

Demographic Avant-Garde

**Jews in Bohemia between
the Enlightenment and the Shoah**

Jana Vobecká



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*To my mother, Jitka,
and my father, Jan.*

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Preface

This book studies the unique demographic behavior of Jews in Bohemia, starting from a moment in history when industrialization in Central Europe was still far away in the future and when Jews were still living legally restricted lives in segregated ghettos. Very early on, from the eighteenth century onwards, Jews developed patterns of decreasing mortality and fertility not observed among the gentile majority in Bohemia; patterns which established them as a demographic *avant-garde* population in all of Europe. Industrialization and increasing earnings are the reasons most often cited by demographers aiming to explain the onset of demographic transitions in history, whereby populations shift from a pattern of high fertility and high mortality to one of consciously restricted fertility and low mortality. But in the case of the Jews in Bohemia, these explanatory factors are of little help—simply because Jews started their transition *decades before* industrialization. This book explains what made Jews in Bohemia true forerunners of the demographic transition and why this occurred when it did. It follows in detail Jewish population trends in Bohemia from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century and examines what made them distinct from the trends observed in the gentile community and among Jews in other lands.

To do so, this book focuses on the larger societal context of demographic change—the cultural, social, political, and economic environment. The peculiar position of Jews as permanent strangers throughout history, in Bohemia as elsewhere, was embedded in their religious and cultural tradition, and reinforced by the legal restrictions imposed by rulers on what occupations they could hold, where they could settle, and what rights they enjoyed. The Jews served as middlemen in the host societies, providing services and holding occupations that gentiles were unwilling or un-

able to do themselves. In Bohemia, then a small Central European land that was often a part of larger political entities, a Jewish community had existed for about a thousand years, with Prague as its cultural and economic center. Unlike in Britain, France, Spain, and Austria, Jews were never effectively banned from Bohemia. They never witnessed large waves of immigration of fellow Jews from other countries, the way Poland did in the Middle Ages, or Hungary, Austria, France, Britain, and many other Western European countries and the United States did in the nineteenth century. 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. During the period this book focuses on, Bohemia was a part of the Habsburg Monarchy, and in 1918, after the Monarchy's demise, it became a part of the Czechoslovak Republic. In 1938 and 1939, the Nazis occupied Bohemia, pre-war Czechoslovakia was dissolved, and Bohemia became a part of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia until the end of the war in 1945. During this period, between the Enlightenment and the Shoah, the Jewish community went through an extraordinary sequence of changes. This book provides an insight into the effect these changes had on Jewish demographic development.

The concept of a demographic avant-garde is central to this book. 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. Jews in Bohemia have never been studied thus far as the avant-garde of this demographic transition. While they share with the best-known forerunner of that transition, the population of France, the timing of a sustained decline in fertility, their mortality conditions were better than those in France. Other populations in Europe, such as the nobility, the urban bourgeoisie, or Jews in Italy or elsewhere, may have exhibited similar avant-garde tendencies to limit fertility early on, but the evidence is simply too sparse, the populations too small, or the time series too short to properly identify any of these groups as demographic forerunners. The theory of demographic transition, based on the assumption of an inevitable transition from high to low fertility and mortality regime at a certain stage of societal development, dominates our understanding of past and future population change in the world. Demographers, economists, and historians are still debating what the causes of the transition are and whether they are universal. I argue there is a core set of factors that must be present in order for the demographic transition to be completed in any given population, and I discuss these factors throughout the book.

The analysis of Bohemian Jews developed here goes beyond conventional demography studies in a number of ways. First, it covers a long time span—two hundred years, stretching from the mid-eighteenth century to the years just before World War II. This exceptionally long time span provides room to study every stage of the demographic transition. Most other studies of the demographic transition in Europe restrict themselves to the end of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century because of data limitations. But this period is simply too late for the demographic forerunners in Europe: by that time they had mostly completed their own demographic transition. Second, this book pays special attention to the wider societal and cultural context in which the demographic changes happened. These factors are sometimes neglected in demographic analysis, even though it is impossible to really explain many demographic processes without them. Third, this book is the first to map, analyze, and publish a complete set of data on the Jewish population in Bohemia, derived from official statistical publications from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century. The aggregated data presented here enable an analysis of the *entire* Jewish population in Bohemia over a long time span. The drawback is that the level of detail the analysis can go into depends heavily on the quality and structure of the published data. Most of the data used in the book were extracted directly from primary data sources deposited in the National Archives of the Czech Republic. Fourth, given the comparative nature of this analysis, the population development of Jews is continuously contrasted with the total population in Bohemia. Where data are available, comparisons with other Central European Jewry are also presented.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part provides an overview of the background knowledge necessary to understand population development and the context of Jewish population dynamics in Bohemia. Chapter 1 looks at past demographic change, introduces the concept of the demographic transition and the competing theories surrounding it, and reviews existing studies on forerunners of the demographic transition elsewhere. Chapter 2 focuses on the historical context and briefly describes the history of Jews in Bohemia. Chapter 3 presents the available data sources, and comments on their quality, completeness, and reliability.

The second part of the book is fully devoted to an analysis of the demographic structure and dynamics of the Jewish population in Bohemia, in comparison with gentiles and with Jewish populations in other countries. Chapters 4 through 9 analyze Jewish population growth and spatial distribution, the population structure (by age, sex, and marital

status), nuptiality and divorces, fertility, mortality, migration and religious disaffiliation, and acculturation.

The third part is devoted to the analysis of Jewish social and economic characteristics and their role in the country's economy. Chapters 10 to 12 set out to explain the specific position of Jews in gentile society and the impact that the post-1848 legal emancipation of Jews had not only on their professional structure but also on their culture, ethnic identity, schooling, and social status. Each analytical chapter in parts two and three is summed up in bullet-point conclusions so that the reader can easily familiarize him- or herself with the contents of the chapter. Numerous tables, figures, and appendices that illustrate the findings accompany the analyses, which can serve as data sources for other researchers' analyses.

The book is written by a demographer and is primarily about population development and demographic transition. But it does not exclusively address a professional demographic audience. Rather, it has been written in a style explicitly aimed at informed lay readers not necessarily trained in demography, but who have a keen interest in social history, the history of Central Europe, Jewish history, and modernization.

Acknowledgment

This book is the outcome of my interest in the history of Bohemia, the small land in the heart of Europe where I come from, and my interest as a demographer in the patterns and causes of human reproduction across time, space, and place. I first started studying the population development of the Jews in Bohemia in 2003 and returned to it several times while working on other sociological and demographic topics. This book would not have been possible without the support of a number of institutions and individuals to whom I would like to express my gratitude.

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