

## The Port Jews of Libau, 1880–1914

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Within the field of Jewish historiography there are many studies of life in nineteenth century Russia, the journey west undertaken by hundreds of thousands of Jews during the reign of the last two Tsars of Imperial Russia, and the eventual settlement of Ashkenazi Jews in western Europe and the Atlantic basin.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the scale and depth of these assessments little attention has been paid to the contribution of Libau (the modern day port of Liepāja) in the development of a distinctive port Jewish community in the Russian Baltic. In Libau Jewish merchants worked alongside their non-Jewish counterparts. The port itself was a major entrepôt for emigrants fleeing the ordeals of life ‘in the Pale’. Yet despite anti-semitic pressures, Libau’s Ashkenazi Jewish community had, by the time of the 1897 census, grown to become the second largest port Jewish community in the Baltic region and the town’s great synagogue would dominate the skyline as much as the Russian Orthodox Church. The Jewish presence in this Baltic port was thus real and visible, sizeable and influential.

This essay aims to explore how a study of Jewish merchants operating in Libau and other Baltic ports can contribute to the evolution of the port Jewish concept.<sup>2</sup> Did the port Jew ‘concept’ apply to collective economic influence as much as the concentration of great wealth in the hands of a few port-based ‘court Jews’? Could the fluidity of a port’s mercantile community further port Jewish influence beyond the maritime region in which it was situated? Can the concept of port Jewry be applied to a port whose Jewish residents were predominantly of working-class or mercantile status? Having outlined the problems faced by Libau’s Jewish community under the control of Imperial Russia, attention will then be afforded to the scale and patterns of Jewish emigration from the port and the ramifications that this ‘trade’ would have upon port Jewish identity in those western ports to where so many Ashkenazi Jews were destined between 1881 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Were the gains made by port Jews in important centres of Jewish settlement in the West undermined by the arrival of their poorer co-religionists from smaller Baltic communities epitomised by Libau? Did anti-Jewish sentiment in Europe and America in the opening decade of the twentieth century owe its origins to their poorer co-religionists that had arrived directly from a port under Imperial Russia’s control?

## The Rights of the Jews in Courland within the Russian Empire

When the partition of the kingdom of Poland began in 1772, Imperial Russia found herself in control of the largest concentration of Jews in Europe. Though most lived in what became defined as the Pale of Settlement, the westward expansion of Russia meant that, by the time of Nicholas II's accession, there were sizeable Jewish communities in Russia's vibrant maritime centres at St Petersburg, Riga, Jacobstadt and Libau. Each port lay within a different province of Imperial Russia and commercial rivalry between them was rife. Each had an active Jewish mercantile community and as debate raged as to the rights to be given to Jews living in both urban and rural areas throughout Russia, so the influence that Jews exercised in maritime life was similarly questioned. Though life in the Pale was growing increasingly intolerable, the economic strength that port Jewish commerce represented in other parts of Russia was so important that Jews who worked in Riga were granted greater freedom of mobility to trade there so that other rival ports, where they were less constrained, would not disturb the predominance of Russia's second largest port. As Herman Rosenthal (in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*) noted, regarding the notion in the eighteenth century that Friedrichstadt (a port within the state of Courland) could eclipse the larger port of Riga if economic freedoms were not granted to Jewish merchants who traded in the port:

The edict of Empress Elisabeth (1742) expelling the Jews from Russia interfered considerably with this business [of moving goods such as flax, grain, lumber and other Russian goods to merchants based in Riga]. The Council of Riga, fearing that the Jewish merchants might direct their trade to Windau, Libau and Königsberg, petitioned the Senate in the matter, and, pending the resolution of the Senate, the vice-governor of Livonia stopped the Jewish traders in Friedrichstadt.<sup>3</sup>

These privileges not only increased the economic opportunities available to Jewish merchants working within Livonia and Courland, but they also helped Riga's Jewish population to grow from just over 500 in 1824 to 21,963 by 1897 to the detriment of ports such as Friedrichstadt (whose Jewish population was only 3,800 at the time of the 1897 census). Even though many Jews were expelled from St Petersburg, Riga and Libau in the early 1890s, Riga's role as the main port Jewish community in the Baltic continued to grow as one of Russia's largest ports expanded throughout the nineteenth century, helped by the rights awarded to her Jewish merchants in the mid-eighteenth century.

Though the rights of Jews in neighbouring Courland would vary enormously in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the communal and economic strength of the port Jews working in the port of Libau continued to grow as the port expanded.<sup>4</sup> Situated in the eastern Baltic between Riga and

Danzig, it lay within the province of Courland and came under the administrative control of Mitau, the provincial capital.<sup>5</sup> Though Courland bordered the northern extremities of the Pale of Settlement, and despite being under the rule of Russia since 1795, those living within the duchy retained more religious and economic freedom than their less fortunate co-religionists living in neighbouring Kovno. As Simon Dubnov noted regarding the rights of those living in this region:

The brief reign of Paul I (1796–1801) added nothing of moment to the Russian legislation concerning the Jews. The law imposing a double tax was confirmed, and also the other restrictions were left in force. The newly acquired Government of Courland, on the outskirts of the Empire, increased the area of Jewish settlement. In this Duchy, which was annexed in 1795, there were several thousand Jewish inhabitants, who had been ‘tolerated’ as foreigners, after the German pattern, and had only partly succeeded in forming a communal organization. The question now arose as to the best way of collecting the taxes from the itinerant chapmen who formed the bulk of the Jewish population, and were enrolled neither among the rural nor the urban estates, and were not even affiliated with Jewish communities. The Russian Government solved this question in 1799, by placing the Jews of Courland in the same position as their coreligionists in the other western Governments, and by granting them the right of enrolling themselves among the mercantile or burgher estates, as well as establishing their own *Kahals*. In this case fiscal considerations were responsible for the organization of the Jewish masses in the dominion of the German barons.<sup>6</sup>

Though they suffered discrimination because of their faith, the Jews of Courland were still free to participate in the commerce of the land, because of their commercial acumen and because of the revenues generated through the taxes imposed upon them.<sup>7</sup> Under successive Imperial Russian edicts, they faced increased threats to the rights they had enjoyed under the protection of the nobility prior to 1795. But such incursions upon their rights were often challenged, not by the Dukes of Courland, but by their noble subordinates who recognised the important contribution that Jewish merchants made to Baltic commerce, and their own revenues, as the port developed.

### **The Development of Libau’s Port Jewish Community**

The port of Libau, unlike the neighbouring ports of Riga and St Petersburg, did not ‘close’ each winter when the ice closed much of the Baltic to navigation.<sup>8</sup> This geographic factor was one of the main reasons why investment in the port’s development took place during the period 1880 to

1914. Investment transformed the port from that described by Brian Hoyle as a primitive port/city into that of an expanding port/city.<sup>9</sup> The maritime opportunities that the locality presented to the port's merchants were significantly boosted in 1880 with the opening of the railway link from Romny (near Poltava in modern-day Ukraine) to Libau. The line ran through some of the most populous areas of the Pale including Gomel, Minsk and Vilna. Commercially it connected the Baltic port of Libau with urban districts in the Pale of Settlement, the agrarian regions of Russia and the important railway line that carried freight between Kiev and Moscow. By 1880 the port was equipped with an integrated transport system that rivalled its neighbouring Baltic ports. It was connected with urban and agricultural regions, which produced commodities that could be exported. The port Jews situated in this expanding maritime centre were free to take advantage of the opportunities with which Hoyle notes expanding port cities of the time were presented.

In the expanding port cities of the nineteenth century, rapid commercial and industrial development induced major changes in traditional port-city inter-relationships. Old harbours were overcrowded, new quays and basins were constructed ... and port growth was paralleled by industrial and urban expansion.<sup>10</sup>

As the port grew, so its Jewish presence was maintained as economic opportunities made the port a magnet for internal economic migrants and merchants living in the Pale.<sup>11</sup> The Jewish community of Libau, though between 43 and 47 per cent smaller in size (in 1881 and 1897) than that of the neighbouring port of Riga, grew rapidly throughout the nineteenth century. It rose, according to Dov Levin, from 19 in 1795, to 1,218 in 1850, 1,700 in 1863, 6,651 in 1881, 9,454 in 1897, 10,398 in 1911 and 7,163 in 1915. The Jewish population of Courland expanded from 9,000 in 1835 to 49,102 in 1897.<sup>12</sup> As the port expanded after 1880, the Jewish merchants and their gentile neighbours would profit equally. Some Jews grew wealthy, many prosperous, and even the poorest were educated.

The Jews living or working in Libau during the period in question may not have been as free and enlightened as some of their predecessors. They did not champion or sponsor *haskalah* (enlightenment). But their status as subjects was, at least after 1893, stable. They were free to trade and achieved a degree of cultural assimilation with their gentile neighbours that distinguished them from their Yiddish-speaking co-religionists in the Pale. An emigrant who lived at the nearby town of Talsen recalled his own middle-class Jewish upbringing in Courland:

We did not know a word of Russian, we spoke German because it had once belonged to Germany, my mother went to a German school, we all

spoke German ... [the] middle class[es] went to German schools, to my mother we spoke in German, not in Yiddish.<sup>13</sup>

But though this German influence was stronger in Courland than in other Baltic port Jewish communities, its educational institutions in Libau still included a government school for Jews, a Jewish general school for girls and a Talmud Torah. Prior to 1893 the port even had its own Rabbinical School that was influential throughout the Ashkenazi world.

Despite the continued emigration of so many of its Jews and the forced movement of part of its community in 1892, the natural fecundity of the Jews of Libau ensured that the port retained its status as the second largest port Jewish community in the Baltic in the 1897 census.<sup>14</sup> The Jewish community thus reflected the city's physical presence in the Baltic and mirrored that of other port Jewish communities of the period. The Jews of Courland, and Libau in particular, thus embodied the processes and identity formation that Louis Dubin and David Sorkin have associated with the Sephardi port Jews of Trieste. The Jews of Libau may not have been patronised by monarchs in the way that those of Trieste, London or Amsterdam were, but they certainly gained economic freedoms from the successive absolutist monarchs and their ducal lieutenants who governed the duchy.<sup>15</sup> Though they lost their rabbinical school under edicts of Tsar Alexander III (in 1893), it has to be remembered that the port had no such institutions for much of the time before Russia partitioned the Kingdom of Poland.<sup>16</sup>

Libau's contribution towards Jewish culture – namely the constant cycle of foreign-born rabbis and other influential men from the port who subsequently settled in other port cities – offers an example of the port's own form of religious enlightenment. Though not as visionary nor as enlightened as contemporaries writing in other more influential port cities, such as Hamburg or Trieste, Courland was noted by some nineteenth-century historians as enjoying close rabbinical links to those such as the Mendelssohns and Mordecai Aaron Ginzburg (1796–1846), described by Simon Dubnov as one of the founders of Neo-Hebraic literary style who lived 'for some time' in Courland.<sup>17</sup> Though many of the most influential rabbis would be forced to leave Libau following the Regulations on Passports issued in 1890, which permitted only Jews whose families were registered in the census of 13 April 1835 to remain in the port, the influence they exacted upon Jewish identity in the West would spread as these Ashkenazi Jews established new centres of scholarship in the West.<sup>18</sup> In this way, Dubin's theory that port Jews created opportunities for Jewish culture to develop was as applicable to the Ashkenazi Jews of Baltic Russia as it was to those of the Adriatic. But as with the Jews of Trieste, the Jews of Libau were only presented with such opportunity and 'freedom' because of the contribution they made to Baltic maritime commerce.

## **The Economic Contribution of Baltic Jewry**

As with port Jews in other western cities, the granting of certain freedoms and rights was mirrored by the ability of governing regimes to tax Jews heavily. Jews were also denied many of the rights of their gentile colleagues, such as the right for their children to play on the Libau sands. Many recently arrived Jews were expelled from Libau in 1893. Despite all this, the contribution that Jews made to Baltic trade was both valued and encouraged. Foreign agents vying for a share of Russia's exported commodities of ponies, butter, eggs, timber, grain and third-class emigrants saw in the Jews of Libau the means to control and profit from the export of the Imperial Russia's agrarian produce. As the port reached what Hoyle styled the second stage in the evolution of port city inter-relationships, so its port Jewish population expanded to ever-greater heights. By the time of the visit of Major William Evans-Gordon, the MP for Stepney in London in 1902, the Jewish merchants controlled a large proportion of the export trade of perishable commodities.

The commercial harbour is convenient, and is being much improved. A very large export trade is carried on from here in the produce of the country – grain, wood, eggs, etc. – and this is entirely in the hands of Jewish merchants.<sup>19</sup>

The influence of these port Jews was not just confined to their locality. Whether based in Libau, Riga or even St Petersburg, the Port Jews of the Baltic often had smaller offices, branches or sub-agents based in other Baltic or North Sea ports. Whether they remained or departed Russia's Baltic ports in the wake of the anti-semitic measures introduced during the early 1890s, the networks that they had established would continue to develop in Russia's northern ports, and those port cities to which they had emigrated.

Nathan Schapiro, who ran a business that exported Russian ponies to the coalfields of northern England and to the London Omnibus Company, typified the port Jew of the period.<sup>20</sup> Schapiro emigrated to England with his family in 1866, and settled in Doncaster, a town situated on the edge of the Yorkshire coalfields, around 1876. Though living in Britain he had relatives in the ports of Riga and Hamburg, commercial associates in Hull and a business based in Doncaster. He, his port Jewish relatives and the network of horse dealers that they knew throughout Russia then arranged for ponies to be transported from the Russian interior to the port city interface, where the Wilson Line of Hull (who provided the scheduled steamships needed to export livestock, emigrants and perishable produce between the Baltic ports of St Petersburg, Riga, Libau, Windau, Stettin and Copenhagen) then transported these goods to the British ports of Hull and London. From these British ports, the ponies were then transported to the coalfield or transport depot – with all

the profit from the export being retained by the Jewish merchant. The links established between Jewish merchants who exported ponies, horses, eggs, grain and butter, and the company that conveyed the goods was imperative to the long-term success of both agent and ship-owner alike. Business associations in this sphere often passed from generation to generation. When Schapiro died he wished to be buried 'back home'. Yet his children and grandchildren continued to live in the western cities where they had established themselves.

Through serving as brokers, the Jews of Libau, like the Schapiros at Riga, gained an important niche in an expanding export market. Throughout the period between 1880 and 1914, as exports of horses, butter and timber grew, so the contribution they made to port-based commerce expanded – at the same time as their rights as citizens declined.<sup>21</sup> As Table 1 demonstrates, the import of timber, horses and what Gordon Jackson referred to as the 'breakfast trades' were as important to Britain as the products imported from the British Empire.<sup>22</sup>

TABLE 1  
THE SCALE OF SPECIFIC IMPORTS TO BRITISH PORTS  
FROM RUSSIAN BALTIC PORTS, 1894–1905<sup>23</sup>

Year	Number of Aliens	Number of Horses	Tons of Grain	Number of Eggs	Loads of Timber
1894	4,706	3,653	11,900,832	1,367,559	1,989,455
1895	3,595	2,427	12,841,040	2,215,280	1,935,445
1896	3,353	3,198	11,926,500	2,403,779	2,156,717
1897	5,805	5,662	10,087,880	3,132,333	2,304,977
1898	2,749	5,413	6,758,020(*)	3,645,903	2,174,552
1899	4,453	7,198	5,046,900(*)	4,318,601	2,220,327
1900	8,185	11,779	12,091,970	4,024,712	2,365,645
1901	7,562	10,754	13,365,540	4,492,110	2,390,957
1902	12,479	11,430	8,696,915	5,338,757	2,581,616
1903	11,391	12,801	9,172,644	6,802,773	2,795,353
1904	13,951	2,811	9,655,680	7,032,906	2,855,286
1905	15,086	2,535	11,179,933	7,621,793	2,885,044
Total	93,315	79,661	122,723,854	52,396,506	28,655,374

Source: British Parliamentary Papers (BPP), *Annual Statements of Trade and Navigation* (1894–1905); and BPP, *Statistical Tables Relating to Emigration and Immigration from and into the United Kingdom* (1894–1905).

Notes: The quantity of goods imported included all emanating from Russia's northern ports. 'Horses' included ponies. The term 'Grain' included wheat, barley, oats, rye and buckwheat. 'Timber' included only wood that was hewn, sawn or split, and staves of all dimensions. The rate of aliens arriving in Britain only included those emanating from the port of Libau. Few were ever recorded as leaving from Windau, Riga or St Petersburg. (\*) Decreases affected by crop failures.

TABLE 2  
THE VALUE OF SPECIFIC IMPORTS TO BRITISH PORTS  
FROM RUSSIAN BALTIC PORTS (IN POUNDS STERLING), 1894-1905

	Year	Horses	Grain	Eggs	Timber	Percentage of Total Imports from the Russian Baltic
1894		34,686	3,055,053	383,039	3,912,140	61
1895		27,104	3,058,735	596,652	3,665,595	56
1896		33,445	2,985,778	629,101	4,339,444	59
1897		54,589	3,140,300	812,297	4,961,092	59
1898		54,544	2,410,847(*)	966,129	4,714,087	59
1899		73,067	1,382,676(*)	1,183,031	5,030,744	58
1900		116,056	3,245,187	1,109,553	6,143,194	65
1901		107,445	3,848,668	1,207,474	5,520,757	64
1902		114,842	2,797,414	1,509,699	6,086,720	62
1903		134,554	2,461,109	1,866,421	6,512,322	59
1904		29,399(**)	2,956,266	2,042,520	6,221,289	64
1905		27,599(**)	3,228,765	2,425,809	6,297,899	61
Total		807,330	34,570,798	14,731,725	63,405,283	61

*Source:* BPP, *Annual Statements of Trade and Navigation* (1894-1905).

*Notes:* The value of goods imported included all emanating from Russia's northern ports. 'Horses' included ponies. The term 'Grain' included wheat, barley, oats, rye and buckwheat. 'Timber' included only wood that was hewn, sawn or split, and staves of all dimensions. (\*) Decreases affected by crop failures. (\*\*) Decrease affected by Russo-Japanese War.

The important role that the Jews of the Russian Baltic ports played in this trade cannot be overestimated. As Table 2 indicates, the percentage (in value) of the exported products known to be almost entirely in the hands of Jewish merchants represented between 56 and 65 per cent of all imports arriving into Britain from Russia's northern ports, totalling between three and five million pounds each year. The role they played was visible both on the dockside in Libau and through the official correspondence of the British and US governments.<sup>24</sup> Such figures do not even include goods exported to other trading nations such as Denmark, Germany and France.

Though the trade controlled by Libau's Jewish merchants was less than that at the nearby port of Riga, Libau's role as a conduit of emigrants – Finns, Slavs, Russians, Poles and Jews – inflated her importance beyond that of neighbouring Riga and other Baltic port Jewish communities. Because of the emergence of the port as an outlet for mass migration in the early 1890s, Libau's resident Jewish community acquired importance and developed an identity independently of the role it played in the export of agrarian produce. This 'market' in the movement of humans transformed Libau into one of the world's leading centres for westward migration, providing Libau's Jewish merchants with the opportunity to profit from a trade that was 'open' to them.



## The Emigrant Business and the Role of Jewry

As in port cities in Germany, Britain, the United States and South Africa, the Jews of Libau profited from the business of emigration by acting as emigration agents, money exchangers and hoteliers. The so-called emigrant hotels that they ran in Libau varied in size and standard as they did in Hamburg, Hull, London, New York and Cape Town.<sup>25</sup> Though they welcomed gentiles as well as members of their own faith, as with the export of timber, horses and the 'breakfast trades', those who operated the hotels saturated a business opportunity that arose with the expansion of the maritime centre in which they lived. Emigration grew to become an important aspect of Baltic commerce. As Libau developed throughout the 1890s and 1900s as a centre for outward migration from Russia, so her Jews were increasingly important as facilitators of this trade.<sup>26</sup> As the United States Immigration Commission reported in 1910:

All of the boarding houses [for emigration] visited were kept by Hebrews, but in no instance were the guests confined to any one race, and Poles, Hebrews, and Lithuanians were dwelling in apparent harmony under one roof, and in many instances in the same room.<sup>27</sup>

As the Jewish community grew in Libau, links with family, friends and business acquaintances in the Pale and through other maritime centres in which Jews had settled led to the expansion of exports through the Baltic ports of Libau, Riga and Windau.

The emigrant market had emerged by the mid-1890s as an important source of revenue for Jews situated in the ports of embarkation in Hamburg, Bremen, Liverpool and Southampton, as much as it was for those receiving immigrants in Hull, London, Cape Town or New York (to name but a few). Each of these ports saw large numbers of migrants passing through their transport systems and yet they also served as magnets to other Jews living in *shetl* throughout the Russian interior. In order to reach such emigration centres the migrants travelled on the same transport routes as the commodities that were being exported to maritime entrepôts in the Baltic, Humber, Thames, Solent or Mersey. As demand to leave the Pale intensified after the Kishinev Pogrom, one trade – the emigrant trade – would grow the most. As the agent for the Wilson Line based in Riga messaged his Hull-based employers in 1904:

It will also interest you to hear that just now a Mr. Freydberg of the firm of Karlsberg, Spiro and Co., Libau, who ship all their emigrants from Libau by the Forende steamers called and wanted to arrange with us to take emigrants by our weekly boat to Libau, and he also asked if we would take emigrants by our London Boats, as he was unable to deal with the whole lot of them in Libau.<sup>28</sup>

TABLE 3  
THE NUMBER AND STATUS OF ALIENS ARRIVING IN BRITAIN FROM LIBAU, 1894-1905

Year of Arrival	Number of Aliens not described as en route to another country*	Number of Aliens described as en route to another country	Total number of Aliens recorded as arriving from Libau
1893	225	204	429
1894	671	4,035	4,706
1895	628	2,967	3,595
1896	1,787	1,566	3,353
1897	4,409	1,396	5,805
1898	2,013	736	2,749
1899	3,122	1,331	4,453
1900	5,226	2,959	8,185
1901	5,743	1,819	7,562
1902	6,941	5,538	12,479
1903	6,580	4,811	11,391
1904	7,656	6,295	13,951
1905	8,646	6,440	15,086
Total	53,647	40,097	93,744

*Source:* BPP, *Statistical Tables Relating to Emigration and Immigration from and into the United Kingdom* (1894-1905).

*Notes:* (\*) Includes alien seamen. Many of those not described as en route to another destination subsequently re-migrated to America, Canada or South Africa within a short time of their arrival. Prior to 1906 the statistical returns made to Parliament failed to distinguish between the number of immigrants and transmigrants arriving via London.

The large number of Russian and Polish emigrants leaving through the port of Libau continued to grow at an alarming rate. Only when Libau was unable to facilitate all of the Jews that desired to emigrate would 'surplus' Jewish emigrants be sent through Riga (or to a lesser extent via the Finnish port of Hangö). As Table 3 demonstrates, Libau had emerged as an important source of continental embarkation to Britain by 1894. By 1904, as reported in British Parliamentary Papers, it was the second most important source of alien migrants to Britain.<sup>29</sup>

It was of no surprise that so many chose to emigrate via the port of Libau. The rail link that had opened between it and Romny in 1880 also linked the port with Kovno – the *gubernia* that exported more Jews to South Africa than any other region of the Pale – and other important sources of western immigrant origin. The opportunity to leave had now reached all those in the northern half of the Pale and the districts surrounding Libau. Jewish merchants gained from the improvements made to Russia's transport system as much as those wishing to leave. Though the journey could be lengthy (as the trains carried cargo and passengers) it did not include the crossing of an international border that necessitated interaction with border officials nor

overland travel through alien lands. The Jews leaving via Libau were spared such encounters, as they did not have to converse in a language other than their native tongue. Jews situated in this Baltic port provided their food and lodgings in a port just 110 miles from Kovno. Though a passport was often required, the gendarmes policing access to the port were as open to bribery as those policing the German and Austrian land borders. Emigration through Libau similarly did not entail as rigorous a medical inspection as had been in place since 1895 on the German border and at German ports as officials representing western governments rarely policed access to the vessels moored in Libau's Winter Harbour and the Russian Imperial Government did not regulate the standards according to which emigrants were transported.

### **The Threat Libau Posed to Other Port Jewish Communities**

Trade brought prosperity and entrepreneurial opportunities to the Jewish merchants operating in or from Baltic ports such as Libau. Though some prospered most of their co-religionists still lived in poor conditions. As with other port Jewish communities the expansion of the community reduced the growth in overall prosperity that buoyant trading conditions offered. In 1903 a British official visiting the Jews of Libau described them as being:

Very similar to those ... at St. Petersburg and Riga. There is a great deal of poverty among[st them], but the houses of the poor appeared excellent to one accustomed to the horrors of the East End [of London]. There is plenty of space and air, and rents are low.<sup>30</sup>

Life for many of those Jews living in Libau was thus very simple. Population increase, from 6,651 in 1881 to 10,398 in 1911, negated any real improvement that they had made in their standard of living. Often those who could leave did so. Even the poor living conditions in western ports where Jewish emigrants settled offered seemingly greater opportunity than the brutality of Imperial Russia and the comparative opportunities provided in Baltic port cities such as Libau. Yet conditions in the new areas of settlement were harsh. Some merchants like Hyman Schapiro's father may have returned home 'to die in their native homeland', while the poor immigrant in the East End of London often yearned for the simple life they had once enjoyed 'in their homeland'.<sup>31</sup> Such commentary on the repercussions of settling in a western port was also noted by those opposed to 'Russia's poor' settling in Britain's imperial capital. As newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* ran commentaries championing alien restriction, immigrants arriving in Britain from Libau provided scientific justification for their cause when vessels inspected by the Medical Officers of Health for the Port of London and Hull and Goole Port Sanitary Authorities were deemed unhygienic.<sup>32</sup>

The business of emigration via the port of Libau had grown significantly by the beginning of the twentieth century. Such was the demand that vessels unsuited to conveying passengers were increasingly chartered by foreign companies to meet the pressure for passage westward via a Baltic port, principally Libau. After a three to five day journey to Britain, these unsuitable conditions, chiefly the lack of necessary sanitary facilities, turned the ethnically diverse range of immigrants into a sanitation threat to Britain's port-based populations. Though diseases such as typhus, small pox and diarrhoea were as prevalent in urban Britain as they were in maritime centres, instances of pestilence in Hull, Grimsby, London and Southampton were increasingly blamed on the newly arrived alien. Though conditions could, and were, improved upon for inward-bound merchant ships, the association of the health threat with ethnic identity was to become automatic as far as the anti-semitic was concerned.

Dr H. Williams (Port Medical Officer of Health for the Port of London Sanitary Authority) described those arriving from Libau in the evidence that he presented to the Royal Commission in 1903.

Their clothing was dirty, and the smell was almost unbearable; it was such a smell that you would not like to travel in the same 'bus with these people; it was a peculiar smell – a smell that I have never been able quite to find anything to compare with; the nearest approach to a comparison is the smell of an acetylene lamp which has been blown out. It somewhat resembles that.<sup>33</sup>

The commencement of direct steamship services by the Russian American Line and the Russian Volunteer Fleet (both in 1906) between Libau and New York did not improve matters because the checks in place at Libau were far from adequate.<sup>34</sup> Though every steerage emigrant who embarked for the United States was supposed to undergo a medical inspection at the port of embarkation, as the US Immigration Commission lamented in its report in 1911:

The American consular agent at Libau had practically no part in the examination of emigrants at the time of the committee's visit. At the examination witnessed by this official was represented at the dock by a clerk who could speak no English, and who mechanically placed the consular seal on every inspection card presented to him without even looking at the person to whom the card had been issued. The committee did not see the consular agent, but was informed that like his clerk, he could not speak English. It was stated that he never attended the embarkation of emigrants, and in fact only signed the ship's bill of health when it was sent to his house or office.<sup>35</sup>

Although the agents of the Russian American Line were penalised by the company for sending to Libau persons who are afflicted with certain diseases, such as typhus, small pox, scarlet fever and ~~tr~~achoma, the providers of direct services continued to send unsuitable immigrants on the ~~tr~~ansatlantic crossing. Between 1 September 1906 and 10 May 1908 of those emigrants sent by the Russian Volunteer Fleet from Libau a total of 654 emigrants were rejected.<sup>36</sup>

Even when their economic status and not just their physical condition was taken into account, during events like the Boer War, those emerging from the port of Libau were perceived by the receiving governments as a real threat. In the Boer conflict, the Prime Minister of South Africa intervened in the issue of alien immigration by limiting the arrival of those 'via Libau and London' to those of a more desirable class. In the debate over the issuance of passports and or permits to enter the Cape Colony, the Cape Government insisted that 'no difficulty should be placed in the way of the immigration into the Colony of a certain class viz:- British working men, clerks and shepherds, for whom there is great demand'.<sup>37</sup> It was evidently not the British immigrants that the Cape feared. Permits, introduced under the extension of martial law to the ports in September 1901, were to be used to limit 'that very considerable number of Foreigners, especially Polish Jews, [who] are applying for permit[s] to proceed to South Africa [via Libau]'.<sup>38</sup> Sir Henry H. Settle, the General Officer Commanding Cape Town, wrote to the British High Commissioner:

Relating to the issue of permits at Libau to indigent Russian subjects and to state that indigent foreigners are beginning to arrive in large numbers. As these persons have permits they must be permitted to land but it would appear most desirable to prohibit the issue of permits to foreigners until all prisoners of war have been repatriated. If you concur, I would suggest that representations be made to the Imperial Government on the subject.<sup>39</sup>

The enforcement of the 1905 Aliens Act in Britain from January 1906 onwards reduced the inflow of poor Jewish immigrants to Britain via the port Jewish community at Libau. But, as the US Immigration Commission acknowledged, what ceased to be a problem for London and Hull continued to be an issue for the United States and Britain's Dominions. Despite protestations to the contrary by steamship operators Libau continued to defy the attempts of western governments to regulate the westward flow of Russia's poor.<sup>40</sup>

The passing of the 1906 British Merchant Shipping Act may have finally limited the ability of foreign merchant fleets to convey emigrants in diabolical conditions, but the damage had already been done. The business of emigration via the Baltic port, a business entirely in the hands of Jewish operators, had been used by anti-alien campaigners in Britain to introduce anti-alien, often perceived as anti-Jewish, legislation. The earnest desire by port Jews in Libau

to profit had effectively removed from them the long-term opportunity to profit from the movement of their co-religionists. Libau's port Jewish community was not solely to blame. Its merchants had merely acted as they had always done, by maximising the opportunity for entrepreneurial gain in the short term before moving onward to other port Jewish communities in the West in the longer term. The difference with the trade in human cargo was that this aspect of the port Jews' business had declined significantly due to the failure of Jewish agents to curtail the inhumane aspect of the mass migration of people.

## Conclusion

Though commented upon extensively in medical, commercial and parliamentary correspondence of the time, Libau's place in Jewish historiography has been largely consigned to oblivion because of the fluidity of her port Jewish community and the overshadowing influence that the larger port Jewish community of Riga would have upon written recollections of the Jews of the Baltic.

Yet Libau was of first-rank importance as an entrepôt for the export of goods such as timber, grain, eggs and butter that arose because of the expansion of the transport system within and without Imperial Russia. Though Jews were forcibly moved from some of Russia's Baltic ports throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the freedoms enjoyed by the Baltic Jews of Courland continued to be allowed to Jews in Libau and Riga because their activities were so economically advantageous to an industrialising Russia. Jews within the Pale, in Libau itself and at her harbour profited from the movement of such goods. As the need to leave Russia intensified in the wake of the Kishinev pogrom and the deterioration of life in the Pale, Danish and British shipping lines that had for decades shipped commodities such as timber, eggs and ponies (brokered by Jewish agents) began to export Jews as a staple commodity. The availability of shipping from a port within the Russian Empire enabled many Jews from Libau, the Baltic and within the Pale itself to evade the intensive medical inspections that had been introduced along the Russian border with Germany in the wake of the 1892 cholera epidemic at Hamburg. Though Libau provided a nearby port through which so many could emigrate, or work their passage to the West, the dire state in which so many passengers were transported posed both a visible and invisible threat to Jews that had already travelled to British and other western port cities. The barely established Jews faced a threat to those freedoms and rights which port Jews had previously gained because of the fear of disease carried by those newly arriving from the Baltic – and the port of Libau in particular.

Whether the mercantile status of Jews in Libau equates with the position

enjoyed by Lois Dubin's port Jews of Trieste is debateable. Neither is it clear whether the port of Libau enjoyed an equivalent status to the semi-autonomous ports of Trieste or Odessa. But though Riga retained a larger Jewish community than Libau, and although it could be said that it had a greater influence upon Jewish enlightenment than the latter port, the Jews of Libau undoubtedly held a unique position in commercial affairs within and without absolutist Russia during the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Libau's importance in the forging of a distinctive port Jewish identity, I would argue, is thus far greater than other Baltic ports because she acted as an exporter of Jews and not just because of her communal size or economic strength.

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#### NOTES

1. Foremost in these studies are Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976); Lloyd Gartner, *The Jewish Immigrant in England, 1870–1914* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000); and Ronald Sanders, *Shores of Refuge: A Hundred Years of Jewish Emigration* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988). Each has described the mechanics, motives and patterns of movement evident between 1870 and 1914. Edited works resulting from conferences arranged under the auspices of the Jewish Historical Society of England offer important insights into the migration westward of East European Jewry. See (for example) Aubrey Newman, *Migration and Settlement* (London: Jewish Historical Society of England, 1970); and Aubrey Newman and Stephen Massil (eds.), *Patterns of Migration, 1850–1914* (London: Jewish Historical Society of England, 1996). Recent studies that have examined the westward emigration, movement and settlement of East European Jewry include John Klier, *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question, 1855–1881* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Rainer Liedtke, *Jewish Welfare in Hamburg and Manchester, c.1850–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Tony Kushner and Katherine Knox (eds.), *Refugees in an Age of Genocide: Global, National, and Local Perspectives during the Twentieth Century* (London: Frank Cass, 1999); and Anne Kershen, *Uniting the Tailors: Trade Unionism among the Tailoring Workers of London and Leeds, 1870–1939* (Ilford: Frank Cass, 1995).
2. The conceptual base for the 'port Jew' stereotype has evolved significantly since it was first defined by Lois Dubin and David Sorkin. See Lois Dubin, *The Port Jews of Habsburg Trieste* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); and David Sorkin, 'The Port Jew: Notes Toward a Social Type', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50.1 (Spring 1999), 87–97. For recent discussion, see David Cesarani (ed.), *Port Jews: Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres, 1550–1950* (London: Frank Cass, 2002). In this latter volume, David Cesarani highlighted the need to examine the port Jews of Riga – for which I hope this essay has offered some contextual insight – and Tony Kushner urged the wider application of non-elite Ashkenazim beyond the eighteenth century, for which the port of Libau (as one source of 'the phenomena of transmigration') will hopefully serve as an important example.

3. I. Singer (ed.), *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* (New York and London: Funk & Wagnall's, 1901–06), vol. 4, p.312.
4. The port was founded in 1625.
5. *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* (see note 3), vol.4, p.621.
6. Simon Dubnov, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland: From the Earliest Times until the Present Day* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1918), vol.1, p.321.
7. An example of the discrimination that the Jews of Courland experienced can be seen in the provincial capital, Mitau. According to *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (see note 3), vol.4, p.312, the Jews of Mitau could only live in 'the so-called Jewish street (known as "Doblen'sche Strasse") as protected Jews ("Schutzjuden")'.
8. For a history of the development of the town and port of Libau, see *Geschichte der Stadt Libau von Alexander Wegner* (Hannover and Döhren: Verlag Harro v. Hirschheydt, 1970). Libau's role as an emigrant port was briefly discussed in Vlad Sosnikov, 'Libau: A Gateway for Emigration From the Russian Empire', *Avotaynu* XV.1 (Spring 1999), 20. Other references are made in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* (see note 3); and Dubnov (see note 6).
9. Brian Hoyle, 'Fields of Tension: Development Dynamics at the Port-City Interface', in Cesarani (see note 2), p.17.
10. *Ibid.*, p.18.
11. *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* (see note 3), vol.4, p.312, notes that most of the Jews living in Courland were believed to have originated either by sea from Prussia and North Germany or (as described by Brutzkus) from the neighbouring countries of Lithuania and Poland.
12. Dov Levin (ed.), *Pinkas ha-kehilot; entriklopediya shel ha-yishuvim le-min hivsardam ve-ad le-aher shoat milhemet ha-olam ha-sheniya: Latvia and Estonia* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988), pp.170, 180–86. Data for the size of Libau's Jewish population varies according to which source is used. Libau's total population in 1897 was 64,505 according to *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* (see note 3), vol.4, p.311. Its Jewish community was stated as 9,700 (or 15 per cent of the port city's population). Of these 3,225 were described as artisans (of whom 1,309 were masters) and 117 were day labourers. The Jewish population of Courland similarly expanded during the nineteenth century from 9,000 in 1835 to 49,102 in 1897.
13. BC 949: Kaplan Centre Interviews, Transcript of an interview between Eve Horwitz and Dr Maurice Immerman, p.5, September 1990. Immerman lived in Talsen, Courland before emigrating with his parents and siblings to South Africa (via Libau) in 1906.
14. Libau was the second largest port Jewish settlement within the Baltic region by the time of the 1897 Russian census. According to *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* (see note 3), vol.4, p.311, in 1897 Riga had 21,963 Jews, Libau 10,860, Friedrichstadt 3,800 and Windau 1,350.
15. Courland retained a relative degree of autonomy, unlike the Polish Jews living in the Russian Pale of Settlement. Such territorial 'independence' enabled successive Imperial rulers to grant freedoms to Jews living in this region and for its Jews to retain certain economic privileges unlike those living in neighbouring Baltic ports such as Danzig, Riga or St Petersburg.
16. The port gained its first synagogue in 1708.
17. Dubnov (see note 6), vol.2, p.133. The links between Libau and the Mendelssohns were the direct result of the friendship between Aaron Horwitz, rabbi of Hasenpot (in Courland) and later of Berlin as cited in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* (see note 3), vol.4, p.315.
18. Philip Klein, a former rabbi of Libau, emigrated to New York and was described by *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* (see note 3), vol.7, p.522, as rabbi of the 'Hungarian congregation Oheb Zedek, perhaps the most important position among the East Side congregations of New York'. Other port Jews who were educated in Libau (before later emigrating to the West) include Joseph Jacobs, Professor of Hebrew and rabbi of Liverpool (*Jewish Chronicle*, 31 December 1881); John Paley, American journalist and editor of *Jüdischer Tageblatt* and *Jüdische Gazetten* (*American Jewish Yearbook*, 5665 [Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1904–05]); and Baltimore rabbi Schepsel Schaffer (*American Jewish Yearbook*, 5665). Perhaps the most renowned emigrant from this period, who left one port for another, was the artist Mark Rothko (born Marcus Rothkowitz), who was born in Libau before emigrating on 5 August 1913 onboard the SS *Czar*. Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), pp.18–19.
19. Evidence of Major William Evans Gordon to the *Royal Commission on Alien Immigration, Minutes of Evidence* (London, 1903), vol.II, p.455, M.13349.



20. I would like to thank Dr Charles Freeman for information on his great grandfather's business and family history. Details of Schapiro's business featured in his obituary, entitled 'Death of Mr. H. Schapiro. Well-known Importer of Pit Ponies', *Doncaster Chronicle*, 6 May 1921, p.12. An example of the role of Jewish timber merchants providing ports such as Libau with timber for export is provided by Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), pp.27–9.
21. In 1891, 1892 and 1903 (following the rise of political agitation that followed the Kishinev pogrom), Imperial Russia reduced the rights of relatively free Jews of Libau, just as she had in Riga and St Petersburg.
22. Gordon Jackson, 'Sea Trade', in R.J. Morris, *Atlas of Industrializing Britain* (London: Methuen, 1986), p.102.
23. Though non-Jewish merchants and ship-owners undoubtedly contributed towards the growth of trade in these imported commodities, the dominant influence of the Jewish merchants was noted by political commentators of the time. For an example, see William Evans-Gordon, *The Alien Immigrant* (London and New York: William Heinemann and Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1903), p.98.
24. An image of a port Jewish merchant working in Libau is provided in Evans-Gordon (see note 23), p.105. The Jew illustrated in 'From Other Lands', *Hull Daily Mail*, 16 February 1910, p.4, was most probably one that has just arrived on board a ship from Libau and whose dress shows that those leaving via the Baltic port were not always poor.
25. For a description of arrival at a lodging house in Libau, see the report on emigration via Libau made for the Jewish Colonisation Association by Mr Janovski in 1906: Central Jewish Archives, Jerusalem, ICA, Mr Janovski's Report on his journey of Inspection (October–November [1906]). Similar buildings in British ports were frequently criticised by Urban and Port Medical Officers of Health. See, for example, the Annual Reports of the Medical Officer of Health for the Hull and Goole Port Sanitary Authority, Hull City Archives; the Annual Reports by the Medical Officer of Health to Port of London Sanitary Authority, Corporation of London Record Office; and the Annual Reports by the Medical Officer of Health to the London Metropolitan Sanitary Authority, London Metropolitan Archives. For an analysis of the medical 'threat' of immigration, see Krista Maglen, *Intercepting Infection: Quarantine, the Port Sanitary Authority and Immigration in Late Nineteenth Century Britain* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Glasgow, 2001). Some of the findings of Maglen's work have recently been included in "The First Line of Defence": British Quarantine and the Port Sanitary Authorities in the Nineteenth Century', *Social History of Medicine* 15.3 (2002), 413–28.
26. The importance of Libau as Russia's premier emigrant port continued until the outbreak of the First World War. *The Times*, 14 March 1914, p.7, in an article on the detrimental effects that Russian legislation may have upon British shipping, noted that 'Libau is the chief Russian port of departure, but many of the emigrants, instead of going directly by the Russian Transatlantic line, proceed by steamer to England and there take passage by one of the English Transatlantic lines'.
27. 'Emigration Conditions in Europe – Libau', in 'The Immigration Commission – Emigration Conditions in Europe', in *Senate Documents* (Washington, DC: US Government, 1910–11), vol.12, pp.104–5.
28. Hull University Archives and Special Collections, DEW/4/31a, letter from Helmsing and Grimm to Thomas Wilson Sons and Co., 27 April 1904. Later correspondence in this collection shows how Freyberg was a Jew. Though he was normally a very able agent for both DFDS (referred to here as Forende) and later Thomas Wilson, Sons & Co., during negotiations for the implementation of the 1910 Russian Emigration Law his ability to represent the foreign shipping lines was ruled impossible because he was both German and Jewish.
29. Hamburg was the most important source for inward Russian and Polish migration to Britain during this period.
30. *Royal Commission on Alien Immigration* (see note 19), vol.II, p.455, M.13349.
31. George Sims, 'Sweated London', in idem (ed.), *Living London: its work and its play, its humour and its pathos, its sights and its scenes* (London: Cassell, c.1902), vol.1, pp.49–55.
32. For an example of the poor state of migrant-carrying vessels arriving in Britain via the Thames and Humber (respectively), see the arrival of the SS *George* on 12 November 1896, Corporation

- of London Record Office, CSFR 27.6, p.16; and the SS *Yrsa* on 7 October 1898, Hull City Archives, WHG 1/30, p.79.
33. *Royal Commission on Alien Immigration* (see note 19), vol II, p.206, M.6116.
  34. N.R.P. Bonsor, *North Atlantic Seaway* (St Brelade, Cambridge: Brookside Publications, 1979), vol.III, pp.1346–1357.
  35. 'The Immigration Commission – Emigration Conditions in Europe', in *Senate Documents* (see note 27), p.104.
  36. *Ibid.*, p.105. Details of the inspection of emigrants leaving for America appears in the *Annual Report of the Commissioner General of Immigration to the Secretary of Labour for the fiscal year ended June 30 1913* (Washington, DC: US Government, 1914), pp.511–12.
  37. Cape Archives, PMO 84, Archives of the Prime Minister's Office, Cape Colony, 6 June 1902, No.314.
  38. Telegram sent by the Secretary of State, London to the High Commissioner in Johannesburg, Cape Archives, PMO 85, Archives of the Prime Minister's Office, Cape Colony, 19 June 1902, No.4.
  39. Cited in Milton Shain, *Jewry and Cape Society* (Cape Town: Historical Publication Society, 1983), p.24.
  40. 'The Immigration Commission – Emigration Conditions in Europe', in *Senate Documents* (see note 27), p.104.