

Jana Vobecká: *Demographic Avant-Garde: Jews in Bohemia Between the Enlightenment and the Shoah*

Budapest and New York 2013: Central European University Press, 250 pp.

This book describes the demographic transition that took place among Bohemian Jewry in the modern period and explains its timing and dynamics. Jana Vobecká succeeds in this task—but she does much more than that. This book is a very important contribution not only to demographic history and historical sociology, but also to the study of the history of Jews in Bohemia. What is no less remarkable is that despite the many technical issues she raises and deals with, the book is also very readable. No less important is the great care Vobecká takes in structuring and organising the book. The data sources are described in boxes, so they can easily be located when necessary or easily skipped by readers who are interested in the discussion. Each chapter ends with a short and clear summary, which is useful for readers who are mainly interested in the conclusions. In short, this book can be read in many ways depending on the needs of the reader.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is basically an introduction built out of three chapters. Chapter one introduces the concept of demographic transition and of a ‘demographic avant-garde’. The term ‘demographic transition’ refers to the well-known shift of most modern human societies from patterns of high mortality and high fertility to patterns of low mortality and low fertility. According to Vobecká, Bohemian Jews were ‘forerunners of the demographic transition’. They ‘developed patterns of decreasing mortality and fertility’ long before this shift took place among the gentile majority in Bohemia and, for that matter, before this shift took place elsewhere in Europe. In her opinion this justifies referring to them as a demographically *avant-garde* population in

Europe. This is what makes the study of this community particularly significant. The second chapter outlines the history of Bohemian Jewry and the third chapter describes the rich data sources that exist for the study of the demography of Bohemian Jewry.

The second part of the book, which is the bulk of the book, deals with different aspects of population changes, trends and transitions from the mid-eighteenth century to the Holocaust (Shoah). It deals, in turns, with population growth and its geographical spread and concentration, population structure, marital patterns fertility, mortality and, finally, issues such as migration and religious disaffiliation and their impact on population size and patterns. The final part of the book deals with the languages Jews spoke, ethnic identity, the educational attainments of Jews and, finally, issues of social status, professional structure and economic activity. The clearly written conclusion summarises the author’s main findings. The index is well thought out (which is not always the case in academic books) and includes both names and concepts.

The conclusion raises a basic question: Why were the Bohemian Jews the *forerunners* of the demographic transition? Vobecká raises the important point, also discussed earlier, that a key factor in this was the successful introduction of Jewish secular education and the gradual acceptance of Haskalah (Enlightenment) ideas. This led to a transformation of Jewish tradition and culture towards more open, individualistic, and later more secular values and attitudes. This was followed by industrialisation in the Habsburg Monarchy and especially in Bohemia and legal changes in the wake of the 1848 revolution that ‘resulted in rapid urbanization of the Jewish population, an intense spatial mobility within and outside the country, fast professional mobility... and high participation levels in higher education’ (p. 157). Vobecká notes that it was

this period in which the Jewish population also witnessed its fastest-ever population growth. This was followed by a 'transition to postponed and non universal marriage [that] started most likely with the generations born in the 1830's and 1840's ...[and] the fertility of most of the 1840's generation of Jewish women was already being limited...' (p. 159). Vobecká attributes this change to the combination of changing values and attitudes together with adjustments to socio-economic stimuli. In other words, the new legal status of the Jews and the new economic realities had an impact on demographic behaviour only because they occurred together with the spread of secular education and the adoption of Enlightenment ideas. This cultural willingness to limit reproduction and the ability to do so contributed to a readiness to embark on the demographic transition. This made economic sense and, combined with what Vobecká terms a 'relatively greater Jewish readiness to nurture their children carefully', it contributed to the demographic transition occurring early among Jews. In addition, the settlement structure gave one urban centre (Prague) a dominant cultural role. In short, it was a combination of cultural readiness, empowerment through education and legal equality, and 'socio-economic conditions that allow individuals to fulfill their career aspirations' (p. 163).

Vobecká provides a mass of quantitative data in the book in the form of tables and statistical appendices. It is difficult to imagine any future research on Jewish society in Bohemia that does not make intensive use of these materials and it is doubtful that there is much more to add in this area. However, one of the best indications of first class research is that it raises as many questions as it answers—and this fine study is no exception.

The changes in the social, political and economic environment in Bohemia in the 19th century are, I think, reasonably well known. However, the changes in the Jew-

ish community are perhaps less well known—despite the works of Pekny, Kieval, Iggers, Wlaschek, Cohen and others. These changes and their impact call for more attention. This is particularly the case with regard to the relatively quick acceptance of secular education and of Enlightenment ideas on the part of Bohemian Jews—a fact that cannot be taken for granted. Vobecká correctly points out in Chapter 11 that in other parts of the Habsburg Monarchy the concept of *Normalschulen* did not catch on. This suggests that there were some unique characteristics already in the first half of the 19th century that influenced the decision whether to send children to *Normalschulen* or not. In the same chapter she states that 'the secularization of Jewish schooling gradually altered Jewish values and aspirations and Jews became more open to gentile society' (p. 144). However, given the distinctive patterns of Bohemia, one should consider the possibility that Jewish values (whatever they may be) may have changed in Bohemia by the beginning of the 19th century and Bohemian Jews may have already been more open to gentile society, and it was this change that influenced the relatively positive response to the new school programme. Otherwise, Jews could have attempted to avoid sending children, especially boys, to the new type of school. This response would not have been totally unique. There were similar positive responses in some Jewish communities in other German-speaking regions in Europe. This would prompt the obvious question—why the openness? It might not be out of place to note that the rabbis of Prague from 1755 to 1793 and from 1840 to 1867 were both imports from Poland. This suggests that there was a decline in the tradition of Talmudic study in Bohemia even before the formal closure of *yeshivas*. It might also have something to do with 'liberal' or open trends in Christianity. The warm personal relations between the rabbi of Prague in the first part

of the 18th century, r. Eleazar Fleckeles, and the censor, Karl Fischer, are clear indications that there were significant changes in both religious communities. The political thought of the period also very likely played a role. I also suspect that schools influence students when students are open to influence. While it is appealing to credit schooling with a major influence on society, it might well be the case that previous social integration in Prague may have paved the way for this openness—and the changes in Prague might be the product of a number of factors other than cultural ones.

Future researchers might also expand on some of the comparisons between Jews and non-Jews which appear in various places in the book. These are very important not only because of their descriptive value but also because they make it possible to see the characteristics that non-Jews saw in the Bohemian Jewish population. One case, which should illustrate the complexity of making comparisons, is in Chapter 11, which deals with education. Vobecká points out, absolutely correctly, that 'In the 1890s Jews were ten times more likely to study at a secondary school than their gentile peers' (p. 144). This, of course, was not a new phenomenon. However, given the fact that Jews had distinctive geographical and occupational statistics, one could compare education between Jews and *urban* non-Jewish populations and then compare Jews with urban non-Jews in middle-class occupations. I suspect that the differences would be much smaller. Jews (and all urban residents) were far more likely than the peasant masses to anticipate social and economic benefits from education for their children. Here, a series of comparisons could help pinpoint some of the differences between Jews and their immediate neighbours—if indeed there were any differences. For a peasant, there was less confidence that a child would be able to make good use of an education. However, a peas-

ant could be quite certain that if a child did receive a good education, he would certainly not maintain close relations with his uneducated peasant family. This was certainly not an incentive to encourage a child to stay in school instead of assisting his father in the field.

The wording of the conclusion to the book is encouraging, but cannot be taken for granted. It reads:

... 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: through a shift towards *universal secular education* and a *legal framework* that assures the equality of all citizens and the freedom to migrate and by *socio-economic conditions* that allow individuals to fulfill their career aspirations. These four factors make up the causal constellation that explains why... Bohemian Jews became one of the historical forerunners of the demographic transition in Europe. The same constellation of factors... is likely to drive future demographic transitions... in those societies that are still at the early stage of the transition, such as parts of the Middle East and most of Sub-Saharan Africa. (p. 163)

The not so hidden assumption here is that the four factors Vobecká focused on will, almost inevitably, appear in the Middle East and Africa. However, Islam may not develop in the same way that Christianity did and the political ethos of the Habsburg Empire may not spread as anticipated to Asia and Africa. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the same economic developments will take place. It is quite possible that a shift to a different demographic regime will take place in far more troubling ways in conditions of limited resources than it did among Bohemian Jews.

In short, *Demographic Avant-Garde: Jews in Bohemia Between the Enlightenment and*

the Shoah is an extremely stimulating contribution to demographic history and historical sociology. It illuminates a key demographic transition in an original and very well-documented manner and simultaneously redraws the history of Bohemian Jewry with a finely delineated description of the manifold changes it underwent. This book opens up many questions and should be the starting point for a number of future studies. The Central European University Press has moreover made this important monograph available to the scholarly public in a very attractive manner. Now the readers of this book must wait to see what Jana Vobecká's next contribution will be.

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Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik:
*Defeating Authoritarian Leaders
in Postcommunist Countries*

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Soon after the revolutions of 1989 and 1991, it seemed that the democratic future of the post-communist region was set. There were two groups of countries: the good consolidated democracies who were headed into and then joined the EU and the more authoritarian regimes who appeared to be on a road to nowhere. Then came a series of events that muddied this view. First, Slovakia in its 1998 elections rejected its strongman ruler, Vladimír Mečiar. Then, Croatia and Serbia overthrew their even more oppressive regimes in 2000. Georgia was next in line in 2003 with its Rose Revolution, to be followed by Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution in 2005. These so-called coloured revolutions—their causes and consequences—are at the heart of *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries*. The au-

thors, Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, are motivated by the problem of how to democratise hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes which puzzlingly have proved to be relatively stable despite being neither fully democratic nor fully authoritarian.

Their method is an in-depth analysis of the six cases just mentioned, mostly through over 200 interviews with key actors, and a small-N comparison of these cases with several other elections that did not yield democratic breakthroughs in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. The authors' explanation for the democratic successes is the opposition's use of what they call the 'electoral model'. This model is a set of tasks, in fact a 'to do' list, that the opposition needs to engage in when confronting a hybrid regime that allows them to contest elections. The elements of the model—the specific tasks on the 'to do' list—include the following:

- unifying the opposition,
- running an ambitious campaign,
- conducting voter registration and voter turnout drives,
- putting pressure on election commissions,
- getting civil society, youth movements, and the opposition to collaborate,
- using public opinion polls to shape strategy,
- conducting parallel vote tabulations and exit polls.

The oppositions which fulfilled most of these tasks were the ones who successfully beat authoritarian leaders in elections and forced them to leave office, while those who did not failed. While it might seem that these tasks were epiphenomenal, that they were in fact responses to weak or vulnerable regimes rather than independent causes, Bunce and Wolchik argue that they were not. In fact, these tactics worked even in hard-core regimes like Serbia and Kyrgyzstan where few expected them to succeed. Neither was it economic frailty that