Russian Revision Lists: A History

by Boris Feldblyum

[Much has been written in AVOTAYNU *about the* reviski skazki *or revision lists made in Russia during Czarist times; some references are listed at the end of this article. With the opening of the Russian archives in recent years, increasing numbers of Jewish genealogists have obtained information from these lists, but sometimes it seems as if the more data we acquire, the more questions we have and the greater our confusion. In the following article, adapted from a talk given at the July 1998 seminar in Los Angeles, Feldblyum describes what the* reviski skazki *are, why and how they were created, and several important limitations as sources of genealogical information—Ed.]*

Two hundred years ago, Peter the Great ruled Russia. In his desire to modernize his country and to improve the flow of cash into his coffers, he reformed his method of counting the population. In 1718, he introduced a system of person-to-person counting. The resultant population census became Census No. 1 of the 10 major censuses conducted in Russia between 1720 and 1858. Data from these censuses was used to assist the government in drafting men into the army and in tax collection. Hence, it is often referred to as a "fiscal census."

The census was not intended to enumerate the entire population of the country, but only those social classes subject to taxation. Exempt were the nobility, soldiers, titled citizens, civil servants—in all, a total of 18 privileged categories. This approach was refined by the time of the third revision in 1762 and was used for all subsequent censuses through 1858.

Supplemental Enumerations

Why was it called *revisiya* (revision)? Because as soon as the list of taxpayers was compiled, state officials were supposed to verify or revise the data. A state official assigned the job of conducting the census would write down the information as told by a local official. Hence, the term *reviska skazka*; in Russian, *skazka* means "tale." That is why verification or revision was important. Thus, each census generated a number of supplemental lists as well. The individuals listed were considered living and subject to taxation until the next main revision took place when they would be recorded as "deceased," "missing," etc. Thus, these censuses were unusual in that they included persons deceased since the previous census.

The first four revisions are essentially irrelevant to Jewish genealogists, because few Jews lived in Russia until the partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793, and 1795. (The fourth revision, started in 1781, showed 1,816 Jews in the entire empire, some of them in central and southern Ukraine, where Jews were allowed to settle after 1769.) A fifth revision was conducted between 1794 and 1796, the results showing that as a result of its annexations, the Czarist Empire had acquired 621,000 unwelcome Jewish inhabitants.

The 1795 Revision

A decree published on June 23, 1794, instituted the beginning of the fifth revision and mandated that it be finished by the end of 1795. The language of the revision was Polish in the areas recently appropriated from Poland. At this time, most Jews had not yet acquired fixed, hereditary family names (that began after another czarist decree—in 1809), but households are listed together and each member of the household was enumerated separately. I have not researched the 1795 revision in depth, but I am aware of some records from Mogilev, Vilna, and the future Kovno provinces. In other areas, mainly on the left bank of the Dneiper River and in southern Ukraine, 18,861 Jews were registered; it is likely that Jews began migrating there in the 1780s during the Polish partitions.

The 1795 revision, like all of those before and after, suffered from many inaccuracies. When a 1799 decree directed local authorities to review the results and list all omitted persons, the number of omissions discovered exceeded 231,000—most of them in Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania. The number of Jews added during this supplemental revision was 12,000 (males only). Sources I have seen all offer calculations to prove that Jews managed to escape the listing in disproportionately large numbers.

According to the fifth revision, Jews represented 12.2 percent of Vilna guberniya, the highest percentage of any region. They comprised about 10 percent of the population in Belostok, 5.7 percent in Mogilev guberniya, and 5.3 percent in the Zhitomir district.

In 1794, at the same time that it passed the decree ordering the fifth revision, other laws officially designated areas where Jews were permitted to live (i.e., the Pale of Settlement).

Developing capitalism in Russia created a great need for a variety of statistical information, including data on population distribution and composition. For this reason, a statistical department was formed in 1811, first as part of the Police Ministry. In the 1840s, the police were charged with registering all Russian subjects.

The Sixth Revision

The sixth revision took place in 1811 and lasted only one year; because of Napoleon's invasion the following year, there were no supplemental revisions of this enumeration. In the preceding decade, the government had been busy implementing administrative reform; drawing new maps; forming provinces; establishing the Pale of Settlement; and compiling lists of cities, towns, and villages.

I have not seen many examples of the 1811 revision.

Historic ethnographers report that it was compiled only for the male population and was not thorough with regard to the ethnic composition of the people. A sample of the 1811 Jewish revision for Zhitomir, Ukraine, shows that nearly every family had a last name (e.g., Shtejn, Vanshtok, Feldblyum, Ratner), but only males are recorded. There is a note that the previous revision in Zhitomir had occurred in 1806. This would have been supplemental to the 1795 fifth revision and was perhaps local and limited to the city of Zhitomir.

A sample of the 1811 revision from Vilna guberniya is substantially different. In the first column it refers to the 1795 (fifth) revision and also includes females. The language of the local population was Polish and so is the language of the revision. This example also includes family names, although in some cases it is not clear if the names are patronymics or true family names—or both (e.g., Eliasz Wolf Szewelowicz Abramowicz).

The 1816 Revision and Its Supplemental Lists

The War of 1812 took place on a vast territory from the western border of Russia to Moscow, which was briefly occupied by Napoleon. The war led to substantial changes in the composition and distribution of the population and necessitated another revision as soon as the war ended, although the census was not conducted in Finland, Bessarabia, or the occupied Kingdom of Poland. The new decree was published in June 1815 and lasted almost two years. One local census was conducted in the Belostok region in 1816.

The verification process lasted nearly 18 years, which, for genealogists, means researching a number of supplemental lists. During this time, the government "discovered" and registered close to 900,000 people. According to the well-known and well-respected Russian demographer Vladimir Kabuzan, "roughly one third of all omitted people included poor Jewish townsmen who evaded with the utmost energy all (of the government's) attempts to count them and impose the soul tax." Kabuzan concludes that the results of the seventh revision cannot be considered accurate and that one must exercise special care when studying the data regarding Jews. He further notes that during 1817 and the first half of 1818, the government discovered and registered 133,000 omitted Jewish males.

According to Kabuzan, local population counts were taken in certain areas not covered by revisions. He cites two examples, the Budzhak and Khotin districts in Bessarabia and the Caucasus region. The Caucasus fell under Russian rule in the 1820s, and a population description and count, by ethnic group, was taken almost immediately. It included Armenians, Azaris, Georgians, and Jews.

The region that today is western Ukraine was under Austrian rule during the 19th and early 20th centuries. A number of censuses occurred there, too, with an effort made to segregate Jews into separate registers. It is worth noting that in the early 19th century, a substantial Jewish migration took place from Austria-Hungary (mainly Galicia) into Russia. The Russian government took notice of this phenomenon and issued a decree in July 1824 forbidding foreign Jews to settle in Russia. Those who had already settled were registered as *meshchane* (townspeople).

Records from Kremenets Filmed

Seven rolls of Jewish birth, marriage, divorce, and death records from Kremenets for the years 1870–1907 have been filmed by the Mormons at the Ternopol archives in Ukraine. They may be ordered from any LDS (Mormon) Family History Center. The microfilm numbers are 2086060–2086066.

Alexander I, the victor over Napoleon and an active politician in both domestic and international arenas, is recorded in history as an educated monarch. The last year of his reign was 1824. A year later, his son, Nicholas I, started his 30-year reign by suppressing the Decembrist Revolt. A few years later, he issued edicts that made it legal to draft into the army boys less than 10 years old. One may safely assume that the resultant law became one of the primary motivators for impoverished Jews to hide and avoid the censuses to the best of their ability. It is no wonder that many Jewish genealogists cannot find their relatives in the *reviski skazki*.

The Eighth Revision (1833)

Against the backdrop of Nicholas I's repression, the eighth revision was conducted, based on a June 1833 decree. As with previous censuses, it was not conducted in the Polish provinces, Finland, the Caucasus, Middle Asia, or Alaska. The only genealogical sources from the 10 Polish guberniyas available are vital records—where they exist.

The eighth revision lasted almost three years, having been extended because of an ongoing famine. Supplemental revisions were compiled continuously up to the time of the ninth revision in 1851. An additional 231,000 persons were added this way. During the years 1820–40, a large number of Jews from Lithuania settled in the southern Ukraine area known as Novorossia, officially encouraged to do so by the government.

The Ninth Revision (1850–51)

This census was conducted in 1850 and 1851. Although it suffered from the same problem (undercounting) as the others, it is considered to be more accurate than the tenth and final revision. Again, it was not conducted in the Polish provinces. Over the next several years, 120,000 omitted males were registered in supplemental revisions for Grodno, Kiev, Kovno, Podolia, and Vitebsk guberniyas. It is safe to assume that the

biggest culprits were our ancestors. This is understandable. Since the purpose of the revisions was to assist the government in tax collection and in drafting the male population into the army, anybody and everybody who had to pay taxes and was eligible for conscription made it his business to avoid being registered. It was more difficult for landowners and peasants to hide, but Jews were mostly urban dwellers, much less engaged in relations with the government. Consequently, it was easier for them to conceal their existence.

Kabuzan, who has studied extensively many different types of records, makes the following observation:

> It is a well-known fact that the Jewish population hid quite successfully from the census and the resulting soul taxes. Numerous verifications of the 5th through the 9th revisions uncovered hundreds of thousands of Jews who had avoided the census. The inaccuracy of the count was obvious even when one simply noted that the number of Jewish women according to the revisions exceeded by far the number of Jewish men. This is easy to explain; women were not subject to the soul tax. On the other hand, the Crown Rabbis usually reported to the provincial administration their own number of Jewish congregants, without any financial consequences for the latter. [Note: He probably refers here to the vital records registers—Ed.] One cannot help but be amazed that local authorities did not utilize such an important source to uncover criminal violators of the official laws of the land.

In his book *Tsar Nicholas and the Jews*, author Michael Stanislavski makes the following observation:

> Descriptions of the intricate shadowboxing rituals of revision time abound in Hebrew and Yiddish, as well as Russian, literature. One memoirist of Nicholas' time, Yehezkel Kotik, recalled how his grandfather, the *kahal* official, kept his annual appointment with the tax assessor (from *My Memoirs* [Berlin, 1922] in Yiddish):
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> No one in town could handle one matter as he could. This was the "reviser" who used to come to audit the tax rolls of Kamenets, to see if it didn't have more than 450 souls who were listed. Grandfather was a master of "speaking" with the reviser; no one could be better. This "conversation" always ended with the official quickly pocketing 200 rubles. On the day of the revision, many houses would be shut, the inhabitants would leave town, going wherever they chose, and the town seemed dead, like a cemetery. You could almost not see one living creature on the streets, while the reviser would walk through them with the entire local police force at his side, counting souls. They always found around 400 persons. Fifty were missing; they were said to be away on business. Every year the reviser would leave, writing in his protocol that everything was in order.

The Tenth and Final Revision (1858)

Until I began to work on this article, I had always assumed that the tenth revision, conducted in 1857 and 1858, must have been the most valuable one, because on one hand, the Jewish population had grown, and on the other hand, the government must have refined its census-taking skills. Apparently, the reality was quite different. Many authors severely criticize this census as flawed; the omitted and "escapees" were not completely counted until 1874.

In his 1864 report on the population of Minsk guberniya, Russian Army General Headquarters Colonel I. Zelensky writes:

> Reduction in the numbers of the Jewish townsmen cannot be logically supported and is a result of the increased anarchy during the last revision. Omitted souls can be found, of course, among the peasant class as well, but their number would hardly exceed 2 percent, while no more than 40 percent of the Jews were registered.

As a supporting argument, Zelensky cites the following calculation: Jews owned about 4,500 houses in nine cities in Minsk guberniya in 1860. If you estimate a household size to be six people, the total number of Jews in these towns should be 27,000, but according to the tenth revision, only 11,749 Jews were registered in these nine cities.

We cannot know if the under reporting was as extensive in other guberniyas. What is clear, however, is that not every Jewish genealogist will find an ancestral record in the 1858 revision (or in any other specific revision, for that matter), even if the records can be located. All that can be done is to research each and every supplemental list whenever and wherever they can be found. I have seen supplemental revisions conducted as late as 1908, that is, ten years after the first All-Empire (1897) Census of Russia.

What Should a Genealogist Believe?

Knowing how motivated our ancestors were to avoid or distort these records, why should one trust any information found in them? As with all administrative records, the data is only as good as the information that was supplied. Therefore, it is always necessary to treat such information with great circumspection. The simple answer is that a good researcher will not believe any one piece of evidence. Genealogical research, like any other type of research, is not about believing. It is about gathering evidence, analyzing it, and drawing conclusions based upon the collected evidence. If and when other, additional evidence is uncovered, it will either support or contradict our previous findings and conclusions. Nothing more, nothing less.

One valuable type of other evidence is represented by the local census conducted in various cities throughout Russia in the latter part of the 19th century. Such local censuses revealed that the tenth revision omitted 50,000 Jews in Kovno guberniya alone and about 80,000 in the Grodno guberniya/Bialystok region combined. Some of these local censuses survive and, in my opinion, are a type of record even more valuable than the revisions.

Boris Feldblyum was born in Zhitomir, Ukraine, and immigrated to the United States 17 years ago. He is the co-founder and president of FAST Genealogy Service. He is the author of Russian-Jewish Given Names: Their Origins and Variants, *published this year by Avotaynu.*