

Personal Recollections on the History of Research in Jewish Demography

Roberto Bachi

I consider it a great privilege to have been asked to say a few words of welcome to the participants at the demographic sessions of the World Congress of Jewish Studies. I am today fulfilling this pleasant function for the eleventh time.

The first attempt to bring the problems of Jewish demography to the attention of the Congress of Jewish Studies was in the Congress which was held on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem in 1947. During the forty-six years which have elapsed since then, the changes that have occurred in the general conditions of Eretz-Israel, in the demographic situation of our People and in the prospective for our studies have been enormous.

In 1947 the Jews still constituted only a minority of about 32% of the population of Mandatory Palestine. At the time, because the unsettled political conditions of the country had hindered various attempts to take a census, we did not know our exact number. The rough estimates prepared separately by the Statistical Offices of the British Mandatory government and of the Jewish Agency differed considerably, giving demographic research an unpleasant political flavor. This can be explained by the fact that the triangular struggle which was then going on between Jews, Arabs and British was largely based on demographic considerations. Both the Arabs and the Mandatory Power were against the Jews, and strove to keep the survivors of the *Shoah* outside Palestine in order to avoid any drastic change in the ethnic composition of the population. The intense and bitter international debate on the political future of Palestine had the same character and contributed to the climate of insecurity.

Under these circumstances, the very idea of convening a World Congress of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem was a daring one: it reflected the importance attached, already then, to our country as a center of Jewish research. However, as far as I can remember, the place given to contemporary Jewry within the general context of Jewish studies was rather modest, and the position of demography was almost marginal. Despite this, the Congress had the privilege of bringing to Jerusalem two outstanding survivors of what appeared then to have been the golden age of Jewish demographic research: Professor Liebman Hersch and Dr.

Jacob Lestschinsky. Four years earlier, we had mourned the death of the Jewish sociologist and demographer Arthur Ruppin.

For many of you today, presumably, these names do not have much meaning. They are, nonetheless, very important in the long-term history of our field of study. Allow me, therefore, to say a few words about them, based on personal recollections rather than on systematic documentary research.

The appellation of "golden age of Jewish demographic research" which I gave to the period extending from the end of the last century to the first decades of the 20th century may sound strange today, in the light of the positive developments which have occurred in recent decades. However, at the end of the tragic forties, it appeared fully justified.

Until World War II, the majority of the Jewish population lived in countries where censuses, vital statistics and other sets of official statistics included data classified by religion, language, and/or nationality. It was therefore comparatively easy to obtain statistical information on the size of the Jewish populations scattered over Diaspora countries, on their structure, on vital and migratory events, geographical distribution and so on. The statistical coverage of Jewish populations in the world was almost complete in 1897, when the census of the Czarist empire made available very detailed and reliable data for the largest nucleus of Jewish world population, that of Eastern Europe.

At about that time, general demographic research had been rapidly progressing in Europe. Jewish minorities were considered interesting objects for research, not only for scientific reasons but also thanks to frequent debates on racial problems and on the political and cultural problem of the position of the Jews in European societies. Statistical studies on the Jews were carried out both by Jewish and non-Jewish scientists. At that time, the most important center for research was Germany, where Arthur Ruppin had become a leading scientist. His outstanding personality and his deep interest in the future of the Jewish people played a significant role in the development of the Society for the Statistics and Demography of the Jews, which had been founded by Nossig in 1903. The Bureau attached to the Society was very active; it published a *Review on Jewish Demography and Statistics* and edited many other publications. Ruppin laid the foundations of sociology of world Jewry which found expression in the many books published, in various languages, between 1904 and 1940. He came to Palestine, where he was also a pioneer in the teaching of Jewish sociology at the Hebrew University. A typical "Yecke," he was very accurate in his teaching, but his Hebrew was poor and his mistakes were a source of much fun to the students of the Hebrew University. You may hear more on this from our colleague Prof. Schmelz who had the good fortune of being one of Ruppin's pupils. As for me, it was my personal privilege to have some contact with him in my early days here, after my immigration to Eretz-Israel.

The death of Ruppin, leaving no direct successor in the Hebrew University, constituted a great loss for Jewish demographic research, yet it was only one episode in the tragic chain of calamities which actually brought to an end the golden age.

During the late thirties or the early forties in Germany, the society for the Demography and Statistics of the Jews disappeared, as did the research institutions in Eastern Europe. Among these, I wish to mention YIVO, the Jewish scientific institute which conducted its research in Yiddish. YIVO had taken an active interest in economic, demographic and statistical research on the Jews. The outstanding figure in these studies was Jacob Lestschinsky who authored, among other publications, the important work on *Probleme der Bevölkerungsbewegung bei den Juden*, which was edited by Corrado Gini in Metron. In 1938, Lestschinsky emigrated to the United States, and in 1959 he settled in Israel. One of his last works was a provisional evaluation of the demographic consequences of the *Shoah*. His collection of books, papers and notes is now to be found at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry and constitutes a symbolic bridge between the old and new generations of researchers in Jewish demography.

The most important blow inflicted on the research of the statistics and demography of the Jews by the *Shoah* was that, after the war, the principal source of information on Diaspora Jewry had almost completely disappeared. In the late forties, it became clear that the majority of Diaspora Jewry now lived in countries in which official statistics did not supply data on them. The danger became evident that statistical and demographic research on the Jews would be reduced to the study of the past and would be unable to deal with present and future trends. This danger was acutely felt among the few students of Jewish demography who had survived the *Shoah*. Among them I wish to mention again Prof. Liebman Hersch. Hersch, an East-European by origin, found a position at the University of Geneva and became well-known for his studies on general demography, statistics and on the demographic characteristics and internal migrations of the Jews. He was an ardent Bundist and Yiddishist, and very anti-Zionist. In a paper published in Metron in 1928 based on data regarding the crisis which followed the aliyah wave of the mid-twenties, he demonstrated that Zionism had no chance of attaining its aims. However, in 1947, when he came to Jerusalem to participate in the first Congress of Jewish Studies he had become a different man. With emotion he spoke in beautiful classical Hebrew, a language in which he had not uttered a word since his youth. He still felt himself to be a representative of the Diaspora but discovered that Jews of Galuth and Jews of Eretz Israel were brothers in their *tsarot*. These problems included the grim prospects for Jewish demographic studies. Therefore he was quite elated when he found in Jerusalem some modest signs of rebirth of our studies. In 1954, he served as chairman of the World Population Conference held by the United Nations in Rome. Then he accepted my proposal to informally convene several participants of the Conference who had some interest in Jewish demography, in order to exchange ideas on how it might be possible to revive studies in our field. However, under the circumstances prevailing then, the mere goodwill and interest shown by individual scientists were not sufficient. What was needed was an effort by Jewish organizations to collect basic data.

Strange as it may sound today in the light of the present development of Jewish demographic research in the USA, the most acute problem at that time was the lack

of sufficient information on American Jews. Indirect approaches, based on statistics for the Russian-born and for Yiddish speakers, were becoming more and more obsolete. Useful collections of information by institutions such as the American Jewish Congress and by the Bureau of Dr. Linfield could not compensate for the basic lack of reliable official data.

Dr. Linfield was then Director of the Statistical Bureau of the Synagogue Council of America. He had also been appointed by the US Bureau of the Census as special agent for collecting data on the Jews within the scope of the decennial census of religious bodies. I still remember a meeting which I had with Linfield in New York at the end of 1947. Being then ignorant of the American scene and very naive in my enthusiasm for the revival of world Jewish demographic research, I asked him why the American Jews could not take the initiative to persuade the Bureau of the Census to find ways to collect official data on the Jews. He replied that the Jews were opposed to the collection of information which would label them as a minority like the Blacks.

Some time later, starting a course on Jewish demography at the Hebrew University, I had to explain to the students that the available estimates for American Jews were largely based on methods such as counting the number of absences from school on Yom Kippur, the death ratio approach, informed guesses, and so on. This, of course, was far from satisfactory. When we organized the session on Jewish demography in the Second Congress of Jewish Studies, held in 1957, we were happy to have here Sophia Robison whose book on the Jewish population had shown, already in 1943, possibilities for more reliable approaches.

Up to now, I have narrated personal recollections from two Congresses and a span of ten years. It would be very dangerous to continue at this rate, for my personal memories of the history of Jewish world demography spread over 62 years. In fact, they go back to my participation in the special session on the demography of the Jews at the International Congress for the Study of Population which was held in Rome in 1931, at the initiative of Prof. Gini.

I shall, therefore, close my talk by just adding a few remarks regarding the reports on the demographic sessions of the Congresses of Jewish Studies. Looking at all these reports together, as published by the Institute of Contemporary Jewry and by the Association for Jewish Demography and Statistics, you may get some indication regarding the development of our studies and their history.

Up to the mid-sixties, they reflect the opinion, then current, that the state of this art was going from bad to worse, due to increasing deficiencies of statistical sources. Afterwards, a very marked improvement took place. This seems to be due to the simultaneous action of several factors, such as the following:

- the fantastic improvement in theory, in available tools and public acceptance of sampling methods;
- the change in the attitude of leaders and officials of Jewish institutions in many Diaspora countries, who became increasingly appreciative of the need to base action on knowledge;

- the increasing participation of scholars in sociological and demographic research on the Jews, which are envisaged today as legitimate objects of academic interest;
- the development of official and other reliable sources of statistical information on Israeli Jewry, whose share within world Jewry is continuously increasing;
- the activity at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of a Division for the comparative study of world Jewish demography;
- the active support for collection of information given by the Council of Jewish Federations and other institutes in the Diaspora;
- and, last but not least, the institutionalization of quadrennial meetings of Jewish demographers and sociologists at the Congresses of Jewish Studies.

Comparing the impressive list of about 40 reports on demographic and sociological items in our 11th Congress to the humble beginnings in the First Congress of 1947, I have the impression of dreaming.

I am sure that our good friend, Oscar Schmeltz, shares this impression with me. I single out his name among many others who should be mentioned, because I owe him, since a long time ago, a special debt of gratitude. He is now approaching his 75th birthday; when we started to work together he was aged 29. Since then we have almost daily shared our common hopes, preoccupations, frustrations and satisfactions. Our collaboration started when we were assigned by the Organization of Civil Defense, in 1948, to make a census of the population of Jerusalem under siege and under bombing. It continued through decades in the Central Bureau of Statistics and in the Division for Jewish Demography and Statistics at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University. I still enjoy receiving from him now and then the fruits of his relentless research activities on the demography of Jerusalem, of Israel, of Ottoman Palestine, German Jewry and World Jewry.

I take this opportunity to add my expression of thanks and also my best wishes for the continuation of his scientific activities for many more years to come. I am sure that you will join me in this wish.