

Jewish trade in Belarus between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 20th centuries

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This article is devoted to the history of Jewish trade on the Belarusian territory from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries. It focuses on trade, industry, and commerce sectors dominated by Jews. The main directions, the most important features, distinctive traits, techniques, and methods applied in these sectors of the economy are discussed. The article presents relevant statistics and is based on numerous Belarusian, German, Polish and Russian sources.

The idea of Jewish dominance in Belarusian trade in the beginning of the 20th century dominated the public opinion of the Russian Empire. A famous Russian geographer and statistician, Pyotr P. Semyonov and an academician, Vladimir I. Lamsky were the general editors of a series *Rossiia. Polnoe geograficheskoe opisanie nashego Otechestva* (Russia. The Full geographical description of our Fatherland). Volume 9 which contains the following lines:

The occupations of Jews are very diverse. The main part of Belarus' industrial sector and trade is concentrated in their hands. Neither a Pole, nor a Belarusian demonstrates such a propensity to trade or craft professions. Thus, trade, industry, and handicraft are almost monopolized by the Jews. And this is the way it has been developing for several centuries, almost from the very beginning of their settlement in the North-Western territory. As a result, some Jews have enormous capital; the century-long traditions already brought by their migration to Belarus from other countries; they have developed a habit of accumulation and capital savings... Jews cannot be accused of prodigality, because parsimony and prudence constitute the main features of their character; finally, there are no drunkards among them. Thus, a Jew has all the features that contribute to the increase of his wealth.^[1]

In 1855, Mikhail Bez-Karnilovich, a Belarusian historian, local ethnographer and Major General of the Russian army, wrote about Belarusian Jews:

[they are a]dventurous, curious, perspicacious. From the first site, from the first phrase they will understand who they are dealing with. To reach their goal, they go in for all the possible means: they prostrate themselves, compliment, beg, bribe and thus very rarely fail in their endeavors. They calculate the gains of any business transaction in advance, and only then they undertake the task. The whole trade in Belarus is in their hands. With a small amount of cash and borrowed loans they make a tender: when they sustain losses, they lose both capital and pawns of their grantors... A landlord needs to sell or buy something? Or does he

need new craftsmen or suppliers? Jews will always find something for a suitable price, their services are paid by both sides. Jews have a deep knowledge of people's disposition, intentions and habits, and they know how to use their weaknesses...^[2]

One should agree with the opinion of the Belarusian historian Olga Sobolevskaya that if one wants to find a certain stereotype of a typical Jew (which is equally absurd as a search for a typical Belarusian or Pole), he could mostly likely be portrayed as a salesman. Available statistics do prove active involvement of the Jewish population in trade.

As the German historian Bernard Dov Weinryb argues, by the end of the 18th century the proportion of merchants among the Jews ranged from 25% to 30%, which is 13 times higher than among Christians.^[3] Moreover, almost all occupations of the Jews were directly or indirectly connected with trade.

Thus, virtually all significant sales or purchases took place with direct or indirect participation of the Jews. As an officer of the Russian General Staff Illarion Zelensky observed, "the Jews were in charge of trade, speculations and small local frauds." He further emphasized, "If you risk to handle without a Jewish mediator, you will definitely waste your profit and come off as a loser."^[4] At the same time he criticized the view of the negative role of "Jewish dominance" in the sphere of trade. Zelensky therefore underlined:

there is no reason to assert that the Jewish monopoly in commerce and crafts is an evil that impedes the development of commercial enterprise in the country. The reason for such a monopoly should rather be sought in the reluctance of the local population towards commerce, in its innate disposition toward agricultural industry, in the habits of the Christian and the Jewish population, in country's economic conditions, and finally in the historical course of events, which influenced the formation of the current social strata and population classes.^[5]

Jewish trade in Belarus at the end of the 18th – beginning of the 20th centuries has long been a subject of study. Certain aspects of this topic were analyzed in the works of the scholars from the Russian empire Kh. Korobkov, Ilya Orshansky, Andrei Subbotin, Yuli Hessen, Iosif Bikerman, Nikolai Gradovsky, Illarion Zelensky, Pavel Shpileuski, German historian Bernard Dov Weinryb, Polish historian Maurycy Horn, American historian John D. Klier, etc.^[6]

Olga Sobolevskaya can be regarded as one of the most prominent contemporary Belarusian historians, who consistently focuses on Jewish trade in Belarus at the end of 18th - the first half of the 19th centuries. This issues has also been addressed in her two monographs:

- Goncharov, Volodymyr and Olga Sobolevskaya. *Evrei Grodnenshchiny: zhizn do Katastrofy* (Jews of the Hrodna region: life before the Catastrophe) (Donetsk, Nord-Press, 2005);
- Sobolevskaya, Olga. *Povsednevnyaya zhizn evreev Belarusi v kontse XVIII – pervoy polovine XIX veka* (The daily life of the Belarusian Jews in the end of the 18th – first half of the 19th centuries) (Hrodna: HrdZU imia J.Kupaly, 2012).

Some aspects of the history of the Jewish trade in Belarus in the 18th to the beginning of the 20th centuries were addressed in the works of Belarusian (including Belarus-born – BR) historians Zakhar Shybeka, Ina Sorkina, Andrei Kishtymov, Natallia Paliataieva, Leonid Smilovitsky, and others, including the author of this text.^[7]

According to the Russian imperial laws, the top guild consisted of merchants with the stated capital of more than 10,000 rubles, the second guild – from 5,000 to 10,000 rubles, and the third guild – from 1,000 to 5,000 rubles. In 1807, the amount of capital required to join the merchant guild increased. It comprised 50,000 rubles for the top guild, 20,000 rubles for the second guild, and 8,000 rubles for the third guild. The working capital of the Jewish merchants in Belarus was usually not too big. In small towns the vast majority of merchants belonged to the third guild.

Tourists of the 19th century had an impression that only Jews were engaged in trade in the Belarusian cities and towns. The archives confirm this view. Jewish merchants from the town of Liutsin (Vitebsk province) sold flax, bread, vegetables, cattle, while those from Grodno sold flour.^[8] Jewish merchants from Dribin (Mohilev province) imported grain to Russia.^[9] In addition

to those, there are dozens of similar examples from other Belarusian cities and towns. According to the calculations made by the Polish historian Maurycy Horn, in 1793 Jews comprised approximately 80% of all merchants in Mohilev.^[10] What is more, these Jewish merchants had very modest assets.

In the center of the Novy Shklov there was a hospitable court, which was a traditional place of trade for any old city or town. It was a state-owned one-storey square building with towers at the corners and gates on its two sides. In the early 19th century the court hosted 120 there were 120 merchant shops, “in which local Jews sold various goods.”^[11] Jews sold cloth, silk made in the local factories, fruit, small-wares, fur and other peddlery. By comparison, the court also accommodated 70 shops of Orthodox merchants, bondsmen of a local landlord Zorić.

They sold iron, dishware, fish and other products. Shklov was the home of tree Jewish merchants of the top guild, three from the second guild, and 15 from the third guild.^[12] In the middle of the 19th century Jewish merchants of the Mohilev district played a major role in the trade between Mohilev and Riga, Memel, Königsberg, Danzig and the cities of southern Russia.

In the early 1880s, four out of five merchant stores and 46 out of 51 merchant shops in the Mohilev province were controlled by Jews. Jews owned the only bookstore; 127 out of 140 petty shops; 287 out of the 297 premises which did not look like apartments; 10 out of 11 merchant barns; the two timber yards; 29 out of 33 restaurants; all nine inns selling beer; all four wholesale wine stores; the two grog-shops; 47 out of 53 pubs; one out of three confectioneries; eight out of twelve bakeries. Thus, Christians controlled 57 commercial establishments, whereas Jews owned 596.^[13] One can agree with the assessment of a Russian scholar Korobkov, who argued that Jewish commercial activities influenced their way of settlement: both in the countryside and the urban areas they lived along major roads or navigable waterways.^[14]

Rural areas remained the main target of the Jewish trade in the end of the 19th century. However, as a result of legislative changes made in 1882, this trade started focusing on cities and towns. As Leonid Smilovitsky suggests, Jews proved themselves in all spheres of trade, including foreign trade. However, their success was most remarkable in domestic trade, including market, retail delivery, and stationary trade.^[15]

The functioning of the domestic market was secured by a large number of small commercial intermediaries. Peddlers, factors, drovers, brokers and commissionaires controlled the retail delivery trade. Peddlers sold petty wares needed in peasant life. Factors collected business information, provided consultations and offered mediation services. Drovers bought up wholesale meat, fish, cattle and agricultural stock in order to re-sell these goods. Brokers assisted in preparing and making a good trade, while commissioners executed orders for a certain fee.^[16]

Merchandise, profitability, and other features of Jewish trade

A key question regarding this context asks what goods provided Jewish merchants with the greatest profit and what goods were the most popular in the first half of the 19th century? In order to answer to this question, we refer to the archival materials on the properties of the Radziwiłł family as well as to the aforementioned book *Povsednevnyaya zhizn evreev Belarusi v kontse XVIII – pervoy polovine XIX veka* by Olga Sobolevskaya. The liquor and grain traffics brought stable profit. Grain was bought from local landowners and peasants and then floated on the large rivers abroad (by the Nioman to Königsberg and Riga, by the Buh up to Danzig, and by the Dnieper to the Black Sea).

In the beginning of the 19th century fabrics became the most popular commodity among Jewish shopkeepers. While noting the active involvement of the Jewish women in retail sales, one should emphasize that fabrics were the best sellers for their businesses. The second most popular category of commodities sold by Jewish traders to the Radziwiłł family consisted of groceries, especially cereals, flour, coffee, tea, sugar, raisins, cucumbers, bay leaves, anise, olive oil and vinegar. Despite the fact every inn and estate of the Radziwiłł family produced vodka and beer, calculations made by Olga Sobolevskaya demonstrate that alcohol was the third most popular and most profitable category of goods sold by Jews.^[17] Beyond any doubt, this category also included foreign grape wines. Such goods as office supplies and especially paper also easily found a ready market. Forage – oats, barley, hay, and straw – formed another typical sphere of Jewish trade. Metal products always formed a part of salable assortment in the shops of Jewish merchants in, for example, Nesvizh and Slutsk. Jews were also drysalters, as they sold saltpeter, wax, color, Prussian blue, turpentine, or glue.

The German historian Bernard Dov Weinryb suggests that the most important features of the Jewish commercial activities in Russia and Poland were

mobility and ability to offer a consumer nearly everything that could come useful for him. ...A Jewish merchant could only successfully exist and compete with non-Jews, if he was selling everything possible, without any focus on specific types of products. He brought colonial goods from Riga, namely satin, velvet, fancy goods and other products, and at the same time delivered other goods abroad. ... He sold all types of products: fancy goods, wine, cattle, textiles, glass, eggs, timber, salt, tobacco, corn, flax. ...When a new sphere of production was about to develop, Jews had always been the first to try getting benefit from it.^[18]

The second feature of the Jewish trade was the drive to minimize the time of capital turnover. That was why a Jew rather tried not to make profit only from a certain deal, but to increase the number of deals. This made Jewish trade flexible and mobile. That is why Jews tried to invest their assets in the trade branches that could ensure access to a broad market and cover the needs of mass buyers. The third feature of the Jewish trade in Belarus was that Jews used all their assets and also tried to use loans as much as possible. The fourth feature was that traders tried to use all the options to get involved in the direct interaction with the sales market. Even average traders traveled to the remote market places to get acquainted with the local terms of trade. Jewish traders took the initiative to approach the customers, while other sellers were waiting for the customers to reach them.

What were the hallmarks of the Jewish trade in Belarus? First, it was a subject of legal restrictions and oppression. Moreover, the large number of Jewish merchants in the Belarusian part of the Pale of Settlement led to extremely high competition between them. Second, it was characterized by wide circulation of goods taken on credit due to the lack of traders' own assets.

Third, the drive to maximize turnover because of the low profits made the Jewish trade more speculative and, therefore, more risky. The Jewish historian Ilya Orshansky observes the following typical features of the Jewish trade,

this trade has significantly contributed to the Russian manufacturing through enhanced sales of their products in the Western and Southern Russia and the mediation services between them and the Western Europe. Second, Jewish trade was not based on the exclusive principle of charging exorbitant prices, which was the main feature of both

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the Russian *kulaks* and the Asian trade. Instead, it was based on the quick return and little income or even losses... Third, according to the Russian merchants, the Jewish trade was distinct, as it lacked its fundamental nature (i.e. assets) and solidity in a merchant sense... Thus, small-scale retailing was the Jewish strong point... Fourth, by his smartness a Jew creates new sources of public wealth (breeding of domestic animals, birds and picking blueberries could now be supplemented with the export of Spanish flies).^[19]

One of the crucial actors of the Jewish trade between the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries in Belarus was that of factor, a typically Jewish occupation. He delivered the necessary goods, took their surpluses and contacted merchants and peasants. Agency was his main task, as he helped to find a customer for a trader and vice versa. In addition, he provided traders and customers with various information.

In 1853-55, the Belarusian ethnographer and folklorist Pavel Shpileuski had published a series of essays on the Paliessie region in the journal *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary). In his essays the author emphasized that,

in the Western Russia a Jewish factor is exactly the same as a newspaper for a resident of the capital city or an archive for an archaeologist. He will tell you about all the places of interest in the city/town, mention all the famous people, tell where these persons live, whom they know, what they eat and drink, what bed they sleep on, how wealthy they are, how much income and debts they have, what they do, what are their plans, where they plan to go and where they get extra income from, who and when arrived, how this person settled his deal, etc. In other words, he will tell you anything you would like to know about his city/town and even more. He will be ready to take care of all your tasks, no matter how difficult they are, and will accomplish them. Moreover, do not think that his services are expensive: not at all! Only for half ruble the factor will be running for the whole day.^[20]

The Jewish community was characterized by its mutual credit mechanisms and the lack of specialization which helped Jewish merchants to successfully compete with their Christians counterparts. In a Jewish store one could buy everything at once. The stock ranged from tea to dresses and in a way resembled today's hypermarkets. Moreover, the products were relatively cheap. That is why goods sold by Jewish merchants were available both for peasants and poor townees.

The trade flourished even at the small curvy streets of the Jewish districts in most Belarusian cities and towns. A tray with modest goods (such as round cracknels, fish, and different household lit-

tle items) was simply installed next to a house. The trading process was organized by women. Usually the eldest daughters were responsible for these activities while their mothers were doing laundry in the rich houses or selling in the shops.^[21]

Numerous Jewish shops were located in the market squares and central streets of major Belarusian cities. Their premises were either owned by Jews or leased from the city authorities. The customers of these shops were offered nearly everything – small wares, groceries, foodstuff, metalware and secondhand items.^[22]

A Jewish shopkeeper did have particular schedule. Instead, he worked the whole day from early morning till night when potential buyers were still walking the streets. Lack of any professional differentiation among Jewish traders helped them to squeeze their Christian competitors. Erosion of consumer demand or purchasing power resulted in the occupational conversion of Jewish traders to craftsmen, laborers or teachers. Buyers had never been told that some products were out of stock. In such cases under any pretext, customers were asked to wait. The owner ran to the neighbor's shop where this product was on sale and made a deal (*gesheft*) with a colleague.^[23]

One of the forms of trade in Belarusian cities and towns was "depositing the grain." On market days Jews bought wheat from farmers, garnered it, and then sent one or two cars of grain to the bread traders. Thus, this was a way to exist for those who had at least some money. The poorest Jews drummed up farmers to the buyer's barn and got their penny for that.

While dealing with his potential buyers, an impoverished Jewish seller was extremely intrusive. If he was not able to attract a bypasser with his own goods, he started begging his "victim" to be compassionate at least to his little children suffering from hunger and buy at least something. Being kicked out from the house, the peddler appeared in the window of a tavern or inside and continued moaning. People often preferred to buy his silence for the price of a small item.^[24]

Fairs were the main sphere of the Jewish trade in Belarus up to the 1880s. The famous St. Hanna Fair in Zelva (Grodna province) was particularly popular. It was attended by numerous Jewish traders from the territories of today's Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, and Lithuania. In addition, the goods of Jewish merchants were bought and sold at the Sts. Peter and Paul Fair in Beshenkovichi (Lepel district), the Assumption Fair in Svisloch (Volkovysk district), the Baptismal Fair in Lyubav-

ichi (Orsha district), and the St. Paraskeva Fair in Parichi (Bobruisk district). Large forest fairs took place in Minsk and Gomel. The former focused on trade with Germany, while the latter served the needs of timber traders of Southern Russia.

The 1897 census revealed that trade was the most frequent professional occupation among Jews. 38.65% of the active Jewish population was engaged in trade, whereas throughout the Russian empire this number was 3.77%. Among the urban population this ratio was 37.48% among Jews and 12.42% among other ethnicities. In total, 618,926 persons in the Russian empire were engaged in trade, including 450,427 Jews (72.8%). The number of Jews engaged in trade constituted 31.97% in the North-Western provinces, 39.04% – in the Kingdom of Poland, 43.14% – in the South-Western provinces, and 45.5% – in the South-Eastern provinces.^[25]

By the end of the 19th century the role of Jewish merchants had increased remarkably in Belarus. Most Jewish merchants lived in the provinces of Mohilev (30.3%) and Minsk (29%).^[26] In the towns of Babinovichi, Gorodok, Druya, Klimovichi, Kopys, Lepel, Nesvizh, Pruzhany, Slutsk and Radoshkovichi all local merchants were Jews.^[27]

Several issues put the brakes on Jewish trade in Belarus in the 18th – early 20th centuries. The Pale of Settlement, introduced in 1791, considerably increased competition among Jewish traders. In addition, the imperial legislation on Jews was changeable and inconsistent. Beyond the Pale, Jewish merchants, manufacturers and craftsmen could conduct business affairs only during their short-time visits. In addition, the 1804 Regulation on Jews required them to leave rural areas within 3-4 years. They also were banned from keeping taverns and renting estates to prevent the alleged alcoholism and exploitation of local peasants. The banishment started in 1807.^[28] In 1809 a special commission was created to investigate the facts of Jewish residency in the rural areas. In its report the commission underlined,

as long as the Belarusian and Polish landlords keep the current economic system based on the sale of wine, as long as the landlords in a manner patronize drunkenness, this evil will be growing from year to year and no efforts could decrease it. Hence, the consequences will be the same, no matter whether a Jew or a Christian is involved into the sale of wine.^[29]

In the commission's view, Jews did not inflict harm to the rural settlements. On the contrary, being suppliers of goods and intermediaries between the rural and urban areas, they made a

positive contribution to the development of villages. However, Alexander I did not approve the report of the commission.

The 1804 regulation on the right of Jews to receive trading certificates for trade and industrial activities only within the Pale of Settlement was confirmed by the 1824 law. Moreover, it also forbade Jewish and all visiting merchants to sell their goods from their homes or to deliver them to places of temporary residence beyond the Pale of Settlement. The breach of this law was subject to forfeiture.

Jewish merchants were allowed to perform wholesale and retail store trade. However, the bourgeois Jews were banned from carrying out wholesale trade beyond the Pale of Settlement, even if they were estate managers for the nobility. Similarly, it was forbidden to sell the agricultural goods brought from the Pale of Settlement by order of the noblemen. Regulations on the arrival of Jews to the cities in the interior provinces (adopted on May 25, 1827), confirmed previous restrictions and supplemented them with the prohibition of retail sales and setting up new manufacturing beyond the borders of the Pale. Yielding to the economic realities, the 1835 regulation allowed for the presence of the Jewish merchants and manufacturers in Riga and at the main fairs held in the interior provinces to do temporary trade there. Moreover, Jews were granted certain rights to sell goods beyond the Pale of Settlement.^[30] All subsequent legal acts of the Russian empire related to the status of Jewish merchants and traders were aimed at either imposing restrictions on the freedom of trade, or at their partial easing. These measures applied both to Russian and foreign citizens of Jewish ethnicity since 1859 Jewish top guild merchants were allowed to reside on the territory of the whole Russian empire.

In the environment of economic discrimination against Jews, only individual representatives of this community could rise to the top level in trade. As Olga Sobolevskaya and Volodymyr Goncharov argue,

membership in the guild meant payment of the relevant fees and the availability of capital. Only few could be modest about this achievement. Statistics of Grodna province consistently dispel the myth of the rich Jew. In 1886 Jews made 84% of all merchants in Grodna province. However, they mostly belonged to the third guild, as its share comprised two thirds of the total turnover. The average turnover of a Jewish merchant was approximately three times less than that of a non Jew.^[31]

While analyzing the Jewish trade in Minsk, Pinsk and Bobruisk in the 1870-80s, Andrei Subbotin noted that,

turnovers of the Jews in these cities were higher than in the rest of the province. On the contrary, turnovers of the Christian merchants were smaller. Moreover, being older centres of trade with quays, Bobruisk and Pinsk had more large Jewish capitalists. For example, in Minsk there were no more than seven or eight capitalists with the capital value of 100,000 rubles or more. In Pinsk their number comprised ten or more. Non-Jewish merchants

were more active in the districts than in Minsk. Thus, they controlled the whole trade of pork fat; some sold hemp, cattle. In Minsk there were only three Christian stores.^[32]

The average trade profitability in Minsk and its district composed 8-10% of the turnover for Jewish sellers and at least 10% for their Christian counterparts.^[33] The following table provides the data on the number of top and second guild merchant certificates issued in Minsk province in the 1870-80s^[34]:

The number of top and second guild merchant certificates issued in Minsk province				
Year	Jews	non-Jews	Total	% of Jews
1876	252	28	280	90
1880	366	6	372	98
1884	519	115	634	83
1886	563	78	641	88

Discourse on the topic has suggested that Jews took control on the entire local trade, but the official figures contradict this view. The share of the Jewish merchants in the trade of Minsk province was declining. The official figures confirm that 820 guild certificates were issued in 1884 in Minsk province. The share of Jews among them was 562 or 68.55%. Hence, it is obvious that the Jews squeezed their competitors only in small-scale trade, while they were gradually driven out from merchant trade.^[35]

Into the early 20th century

Belarusian Jews played an important role not only in foreign and domestic trade of the Belarusian lands, but the whole Russian empire. Jews controlled almost all the grain trade in the North-Western territory. They exported grain abroad through Odessa, Kherson, Nikolaev and the Baltic Sea ports. The Jews bought grain from the manufacturers and sold it to Russian distilleries and residents of the Russian cities.

As Iosif M. Bikerman observed,

according to 1897 census, in the North-Western territory among every 1,000 persons engaged in trade 886 were Jews, while in grain trade the number of Jews reached 930. This meant that almost all grain trade in this territory was in Jewish hands... The Russian grain trade, which had major importance for the country's economy, ...became an integral part of the global commercial relations. ...For that the country is indebted mainly to the Jews, who accomplished this difficult and important business despite all obstacles in the path of their activities.^[36]

Jewish merchants sharply raised grain purchase prices. As a result, its producers (i.e. local farmers and landowners) benefited, which resulted in general agricultural growth in the Russian empire.

In 1906 the Minsk Timber Stock Exchange was created by the local timber merchants. Its primary focus was timber trade. In 1912 it was transformed to the General Commodity Stock Exchange and its overall trade volume reached 10 million rubles.^[37] Timber played one of the most important roles in the Jewish trade. Jewish historians observed that

timber was both one of the largest sectors of the Jewish trade and one of the most remarkable in terms capital aggregation.^[38]

The Jewish timber trade in Belarus had three geographical directions. A significant part of the Belarusian timber was transported to the unforested Southern provinces via the Dnieper waterway. The other part was delivered to the markets of Poland and Germany by land. Finally, the third part was brought to the Baltic ports for export by sea.

The intensive growth of the Jewish timber trade started in the 1860-70s and was linked with the abolishment of serfdom. As a result of this decision, numerous landlords brought their estates and forests to the market. Timber trade was particularly intense in the five provinces of the North-Western territory, as Jews there sometimes got forests together with the estates.

In his autobiography *Trial and Error*, Chaim Weizmann, the Belarus-born first president of

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the State of Israel, recalled the organization of the timber trade by his father:

The timber trade was the mainstay of Motol. My father was a "transportier." He cut and hauled the timber and got it floated down to Danzig... My father would set out for the heart of the forest, twenty or twenty-five miles away. His only communication with home was the sleight road, which was always subject to interruption... [T]here were wolves in the forests and occasionally robbers. Fortunately, there was, between my father and the fifty or sixty men he employed seasonally – moujiks of Motol and the neighborhood – an excellent relationship, primitive, but warm and patriarchal. Once or twice he was attacked by robbers, but they were beaten off by his workmen. It was hard, exacting work, but on the whole my father did not dislike it, perhaps because it called for a considerable degree of skill. It was his business to mark out the trees to be felled... He has to supervise the hauling... After Passover began the spring and summer work, the floating of the rafts to the sea.^[29]

In early 20th century the Jewish Encyclopedia reported,

the linen trade has considerable importance for the Jewish population of the North-Western ter-

ritory. It is concentrated mainly in the provinces of Vitebsk and Kovna, and in the adjacent areas. Linen is exported abroad and partly to the factories in Russia. In the cities of the Pale of Settlement Jews formed the majority of those engaged in the linen trade.^[30]

Thus, Jews prevailed among traders in Belarusian cities and towns. Contemporaries that had smarts, curiosity, a business mindset and a knowledge of human psychology helped them in their business activities. Christians merchants were limited in their actions and decisions by the guild regulations and did not have much experience in commercial affairs. Therefore, they could not compete with entrepreneurially-inclined Jewish merchants. However, Jews did not monopolize trading activity and were not engaged in it en masse, as is sometimes argued. Only about a third of the Jewish population lived off the trade and the vast majority of them traded for pennies. At the same time, the Jewish trade significantly contributed to the economic development of the Belarusian lands in the late 18th - early 20th centuries.

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