

# The Jewish Presence in Eastern Europe

## *The Beginnings*

I assume that for most people encountering the words *Eastern European Jewry*, what immediately comes to mind is Ashkenazic Jewry, whose roots are in the German-speaking areas of Western and Central Europe. Thinking of a name of an early Jewish scholarly figure from Eastern Europe, such as an author of a rabbinical work, the earliest ones coming to mind would probably be, if Poland were to be included (though most Poles of today would no doubt take exception to their being labeled part of Eastern Europe), the sixteenth-century Ashkenazic rabbis from Cracow, R. Moses Isserles (ca. 1530–72), known by the acronym Remu, and R. Solomon Lurie (1510–73), known by the acronym Rashal. This is understandable, since the great figures of the previous generation, like R. Yakov Pollak (1460–1541), considered the first Polish rabbinic authority (though born and raised in Germany), and his pupil R. Sholem-Shakhne of Lublin (1495–1558), the teacher of both Isserles and Lurie, have barely left us any writings of their own.<sup>1</sup>

If we move east of Cracow, to Lviv (aka Lwów, Lemberg), Minsk, or Vilnius in search of names of early scholars, the situation is no better. Moscow I do not mention at all, since Jews were not normally found in the Muscovite state until fairly recently, in the modern period, as indicated by Solzhenitsyn in the ambiguous title of his not entirely unpartisan 2001 book *Dvesti let vmeste (Two Hundred Years Together)*, referring to the relations between Russia and the Jews between 1795 and 1995—that is, after the partitions of Poland in 1772 and 1793, which brought under the rule of the Russian Empire hundreds of thousands of Jews living in the areas that from 1791 onwards made up the greater part of the *T̥um ha-moshav*, the “Pale of Settlement.”

Nevertheless, the Jewish presence in East European lands precedes the migrations from Ashkenaz and perhaps even the formation of Ashkenazic Jewry. The Jewish population in Eastern Europe before the arrival of the Ashkenazic Jews is

considered by scholars to stem from the south, mainly from Byzantium, Persia, and Babylonia, and, according to some scholars, to some degree also from Khazaria (see M. Weinreich 1956, 623; for a detailed discussion of the southern origins of this early Jewry, see Brook 2003a and the literature cited in note 1). However, details about this Jewry and a fortiori studies of its cultural and intellectual activity are scarce.<sup>2</sup>

Here, in brief, is the little we know about the early history of the Jews in Eastern Europe and their intellectual activity before the Ashkenazic Jews, arriving in Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in ever growing waves in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with their superior erudition and dominant tradition, took over and practically obliterated whatever local Jewish tradition may have existed in these territories.<sup>3</sup>

The ancient city of Kyiv, the first capital of Rus', had a Jewish community by the early tenth century—that is, well before the Christianization of Rus' by the Kyivan prince Vladimir in 988. This is evidenced by a Hebrew letter from the Cairo Genizah (a synagogue storeroom) discovered by Norman Golb in the Taylor-Schechter Collection of the Cambridge University Library in 1962 and published by Golb and Omeljan Pritsak in 1982. The letter (see excerpt below) relates the misadventures of a certain Yakov bar Ḥanukkah, hardly an Ashkenazic name, imprisoned as the guarantor for his brother's debts (see appendix 1). The brother had borrowed money from gentiles, but was killed by robbers and his money was taken. Then the creditors had Yakov arrested as guarantor and he remained chained and shackled for a whole year, after which the community decided to bail him out, having already paid sixty silver ingots; however, there remained forty ingots due. The letter of pleading for help on his behalf is addressed to all Jewish communities that the bearer of the letter may encounter, and it is signed by several leaders of the Jewish community, who refer to themselves as “the community of Kyiv” (*qahal shel qijov*).

The letter is dated paleographically to the middle of the tenth century—that is, to the time when Kyiv was still a pagan town. The names of the signatories, such as Ḥanukkah bar Moshe, Kupin bar Yosef (or perhaps Kopin, Kufin, Kofin—the Hebrew script does not permit further precision), and Sinai Bar Shmuel, do not sound Ashkenazic either.

Slavic sources, too, confirm the early presence of Jews in Kyiv and their interaction with the local residents.<sup>4</sup> The *Primary Chronicle*, also called *The Account of Bygone Years* (*Povest' Vremennykh Let*)—a compilation made in Kyiv, whose initial stage is considered to date to the end of the eleventh century or the beginning of the twelfth—has an account (possibly apocryphal) under the year 6494 from creation (= 986 CE) about Prince Vladimir of Kyiv, while still a pagan, being approached by representatives of the monotheistic religions in order to choose the “true religion”, setting off a contest to which representatives of several religions

were invited, a contest that was won by the Greeks from Byzantium with their variety of Christianity.

Among the religions invited to present their case were representatives of Islam, who naturally lost the contest because abstention from drinking wine was unthinkable for the Rus'. At the contest there appeared also "Khazarian Jews," though they are the only ones of whom it is not said that they were invited. Their case was rejected on the ground that if they were indeed the people chosen by God, as they claimed, then why were they in exile and not in their promised land (see appendix 2)?

We are not sure what the term "Khazarian Jews" signifies here.<sup>5</sup> It may refer to Jews arriving from the Khazaria for the contest, or to Jews originating from Khazaria but residing in Kyiv, which, until the middle of the tenth century, had been a western outpost of the Khazarian Empire, with a resident governor. According to Omeljan Pritsak, it is this governor who also signed and approved the Genizah letter with the word at the bottom left of the letter (see fig. 1), which he proposes to read *hugurum* ("I have read") in some variety of Khazar Turkic (see, however, the objections raised by Zuckerman 2011, 11ff. and further literature quoted there). In any case, the statement by these Jews about Jerusalem being ruled by Christians casts further doubt on the authenticity of the whole account of the 986 debate about the "true religion," or at least on the date of its insertion into the *Primary Chronicle*, since Jerusalem was conquered by the crusaders only in 1099 (as noted, e.g., by Weinryb 1962 and Birnbaum 1973).

In another East Slavic source, the *Life of Saint Theodosius of the Caves Monastery in Kyiv* (d. 1074) we read about the strange custom of the saint to go out at night from the monastery and debate with the Jews of Kyiv. We must be cautious, however, about the historicity of events depicted in the hagiographic genre.

*mnogash'dy v noshchi vstaja i otaj v'sekh iskhoshaashe k zhidom i tekh ezhe o khriste  
prepiraja korja zhe i dosazhaja tem i jako otmenniky i bezakonniky tekh naricaja.  
zh'daashe bo ezhe o khristove ispovedanii ubien byti.*

Many times he rose at night, and unknown to all he went to the Jews and debated with them about Christ, he refuted them and reproached them calling them Apostates and Lawless, for he expected to be killed preaching for Christ. (See Abramovich and Tschizewskij 1964, 65.)

Kyiv was devastated by the Tatars in the 1240s and we do not hear about its Jews for two centuries—until the middle of the fifteenth century. By then, however, Kyiv was no longer the capital of Rus', but a small principality soon to be integrated into the rising Grand Duchy of Lithuania (see map below).

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries we have some evidence of a Jewish presence in the territories of Halych-Volhynia, to the west of Kyiv, which were less affected by the Tatar invasion. Thus, we read in the *Galician-Volhynian Chronicle*

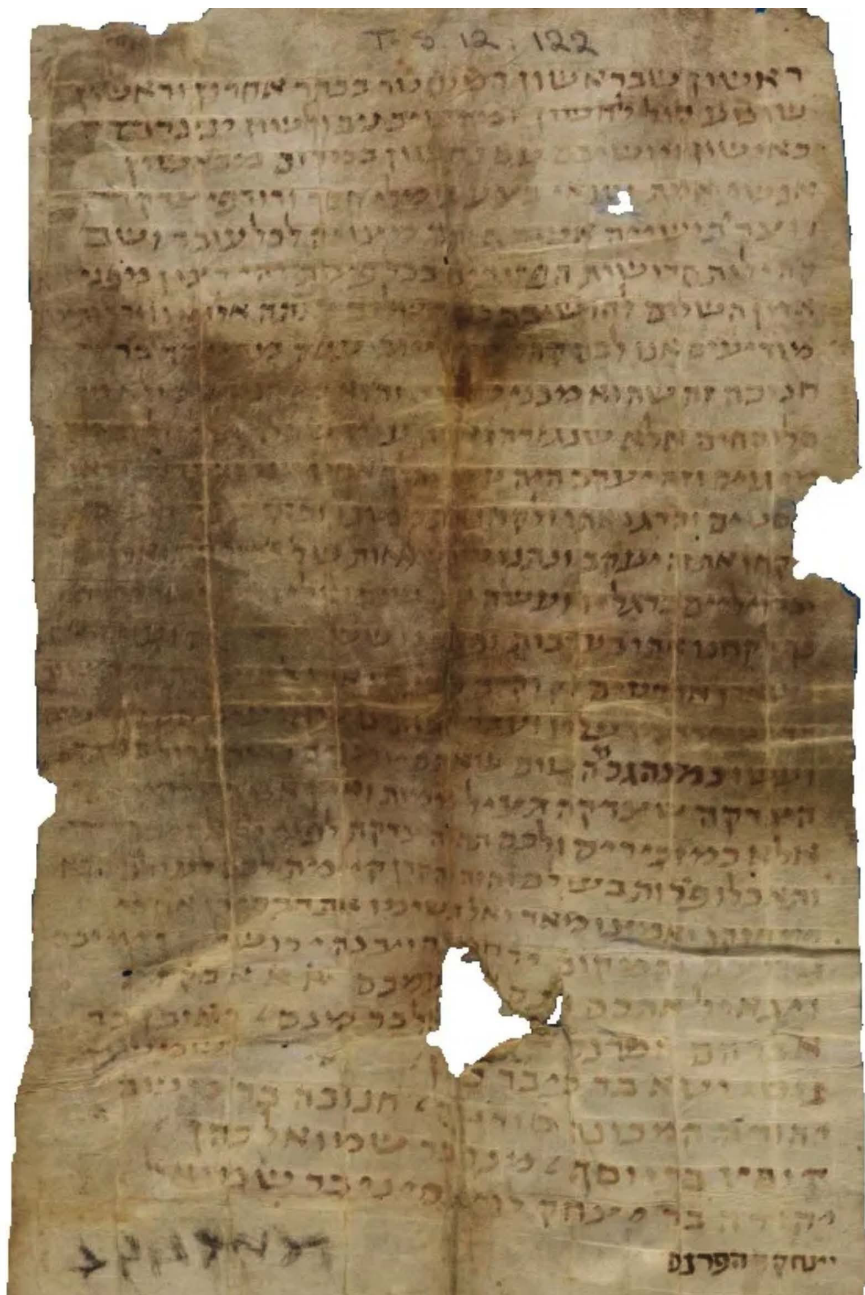


FIGURE 1. The Kyivan letter, Cambridge MS T-S 12.122. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Cambridge Library.



FIGURE 2. Expansion of the Grand-Duchy of Lithuania thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. Map by M.K. 2006 provided by Wikimedia Commons licensed under CC BY-SA 2.5.



in the year 1288, that, on the passing away of the local prince Volodimer Vasilkovich, everyone mourned his death, including the Jews (see Pritsak 1988, 13ff.; Kulik 2004–5, 15):

*i zhidove plakakhusja aki vo vzjat'e Ierusalimu egda vedjakhut' ja vo polon vavilon'skii.*

and the Jews wept as during the capture of Jerusalem, when they were led into captivity in Babylon.

Over the course of these centuries, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland annexed these lands, which subsequently (1562–1795) came to form an integral part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

It is generally agreed that the Jews of Kyivan Rus', just like their coreligionists everywhere in the diaspora, adopted the local language and spoke a Jewish variety of it; in our case, that would be a Jewish variety of East Slavic, referred to in Jewish historiography as (Eastern) Knaanic (on this term, see appendix 3).

We do actually have an early testimony of Knaanic (sc., Slavic) being spoken by Jews in a letter of reference from the community of Salonica to the neighboring Jewish communities, dated to the eleventh century. In the letter we are told about a rather unusual phenomenon in Jewish history—namely, a monolingual Jew. He is described as a Jew “from the community of Rus’” (*miqahal rusiya*) who is on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and requires assistance and guidance, since, the letter says, “he knows neither the Holy Tongue [Hebrew] nor Greek or Arabic, but only the language of Canaan spoken by the people of his native land” (see appendix 4).

Another piece of evidence that Jews in Rus' knew the local vernacular, including its lowest obscenities, comes from the thirteenth-century scholar from England R. Moses ben Isaac ben Hanessiah, who, in his grammatical study titled *The Book of Onyx* (*Sēfer ha-shoham*), under the root *y.b.m.* quotes a piece of information that he had received orally (*amar li*—“he told me”) from his disciple R. Isaac from Chernigov (near Kyiv)—namely, that the verb *yabem* means “to copulate” in the language of “Tiras,” that is, in the language of Rus' (see appendix 5).

The assumption that the Jews of medieval Rus' spoke a variety of local Slavic does not, however, entail that they wrote Slavic, and if they did, which I find unlikely, we have no testimony to corroborate such an assumption. Judging by their poor level of learning and erudition, they did not. This poor level is noted in the early thirteenth-century work by the author of *Or Zarua*, R. Isaac of Vienna, citing a responsum by R. Eliezer of Bohemia to R. Yehuda he-Hasid of Regensburg on the hiring and salary of *hazzanim* (cantors), where R. Eliezer affirms that “in most locations in Poland, Rus', and Hungary where there are no Torah scholars, due to their poverty, they hire an educated man wherever they can find one, and he serves them as cantor and rabbi and teacher for their sons” (see appendix 6).

And indeed, despite their antique origins, the Jewish communities in these lands did not produce any prominent scholars.

We do read, here and there during the twelfth through fourteenth centuries (see Pereswetoff-Morath 2002, 2:18ff.), of Jewish scholars going to Rus', and of Jews coming from Rus' to study at the renowned rabbinical academies in Germany, France, and even Spain.

We thus read in the *Sēfer hayashar*, edited in the second half of the twelfth century by the disciples of Rabbenu Tam (R. Jacob ben Meir) from Ramerupt, Champagne, about a scholar from Kyiv named R. Moses (R. Moshe ben Yosef, also called "Moses the First"), who is mentioned as part of the line of transmission of a ruling allowing the use of wine that had been touched by gentiles if it is used for a purpose other than drinking, such as being mixed into ink in order to improve its quality. R. Moses of Kyiv is said to have received this ruling orally from Rabbenu Tam (*mi-pi rabbi moshe mi-kijov mi-pi rabbenu tam*—"from the mouth of R. Moses of Kyiv from the mouth of Rabbenu Tam").

R. Moses of Kyiv is also mentioned in the work on the genealogy of halakhic scholars *Jihussej tanna'im ve-'amora'im* (first printed by R. N. Rabinowitz in Lyck in 1874) authored in the second half of the twelfth century by R. Yehuda ben Kalonymos ben Meir of Speyer, as addressing a legal question on levirate marriage to the rabbinic authority in Baghdad, the Gaon Samuel ben 'Ali, about what should come first, *yibbum* or *ḥalitzah*.<sup>6</sup> He is also mentioned in the *responsa* of the thirteenth-century R. Meir ben Barukh of Rothenburg (Maharam), as receiving a reply from the same Gaon Samuel on divorcing a rebellious wife (*moredet*), a ruling that enabled any woman who so desired to end her marriage by declaring: "I can't stand the sight of him" (*me'is 'alaj*—lit., "he is repulsive to me"), despite a contradictory ruling in the Talmud (see Kulik 2004–5, 15; 2012, 375).

Given that R. Moses, originally from Kyiv, studied in Ramerupt under Rabbenu Tam, it may well be that the correspondence mentioned took place between Baghdad and Ramerupt, not Baghdad and Kyiv.<sup>7</sup> In any case, regardless of these mentions, we do not have any written work by R. Moses from Kyiv or by any other contemporary scholar from Eastern Europe; nor can we see in these mentions evidence of "the existence of Jewish intellectual activity in Kiev for a certain period" (Pritsak 1988, 9).

There remain nevertheless some traces of intellectual activity of the early pre-Ashkenazic Jews of Eastern Europe. These traces appear in the form of *translations*, mainly but not exclusively from Hebrew into East Slavic. Such translations have survived in Russian and Ruthenian texts written in Cyrillic script, and are preserved in Christian codices.

There can hardly be any doubt that these translations were made with the participation of Jews with a knowledge of Hebrew, whether they were practicing Jews or converts to Christianity. This assumption is made necessary by the fact that in Eastern Europe, unlike in the West, there were no Christian Hebraists. This absence, in turn, is owing to the fact that in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance there were no universities east of Cracow,<sup>8</sup> indeed there were no institutions of higher learning until well into the early modern period.

The Jewish translations consist of two chronological groups, which also differ in their thematic makeup. The earlier group precedes the mid-fifteenth century, though by how much remains controversial, whereas the latter group dates to the second half of the fifteenth century.

Before surveying the early group in its totality (see chapter 2), I would like to discuss two of its items—namely, the Book of Esther and the account of the visit of Alexander the Great to Jerusalem from the *Josippon*—since they constitute the cornerstone for the theory about a whole group of translators from various languages, among them Hebrew, in Kyivan Rus' before the Tatar invasions.

The theory was developed by Nikita Meshcherskij (1905–87),<sup>9</sup> a Soviet scholar of princely origin, persecuted during the Stalinist period, who must be credited with the revival, however slow and defective, of biblical and Hebrew scholarship in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death. Meshcherskij postulated a whole school of translators in ancient Kyiv in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a school that allegedly produced translations from Greek, Hebrew, and even Syriac. Francis Thomson, in a series of papers in the 1980s, which were republished in his 1999 book *The Reception of Byzantine Culture in Mediaeval Russia*, cast serious doubt on the existence of translations in Kyivan Rus' from any language, asserting that most of the texts allegedly translated in Rus' were in fact translations made in Bulgaria and then copied in Rus'.

Let us turn to the texts in question. The translation of Esther, despite its belonging to the early group, differs from the other items in an important respect: Esther is indeed a Jewish translation into Old Russian,<sup>10</sup> but unlike the other items in the early group of translations, it is not, pace Meshcherskij and his followers, a translation made directly from Hebrew, but, as demonstrated by Lunt and Taube (1994 and 1998), it was made from another Jewish language—namely, Judaeo-Greek.

The Slavic book of Esther is attested in about thirty copies, all of them East Slavic, the two earliest of which are dated to around 1400 CE. It is preserved in codices consisting of historiographical compilations that include also other historical books of the Bible.

We are accustomed to think of the Old Testament books as a part of a bulky volume called the Bible, but such a volume was not to be found at that time in any Russian Orthodox church, nor in any monastic library across the Slavic world. What we do encounter in the Medieval Orthodox Slavic world are partial collections of biblical books, such as the Psalter, which is one of the sources of the liturgy, the books of the prophets, and collections of the historical books. In the Greek tradition, the collection of Old Testament historical books comprises eight books called the Octateuch, which include the Pentateuch plus Joshua, Judges, and Ruth. In the East Slavic tradition (see Mathiesen 1983), not attested before 1350, the collection of historical books is enlarged to include ten items—namely, the eight books of the Octateuch followed by I–II Samuel and I–II Kings



(in the Septuagint tradition “The Four Kingdoms”—*Tetrabasileion*)—that count as a single item, No. 9, after which comes Esther as No. 10.

Thus, when Archbishop Gennadij of Novgorod undertook in the 1480s to assemble a full collection of biblical books, probably for the purpose of polemics with the Novgorod Judaizers (see below, chapter 3), he was forced, with some of the books simply not available to him in either Slavic or Greek, to make use of Latin sources, which were considered nothing less than heretical by the Russian Church.

All these books were translated into Slavic from the Greek in Bulgaria in the tenth and eleventh centuries and later brought to Rus'. But the book of Esther is different. Despite being a canonical book, it is not attested anywhere in the Slavic world before the appearance around 1400 CE of the earliest witnesses of the Old Russian translation. In addition, not a single verse from it figures in Christian liturgy, whether in the Greek or the Roman rite.

Given that the written culture of the Slavs during the first centuries after Christianization (both the East Slavs of Rus' and the South Slavs of the Balkans), is almost entirely based on Christian Greek culture, we must assume, whenever facing a translated Slavic text, that we are dealing by default with a translation from Greek, unless we find compelling evidence for a different source. Let us now return to the translation of Esther.

The nineteenth-century Russian scholars who were the first to examine the Esther translation stated without hesitation, however surprising that may sound, that it was a translation from Hebrew. Thus, Archimandrite Leonid (Kavelin), describing in 1883 the earliest manuscript containing Esther, which, at the time, was preserved at the Trinity Lavra of Saint Sergius, cites from the manuscript a marginal note of unspecified date, but probably from the eighteenth or early nineteenth century:

*na verkhu nadpis': ni Vulgata, ni 70, a perevod s evrejskago pretochnyj. strannoe dëlo!*

At the top—an inscription: Neither Vulgate, nor Septuagint, but a very precise translation from the Hebrew. Strange affair!

The assurance with which the first scholars deemed Esther a translation from Hebrew is based on textual grounds. It stems from the fact that the Masoretic Text (i.e., the authoritative Hebrew and Aramaic text of the twenty-four books of the Jewish Bible) in this case is rather different from the Greek Septuagint, which contains several additions, such as a letter from King Artaxerxes, the dream of Mardochai, Esther's prayer, and more. With all these additions absent from the Slavic Esther, the conclusion was clear: the text was a translation from Hebrew!

In 1897, Aleksej Sobolevskij gave a talk (published in his 1903 book on pages 433–36) in which he announced that in view of some Grecisms in the Slavic text, he considered it a translation from Greek, but his claim remained a lonely voice until the 1980s, when my teacher Moshe Altbauer and I, together with Horace G. Lunt, demonstrated that in fact it was a translation from Greek, as suggested

by Sobolevskij. This view was accepted by Francis Thomson in his 1993 paper, “Made in Russia: A Survey of the Translations Allegedly Made in Kievan Russia” (reprinted in his 1999 book as chapter 5). Nevertheless, the controversy regarding the language of origin persists to this day (see Altbauer and Taube 1984; Lunt and Taube 1994, 1998; Alekseev 1987, 1988, 1993, 1996, 1999b, 2001, 2003, 2014; Lysén 2001).

As for the two interdependent thorny questions of the time and place of translation, several opinions have been put forth. In view of the fact that all extant copies are East Slavic and that the language is quite archaic (or archaizing), the prevailing view was (and remains) that the translation was made in Rus’, either before the twelfth century (thus Meshcherskij 1956a; 1964, 183; 1978, 47; Alekseev 1987, 11–12), or sometime between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries (thus Sobolevskij 1903, 436). A less frequent view is the suggestion that it was made in the fourteenth century (thus Evseev 1902, 131–32).<sup>11</sup> More recently, William Veder (2013) introduced a new, even more complicating factor into this complex puzzle, by positing a Slavic ancestral copy in Glagolitic script (of undetermined age) that was transliterated into Cyrillic in fourteenth-century Ruthenia (sc., the Grand Duchy of Lithuania).<sup>12</sup>

My own views on these questions fluctuated and evolved over time. In our first statement on the subject (Altbauer and Taube 1984, 319; see the similar point in Taube 1985, 209) we wrote: “The final redaction is undoubtedly Russian, but we believe that certain of the words point to an older, South Slavic layer that may well represent the original translation.”

In a later paper, aimed for biblical scholars in general, and coauthored with Horace G. Lunt, we presented (Lunt and Taube 1994, 362) a much more extensive series of scenarios:

The linguistic and philological evidence leads us to conclude that the Slavonic Esther must have existed before 1300. Perhaps our sadly botched *Vorlage* of ca. 1350 is a tattered and patched-up remnant of the Bible that Methodius completed in haste in 885. (If so, one must wonder why he did not use the standard Septuagint for his translation.) Perhaps it is the work of the energetic, if not always competent, translators in tenth-century Bulgaria. The possibility that it could have been produced in Rus’ after ca. 1037, when Slavonic seems to have become the official church language among the East Slavs, is remote. We cannot exclude thirteenth-century Bulgaria or Serbia, when there was a revived interest in history and new translations of Byzantine historians were undertaken.

In our edition of Esther (Lunt and Taube 1998, 7), the formulation of time and place is even vaguer (owing to a disagreement between the two coauthors):

All this has led us to posit a 167-verse Greek version of Esther, made by a translator conversant with traditional Jewish views of the meaning of certain passages. At some time between 863 and 1375, at some place in the Christian Orthodox Slavic world,

this Greek Esther was translated into the written Slavic appropriate to the time and place. Evidence that allows more precise delineation of the circumstances and persons involved is not available.

This formulation reflects my view as of today.

A balanced account of the controversy can be found in the 2017 paper by Basil Lourié, who sides with the Greek theory, but adds a twist of his own—a further intermediate stage after the translation from Hebrew into Jewish Greek made, in his view, in the Hellenistic period (e.g., fourth-century Alexandria), namely, a Christian translation from this Greek version into Syriac, and then a translation from Syriac into Slavic made quite early, perhaps in the eleventh century, in Bulgaria. This hypothesis, suggesting a further layer, is not without merits, but it has its own difficulties (which will not be discussed here) and so cannot be considered the final word on the matter. Be this as it may, the important point, convincingly established, is that the immediate source for the translation into Slavic must have been a Greek intermediary version corresponding to the Masoretic Text and differing from the Septuagint with all its additions, hence necessarily a Jewish Greek text.

The Greek text posited as a source of the Slavic translation (whether direct or indirect) has, alas, not been preserved, which is a problem, but we do have several indications of its existence in the past:

First, already in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 17–18, we find a discussion on whether reciting the story of Esther in Greek fulfills the obligation of reading the scroll of Esther (*Qeri'at ha-megillah*).

Second, the chief rabbi of Constantinople in the sixteenth century, R. Eliyahu Mizrahi (a.k.a. Reem, 1437–1526), in his collection of *responsa* titled *Mayim 'Amuqim* (Deep waters) item 79 (first printing Venice 1674, f. 137), addresses a question from a member of his community about the custom of the Romaniote Jews to recite in Greek the story of Mardochai and Esther in the synagogue on the second day of Purim, a custom condemned by the Sephardi rabbis newly arrived from Spain.

And third, the Polyglot Bible printed in 1547 in Constantinople (see Krivoruchko 2007) promises on its title page the Five Books of Moses plus the Five Scrolls (sc., Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther) in Hebrew and in Judaeo-Greek, although it contains only the Five Books of Moses, whereas the scrolls are not to be found in any of the few extant copies.

In the absence of an extant Judaeo-Greek text, the arguments supporting the assumption of an underlying Greek version different from the Septuagint are necessarily of a textual and linguistic nature. The textual differences between the book of Esther in Hebrew and the much longer version of the Septuagint, including several additions,<sup>13</sup> have been well known since Saint Jerome, and can be easily observed by comparing the beginning of the text (see appendix 7).

Beyond the extra text, the Septuagint also demonstrates the phonetic differences between Hebrew and Greek, differences that are most easily discernible in the renderings of the Persian names of persons and of places. Thus, the capital *Susa* in the Septuagint corresponds to Hebrew *Shushan*; King *Artaxerxes* to *Ahashverosh*, and so on.

If we now compare (see appendix 8) the Slavic translation to the Hebrew Masoretic Text, we observe that the Slavic corresponds to the Hebrew, but with phonetic differences reflected in the spelling of the names, pointing to a Greek intermediary.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the Slavic forms *Achasveros*, *Susan*, *Chous* are transliterations of the Masoretic names with some phonetic differences to be explained by the interference of Greek, since the Hebrew hushing sound *sh*, not available in Greek, is consistently rendered by the hissing sound *s* and therefore it also appears as *s* in Slavic.

Nevertheless, some of the proponents of Esther being a direct translation from Hebrew (e.g., Lysén 2001, 289) try to explain these instances by pointing out the nondistinguishing of *s* from *sh* in some Lithuanian dialects of Yiddish, or what is known as *Sábesdiker losn* ("Sabbath language"). This explanation seems implausible in view of this phonetic phenomenon in Yiddish being late, partial, and geographically limited (see U. Weinreich 1952).<sup>15</sup>

Beyond the phonetics of the proper names, we observe in the Slavic version several *syntactic* or *phraseological* Hellenisms, such as verse 5.12, in which a negation particle added to a conditional conjunction serves to render "except" (like one of the meanings of the form *sinon* in French), whereas in Hebrew this meaning is rendered by the combination *ki 'im* (see appendix 9).

The Slavic rendering of Hebrew *ki 'im* (lit., "for"/"that if") by *ashche ne* ("if not") can only be explained by a Greek intermediary text that had *ei mē* (lit., "if not"), as indeed does the Greek version that in the past was called the Lucianic recension and that is now simply referred to as the Greek Alpha-text of Esther (see Fox 1990).<sup>16</sup>

The Septuagint here has a different locution, equally current in Greek: *all' ē* (lit., "other than"). Worthy of notice is also the literal correspondence of the Slavic verb *privede* ("brought") to Hebrew *hēvi'ah*, as against the Septuagint's *keklēken* ("has called").

A second example of a phraseological Hellenism is in 2:13 (see appendix 10). In this verse we focus on the Slavic generalizing particle *ashche* (lit., "if") added here to the relative pronoun *jezhe* ("which"), turning "everything that" into "everything whatsoever." This is a calque reflecting Greek usage, where the particle *e'an* ("if haply") has exactly the same function, as evidenced by the Septuagint rendering here, although the rest of the verse is quite different from both the Hebrew and the Slavic.

We also find among the traces of Greek interference some *semantic* Grecisms, such as the rendering in verse 1.20 of Hebrew *jeqar* ("honor") by *sramotu* ("shame") (see appendix 11).

This unexpected rendering in Slavic can only be explained (as proposed by Alexander Kulik in 1995) by assuming an intermediate Greek text that, unlike the Septuagint's rendering of *jeqar* by *timē* ("esteem," "honor"), had instead *entropē*, which may mean not only "respect," "reverence," but also "shame," "reproach."

It should therefore be concluded that the source of the Slavic translation was a Greek version corresponding to the Hebrew Masoretic Text, but different from the Septuagint, hence in all likelihood a Judaeo-Greek text. More details about the Grecisms in Esther are to be found in our edition (Lunt and Taube 1998, 76–79). This does not mean that the controversy regarding the Slavic Esther has ended, either with regard to its source language, or with regard to the time and place of its translation. For example, Irina Lysén's 2001 book maintains, following Nikita Meshcherskij and Anatolij Alekseev, that the Slavic Esther is a direct translation from Hebrew.

We now turn to the second text serving as cornerstone for Meshcherskij's theory—the episode of Alexander the Great visiting Jerusalem and meeting the high priest.<sup>17</sup>

The entire episode is adapted from the *Josippon*,<sup>18</sup> a tenth-century chronicle written in Hebrew in southern Italy and based (indirectly) on Flavius Josephus's *Jewish War*.

The Old Russian version of the episode recounting Alexander's visit to Jerusalem appears in an entry for the year 1110 in one of the later redactions of the *Account of Bygone Years* (*Povest' Vremennyyx Let*), the redaction called the Hypatian Chronicle (*Ipat'evskaja Letopis'*), whose earliest witness is a manuscript from 1425, but whose time of compilation is claimed to be as early as 1116, or even earlier.

Meshcherskij (1956) published a paper called "An Excerpt from *Josippon* in the *Account of Bygone Years*," comparing the account of Alexander's visit to Jerusalem in the *Hypatian Chronicle* with the account in *Josippon*, and went on to make several strong claims. He contended that the appearance of the excerpt in the Chronicle showed that the whole of *Josippon* "was available in a direct translation from Hebrew into the language of Rus' (to which he referred as 'Russian') already at the beginning of the twelfth century, i.e., was translated no later than by the end of the eleventh century" (65–66).

Without any basis, Meshcherskij also affirmed that "the translation could have been made in Kyiv itself, but could perhaps have arrived in Rus' through the Khazars, among whom the Hebrew text of the *Josippon* was wide-spread in the eleventh century" (66). He went on to conclude that this indicated the presence of a whole school of translators from Hebrew in Rus', who translated, among other works, also the book of Esther (66–67).

In his 1958 edition of the Slavic translation of Josephus's *Jewish War*, a translation made from Greek, possibly in Rus', Meshcherskij states, when summarizing his analysis of that same excerpt from the *Hypatian Chronicle* and the *Josippon*, that "the presence of the excerpt from *Josippon* analyzed by us in the *Account of*

*Bygone Years* under the year 1110 makes it possible to determine a *terminus ante quem* for all the specified Old-Rusian translations from Hebrew. Undoubtedly, they must go back to the era up to the twelfth century” (1958, 153).

Admittedly, the account from the *Josippon* is an instance of a translation made directly from Hebrew, probably in Rus'. It is doubtful, however, whether this was done as early as Meshcherskij and others have claimed.

The comparison of the two versions of the account about Alexander (see appendix 12) shows that in spite of the Rusian version being shorter, it clearly derives directly from the Hebrew *Josippon*,<sup>19</sup> following it closely in wording and phraseology. The comparison leaves no doubt about the link between the two, notwithstanding the omissions and the instances of interpretation in Old Rusian, such as the easily explainable rendering of “the man,” referring to the figure that appeared to Alexander in his dream to warn him, as “the angel.”

On the other hand, the *time* of the insertion of the Alexander episode into the *Hypatian Chronicle* is not as clear; indeed, the account seems to be a subsequent interpolation within an interpolation. It appears toward the end of a discourse on angels that is itself an insertion or an interpolation commenting on the appearance of a pillar of fire over the Caves Monastery in Kyiv on February 12, 1110. The *Chronicle* explains that this appearance was an angel of God, and that angels may appear as a cloud or fire, and it provides examples from Exodus. The *Chronicle* then elaborates on this statement, with appropriate biblical quotations, based on materials from the ninth-century Byzantine chronicle of the monk George Hamartolos (“the sinner”). It posits, with Epiphanius of Salamis as the given source (though the idea is known also in Hebrew sources), that there are angels appointed for every creature and for every nation, even for the pagans. As an example, we are offered the account from the *Josippon*, which does not figure in George Hamartolos's chronicle.

As an interpolation within an interpolation, the account of Alexander is certainly later than the account of the appearance of a pillar of fire over the Caves Monastery found in the Laurentian redaction of the *Primary Chronicle* and closer to the time of its integration with the interpolation on angels,<sup>20</sup> into the redaction represented in the 1425 Hypatian Codex,<sup>21</sup> which was possibly compiled as late as the fourteenth century. This point, however, is not settled and remains a matter of controversy.

Meshcherskij repeatedly claimed (1956, 67; 1958, 153; 1964, 201) to be the one who discovered the Hebrew source of the excerpt on Alexander in Jerusalem. The discovery, however, belongs to a Kyivan Jewish lawyer, censor, and rabbi by the name of Herman Markovich Baratz (b. 1835, Dubno; d. 1922, Paris).<sup>22</sup> Starting in the 1850s, Baratz published many papers on Jewish sources and parallels of Old Rusian texts, among them the episode on Alexander in Jerusalem. The paper appears in his collected works on the Jewish elements in Old Russian texts, published posthumously in two volumes in Paris and Berlin, (vol. 1 1927; vol. 2



1924), following his emigration from Russia after the revolution. The identification and comparison of the two excerpts appears in a chapter titled “On the Compilers of the *Account of Bygone Years* and Its Sources” (Baratz 1924, 248). Meshcherskij, it turns out, appropriated Baratz’s discovery at a time when publications from the West, especially by scholars who emigrated after the Russian Revolution, were not accessible to readers in Soviet libraries, but he later accidentally divulged in a footnote his acquaintance with Baratz’s work (1964, 121).

To sum up the first chapter, we have seen in this brief survey that the meager information on the first Jews of Eastern Europe in the tenth through twelfth centuries suggests the presence of an early Jewish population in Kyiv and the surrounding towns. Those Jews’ origins seem to be from the southeast—that is, the Greek-speaking Romaniote communities in Byzantium, around the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean—to which Kyiv was linked through the ancient fluvial trade route of the Dniepr. These Jews, however, were also open to the newly forming communities of Ashkenaz, both with young men going to study there and with merchants coming from various parts of Ashkenaz to trade in Rus’, which was already famous as a source of furs and slaves.

This early Jewish population did not produce any notable scholarly works, but it did leave us some translations, of which we have discussed two—one from Judaeo-Greek and one from Hebrew. The translations are first attested in manuscript copies from around 1400 CE, with the dating of the translation itself remaining a matter of debate, but they are certainly not as early as was claimed by Meshcherskij and his disciples. In the second chapter we will analyze the remainder, or rather the main bulk, of the translations from Hebrew made in Rus’ before the fifteenth century, and we will discuss the possible scenarios for their emergence.