families in different ways. Youth groups promoting Zionist, Communist, Orthodox, and many other ideologies could result in intra-familial conflicts.

The period between the two World Wars saw the further acceleration of various factors that were shaping the transformation of the Jewish family. Key among them were demographic changes, such as declining Jewish birth rates and declining mortality, but also a rise in the age at marriage. The political situation of Jews as a minority group in new nation states added to the

transformation of the Jewish family until the very lives of most European Jewish families were cut off in the Shoah.

4. The (Jewish) Family: A Contested Term

Today's family research, as reflected in the articles in this issue, takes place in a range of scholarly disciplines, which, in turn, use a broad range of definitions of their subject. Early and traditional family research that was connected to aristocratic and royal family research usually concentrated on the male line and male heirs of the family. New research emphasizes the inclusiveness of the term "family." Czellitzer was among those who extended the term and promoted an approach that considered all children and their children as well, and thus included basically all kinship connections.

Today, this wide definition of family is being used in many disciplines, such as history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, religious studies, economics, medicine, biology, and others. Anthropology and ethnography in particular have inspired historical research, as they engage with questions and definitions of family and kinship. These disciplines argue that blood ties (consanguinity) are not crucial in every culture. Instead, "fictive kinship" comes into play, which involves non-biological family and family members by marriage (affinal), as well as different "cultures of relatedness."[7] These approaches emphasize the social and elective relationships as substantial for and within families. In a similar way, the sociological concept of "chosen kin" or "voluntary kin" refers to the extended family and includes kinships that are mostly based on religious relations and rituals like godparenthood or any other social and economic close relationship.

These discussions can make scholars of the Jewish family reconsider their understanding of the subject, but do not obviate the particular questions they ask. Moreover, the openness of today's definition of family and kinship may provide greater definitional space and additional theoretical references for

[7] For the term "cultures of relatedness", see Janet Carsten, ed., *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For Carsten, the Malaysian model was the basis to argue for the wider term of "relatedness" for describing family and kinship relations. For an overview of the various terminologies, see Margaret Nelson, "Fictive Kin, Families We Choose, and Voluntary Kin: What Does the Discourse Tell Us?," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 5 (2013): 259–281; recently: Margaret Nelson, *Like Family: Narratives of Fictive Kinship* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

analyzing Jewish families. The anthropological and sociological approaches in particular are helpful in this regard, as they do not exclude members of the extended family (for example, in the early modern era, the families of the servants of wealthy Jewish court factor families), the families of the female lines, or the close and not necessarily consanguineal family and kinship networks.

The role of family networks remains central to the evolving agenda of Jewish family research, as reflected in this issue. MÁTÉ TAMÁS looks at *Moses Lackenbacher & Compagnie* in the 19th-century Habsburg empire, and how its family and business network evolved into a multi-religious network of kinship. The article by LISA GERLACH shows how such relations remained central to business practices in the 19th century, as in letters of recommendation that passed down social capital from fathers to sons. The analysis of the family backgrounds and school careers of teachers at Jewish schools in 19th-century Frankfurt (Main) by VIKTORIA GRÄBE and MICHAEL WERMKE points to questions of religious modernization, as family relations seem to have played greater roles in modern Orthodox than in liberal contexts.

Two other contributions address the question of parent-children relationships within Jewish families, especially the role and representation of Jewish mothers. ANNEGRET OEHME explores how a Yiddish Arthurian romance tweaks its 12th-century model in order to re-evaluate female figures in the Jewish family as *matres familias* for early modern audiences. The analysis of Jewish autobiographies in the Russian empire by EKATERINA OLESHKEVICH traces the shift from pre-modern to modern Jewish understandings of parenthood.

A century after its institutional beginnings, Jewish family research has come a long way, adapting its methods, choice of topics, and the questions it asks to the profoundly transformed interests of its academic practitioners and their broader audiences. Like its historiography, the Jewish family itself remains in search of its roots and roles.