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Medieval Jewish Community of Maribor

Srednjeveška judovska skupnost v Mariboru

Abstract: The following article discusses the Jewish presence in medieval Maribor from the 10th century to the expulsion in 1496. The discussion starts with the phenomenon of »Jewish villages« in the area of South-Eastern Alps in the framework of which also the appearance of the Jewish community of Maribor after 1200 should be understood. That community not only turned into a major regional Jewish centre, but also developed its own version of Ashkenazi liturgical rite and in the 15th century partially served as a home for the renowned halachic scholar Rabbi Israel Isserlein. As attested by numerous Jewish and non-Jewish sources, the community had a very rich organisational, cultural and economic life that continued until the expulsion.

Key Words: Jews, Slovenia, Maribor, Middle-Ages, Inner Austria, Isserlein, Jewish villages

Izvilleček: Članek obravnava judovsko prisotnost v Mariboru, in sicer od 10. stoletja pa vse do izгона leta 1496. Razprava se začne z vprašanjem »judovskih vasi« na področju jugovzhodnih Alp, v sklopu katerih je treba razumeti tudi nastanek mariborske skupnosti po letu 1200. Ta skupnost ni postala zgolj pomembno regionalno središče, temveč je razvila tudi svojo različico aškenaškega verskega obreda in v 15. stoletju deloma služila kot dom znamenitemu učenjaku rabinu Israelu Isserleinu. Kot izpričujejo številni judovski in nejudovski viri, je skupnost razvila bogato organizacijsko, kulturno in gospodarsko življenje, ki se je nadaljevalo vse do izгона.

Ključne besede: Judje, Slovenija, Maribor, srednji vek, Notranja Avstrija, judovske vasi, Isserlein

Introduction

In the Roman period, sparse Jewish settlement is attested also in the area of Styria, for instance in present-day Austria at the Leibnitz Field in connection to Flavia Solva. With the retreat of the Roman state after the 5th century, though, Jews disappeared from this area as well (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 172; 2009b).

By the 9th century, commercial contacts between Carantania, Friuli and Istria of the 7th and 8th centuries were already woven into a long-distance trade network that reached far beyond the region. The framework of this network in the 11th century already included dozens of Jewish communities across the northern French and Imperial lands, such as Bamberg, Erfurt, Regensburg, Speyer, Worms, Mainz, Vienna and Prague.

Even though there are no testimonies to a Jewish presence within the area of Carantania until the appearance of Jewish villages in the 10th century, such testimonies can be located on its western and eastern edge. On the eastern edge of Carantania, Jews are explicitly mentioned in the Raffelstätten Custom Regulations from 904–906 (Reg I, 1). Also, around 955, Chasdai Ibn Shaprut mentions Jews in Dalmatia and in Hungary that are in contact with the Land of Rus (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 175–183). Some of the Jewish settlements in Hungary were founded at least in the 12th century along the trade routes with Eastern Alps, which included commercial contacts with Ptuj (Pettau), Velikovec (Völkermarkt) and Judenburg. When Jewish traders, for instance, wanted to travel from Italy to Regensburg, they were obliged to cross the Alps, along which, due to security and organisational reasons, an entire network of trade posts and settlements developed, a sign of which are the so-called »Jewish villages« located along the trade routes in Eastern Alps. These settlements were either permanent with wooden or stone buildings or of more temporary and seasonal nature with temporary lodgings. This chain of outposts begins with Judendorf near Villach (Beljak) and runs through Judendorf (Ždovše)¹ near Maria Saal (Gospa Sveta), founded in mid-10th century, and Judendorf near Friesach (Breže) all the way to Judenburg in Styria. Along the path to Hungary we encounter Seidolach (Ždovlje) and Seidendorf (Ždinja vas) (Wadl 1992, 19) and then Völkermarkt (in 1105–1125 mentioned as *forum iudeorum*). In addition to Judenburg, mentioned between 1074 and 1088 (Kosi 1998, 31), the map also shows one Judendorf above Graz mentioned in 1147 and one below Graz, as well as Judendorf near Leoben mentioned in 1269. In addition to these, we also see Ždinja vas near Novo mesto, which lies near an old Roman road and Trška gora (Market Mountain). Wenniger (1985) clearly shows that the so-called »Jewish places« (*Judenorte*) appear

1 Žid – colloquial for »Jew« in Slovenian.



nowhere else than on the eastern frontier of the Frankish state; in Bavaria and Franconia already in the 8th century and in the area of Carantania, Salzburg and Saxony from the 9th century onwards.

Apparently, the appearance of Jewish villages in the area of the Alpine Slavs needs to be positioned into the 10th century, which would somehow be in accordance with the cessation of Hungarian danger. Up to the end of the 12th century, when Jewish villages are already abandoned, permanent Jewish settlement exists in Carinthia in Villach, Friesach, and Völkermarkt, while in Styria in Graz and Judenburg, though not in Ptuj, as previously considered. (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 183–192)

1 Legal status of Jews

As early as during the period of Frederick I Barbarossa (1152–1190), the Jews in the area of the Holy Roman Empire, meaning most of the Slovenian lands as well, were directly subordinate to the ruler and as such were designated as »servants of the Royal Chamber« (*servi camerae regis*) (Stow 1992, 275). »Jewish servitude« (*Kammerknechtsschaft*), though, despite the use of the term *servus* didn't imply classical servitude or vassalage, but rather only a direct subordination to the ruler, as Jews in fact represented a separate social class/estate.² Certainly the Jewish legal and social position within the Latin Europe was also strongly influenced by the relation of Christianity towards Judaism, which already started forming in the first centuries of the Christian era. The oldest Jewry law used for the Slovenian lands is certainly the so-called *Fridericianum*, issued on the 1st of July 1244 (Reg I, 25) for Austria, which Frederick II of Babenberg, the duke that published the law, expanded to cover the entire Austria and Styria as well as Carinthia and Carniola, and which later on served as a basis for most of other Jewry laws of Hungary, Bohemia, Silesia, Poland and Lithuania. The duke preserved the exclusive power and, for instance, punished the murder of a Jew by death penalty. This law explicitly excluded the Jews from local city jurisdiction and submitted them to the duke. For legal matters between local Jews and Christians, Styrian towns, including Maribor,

2 See Jelinčič Boeta (2009a, 158–168) for a detailed bibliography.



possessed an official, *iudex iudeorum*, »a judge of the Jews«, who administered such affairs. Until 1496 more than 30 such judges are recorded in Maribor only. (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 192–232)

2 The community of Maribor and its structure

Maribor is mentioned as *forum* in 1209 (GZM I/47) and *civitas* in 1254 (GZM I/85). The first Jewish person, who was already selling a vineyard, is explicitly mentioned between 1274 and 1296 (GJ II 2, 522), so it would be safe to assume Jews appeared in Maribor a few decades prior to 1250, most likely right at the start of formation of Maribor around 1200. The synagogue of Maribor built of stone was standing already at the end of the 13th century. (Mikuž 2000, 169) In this sense we can unreservedly accept the claim of Mlinarič (2000, 54) that *Judengoz*, a »Jewish street«, already existed in 1300. In a town, which then had some 500 inhabitants, Jews in addition to the aristocratic element around the Castle and the burghers represented a key element of town's population (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 49–59).

This early period is probably also the time when a distinct Maribor liturgical ritual/rite/custom or *minhag* develops (LY I, 32; TD 104). The development of this *minhag* was already concluded by the start of the 15th century as Isserlein clearly opposes introduction of new customs (TD 20). His disciple, the author of *Leket Yosher*, also describes the existing local customs as well established. The custom of Maribor (*minhag Morpurk*) existed within the framework of a separate Styrian *minhag*, which in turn belonged to Austrian custom (*minhag Ostraych*), one of the main branches of a general Askenazi tradition. The fact that a distinct local ritual developed in Maribor, the only such case in Carinthia, Carniola and Styria, testifies not only to the size of the town's community but also to the multi-generational and uninterrupted presence of local Jews, but is also possibly connected to the unique traditions of the communities living in »Jewish villages«, the descendants of which were among the first Jews who settled in Maribor (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 332–341). For Chanukah candles, for instance, in Maribor they had »a custom of arranging [them] from north to south« (TD 104), if we mention just one local variation.



Due to the hierarchical structure of individual religious communities, according to which the smaller ones were ritually subordinate to the bigger ones, the question rises up to what degree the smaller communities followed the rite of Maribor. This question is especially valid for Slovenska Bistrica, Radkesburg, Slovenj Gradec, Ormož, Celje, and Ljubljana, as well as for Ptuj. To some degree this question might be valid also for the communities of Carinthia, though there the question would also be to what degree local traditions from the period of 10th and 11th centuries survived or even developed. We know, for instance, that certain local ritual specifics developed in Wiener Neustadt.

The community of Maribor possessed an important library (PK 112) and during the time of Rabbi Isserlein became one of the most important communities of the southern parts of the Empire. After the destruction of the Jewish community of Vienna in 1421 and even more so after 1450, on the route Venice-Prague in one direction and Salzburg-Hungary in the other, the community of Maribor became the most important, as is shown by the importance of Maribor's Jewish court in the wider network of Jewish legal courts of Central Europe, which operated according to the internal Jewish political and judiciary autonomy, subordinated to the Emperor only, and independently of the Christian legal infrastructure. As mentioned, the only area in which these two legal systems met were the »courts for Jews«. In 1471, Rabbi Kolon of Mestre even gives an opinion that clearly states that Maribor's *bet-din* or Jewish court is superior to the one in Graz or Salzburg (Keil 2006, 70–71).

The area around the synagogue between the banks of Drava River and the Main Square, which became known as the Jewish Quarter, consisted of some forty initially wooden houses. In 1358, Jewish Town Gate (*Judentor*) is mentioned (GZM IV/79), in 1465 a Jewish Tower (Keil 2006, 23) and in 1497 a Small Jewish Tower as well (GZM X/70). Jews of Maribor were obliged to contribute to the city's defences (GZM XVII/42), i.e. the city walls around the Jewish Quarter, they owned houses (GZM XVII/103), farms and vineyards (GZM VI/2), and resided even outside the Jewish quarter or city walls (GZM III/98), as well as in the adjacent countryside (TD 108,243). Furthermore, some Christians also lived in the Jewish area (GZM XVII/179, 188, 200), which also means the local Jews were not ghettoized, which is valid for all the Jewish communities of medieval Slovenian



lands. At the peak of its size, the community numbered up to 250 individuals or about a quarter of the population within the walls (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 277).

In Maribor, we find all the institutions of a developed Jewish community. The synagogue was enlarged prior to 1400 and again before mid-15th century (Mikuž 2000, 164–165). In addition to ritual and communal purposes, synagogue also served as a stage for legal matters, like in 1429, when affairs connected to money lending were announced (GZM VI/34). In every synagogue, there was also a classroom or *bet midrash*, in Maribor at least until 1477, when construction of a separate *Judenschul* is mentioned (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 278). The cemetery mentioned in 1367 (GZM IV/112) was a new one, as some tombstone remnants were found near the synagogue as well (Mikuž 2000, 170). The *mikveh* or ritual bath was located along the river and was removed only in the 18th century (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 279).

Those in the community that were making decisions, i.e. the communal council, had to be elected according to the majority principle by all the tax-paying members. The larger the community, the larger the differentiation of its functionaries. The community was in charge of buildings, spaces and institutions of public character such as synagogues and *mikves* as well as of collecting charity contributions and taxes. Among the functionaries, sources mention *parnasim* or community foreseers that usually weren't rabbis but represented the members of the community council and took care of collecting the taxes. Various officials are mentioned in Maribor. In 1459, for instance, we hear of a *parnas* named Aram who was in charge of collecting the taxes for the Emperor between 1469 and 1478 (279). The most important employee was the *chazan*, a cantor who led the prayers in synagogue and was responsible for the specific rituals of a particular community. A *shamesh* was confirming Hebrew documents and deeds at Christian courts and could also serve as the community scribe. In Maribor, both functions are mentioned (GZM VII/81; LY II, 29). We also know of 12 different Maribor rabbis (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 382).

2.1 Class structure and economic activity

Until 1496, we can identify 146 Jewish individuals from Maribor, known enough to classify them according to their profession or class. As these



individuals are known from business documents, we have to be aware that very few Jews from the lower strata would appear in such documents. During the 15th century, the share of poor Jews in the entire area of Ashkenaz dramatically increased and Germania Judaica III estimates that in the 15th century, already up to a half of the Jewish population could be counted among the poor (Keil 2006, 55). The data on 146 individuals (23 female and 123 male) are therefore mostly related to members of middle and upper classes. Out of these, 115 individuals (78.7%, of which 17 are women) are identified with commerce and money-lending, 22 (15%, 3 women) with rabbinical families, and 9 (6%, 3 women) exclusively with the possession of real-estate (Jelinčič Boeta 2010; 2011). The wide array of data found in the book *Leket Yosher* also mostly describes the life of a more affluent Jewish stratum.

In addition to Jewish women working as traders, servants, seamstresses, ritual bath managers and washers of the deceased women, a greater share of female business activities in the entire Empire during the 12th and the 15th centuries became connected to money-lending. All together we know of 20 different Jewish female personal names from Maribor, born by 27 women. Among these names, we even find three Slavic/Slovenian ones: Jana (Yana), Priba, and Milka. With Milka, though, the name could also be the Biblical name of Milcah, which is very rarely attested in the medieval sources. As the name Milka is a common name for women in Slovenian and Croatian, there is a great possibility that it was indeed a Slavic name. Yet, in such a case, there is a strong possibility the name is connected to the Hebrew name Malcah, which means »queen«, namely among the medieval Jewish population we observe a phenomenon of Jews having double names, one in Hebrew that was used among the Jews and in synagogues, and the other one used in communication with the non-Jewish population. In this case we could have a possibility of that woman being named Malcah in Hebrew and Milka in local colloquial language. It is quite clear that in addition to the common knowledge of Hebrew and Yiddish, Maribor Jews also spoke local German and Slovenian dialect.

Jews were engaging in commerce and trade until their expulsion, attested by many documents. It was this commerce that played an important role in the establishment of the network of Jewish villages, and the first two localities named in the Old-Carantanian area as 'market-towns' are



Jewish settlements, i.e. Völkermarkt and Judenburg. *Leket Yosher* explicitly states that Jews were importing sugar and rice from Candia (Crete) (LY I, 74-75), and were trading in cheese (LY II, 13), oil (TD 206), precious stones (TD 318), textile (TD 320), wood (LY II, 61), and horses (TD 310).

Several hundred credit deeds clearly show that the money-lending activity of Jews was extremely varied, connected to all the classes of their contemporary Christian society and brought them also to various areas of trade with pawned objects, such as wine and real estate, be it fields, houses, meadows, vineyards or even whole estates. Among the debtors of Jewish money-lenders we find ecclesiastical clients, such as Archbishops of Salzburg, Bishops of Gurk and Bamberg, different monasteries and various aristocratic families, such as Gorizia-Tyrol, Ortenburg, Celje, and Auersperg.

In addition to the two stereotypical Jewish activities of money-lending and trade, the sources mention various professions and functions connected to the internal life of Jewish communities, such as tailors, caretakers of cemeteries and ritual baths, butchers and teachers. Jewish women, for instance, were weaving cloth (TD 152; LY I, 11). Jewish doctors are encountered throughout the entire medieval Europe and medicine is also explicitly mentioned by Isserlein (PK 210). Jewish craftsmen making seals and silverware are also mentioned (LY II, 12, 111) as well as physical labourers, cattle raisers and farmers. They participated as labourers in unloading the wood from rafts (TD 318). In addition to wine-growing which included grape-picking (TD 202), in the vicinity of Maribor Jews also raised goats (PK 129). They were even making cheese and distributing it throughout the land (TD 206). Jews possessed poultry (LY I, 65; TD 299), sheep, goats and cattle (TD 271; PK 167; LY II, 64, 69). In comparison to other imperial areas, the Slovenian lands, including Maribor, are exceptional in the great variety of Jewish economic activities which can be compared to the lands of Southern Italy, Spain and Provence.

2.2 Notable individuals and families

Of the numerous individuals and families, a special attention should be paid to Israel Isserlein bar Petachia (1390, Maribor – 1460, Wiener Neustadt) (Keil 2006, 67; Spitzer 1997, 182). He is considered the most



influential rabbi of the Empire in the second third of the 15th century (GJ III 2, 1625) and the last great rabbi of medieval Austria (Eidelberg 1962, 38). Even though Regensburg in Bavaria is often quoted as his birthplace, it is now clear he was born in Maribor (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 404). As a son of rabbi Petachia of Maribor, he came from a well-known scholarly family. Soon after the Viennese *Gzerah* of 1421, in which his uncle and mother lost their lives, he returned to Maribor, where he started to serve as a rabbi, and in 1425, we already witness his correspondence and socializing with other scholars of his age. Responsa of rabbis Israel Bruna, Moses Mintz and Maharil of Mainz quote Isserlein with great respect. He moved to Neustadt, where he is attested in 1445, though he frequently travelled between Maribor and Neustadt. In Neustadt, as before in Maribor, he started to run a *yeshiva* until his death in 1460. His pupils were from Austria, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, Silesia, Bavaria, and Rhineland. He often served as an arbitrator between different communities and his decision was considered final. With the appearance of press and the codification of *halachah*, his responsa was included into numerous collections, the most prominent being Shulchan Aruch. From his two works, he edited *Trumat ha-Deshen* himself, whereas *Psakim u-Chtavim* was edited by his pupils after his death. They were both printed in Venice in 1519 (404–407).

Another important figure was Isserlein, son of Chia, living and lending money in Ptuj between 1334 and 1350. Along the Jewish brothers Musch and Hatsim of Celje, he was the most important financier of Slovenian lands in mid-14th century. He was lending money to the Lords of Osterwitz, Counts of Gorizia-Gorica (Görz), and Bishops of Gurk and Freising. He died in 1361 or 1362. His grandson Musch acted alone between 1362 and 1392 and significantly superseded his grandfather. His clients, in addition to those of his grandfather, included also the Counts of Celje and the Lords of Ptuj (GJ III 2, 833, 836, 839, 843; Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 411–413).

Sons of Seldman, another important family, are known to us from numerous documents. Mannach is mentioned as early as in 1393 (GZM V/62). Aram, his brother, mentioned in Maribor in 1448–1478, was endowed with privileges by the Emperor several times (1472, 1473, and 1477). For a time, he was paying a quarter of all the taxes for the community of Maribor. Aram, the founder of the Morpurgo family of Trieste and Gorizia, owned houses in Maribor and Radkesburg and had business in Trieste. His son



Isaak of Triest is attested between 1492 and 1522 and died before 1526. He initiated large financial operations, and in 1509, he was granted the privileges of a *Schutzjude* by the Emperor Maximilian (GJ III 2, 835, 842 – note 95, 1482, 1483). These so-called Protected and Court Jews in the following generations across Central Europe, with their high education, standard of living and affinity to the general European Enlightenment, strongly contributed to the development of Jewish Enlightenment or Haskalah in the 18th and the 19th centuries.

2.3 Relations with Christian environment

Despite legal discrimination against another religion in a strictly Christian society, in addition to business, testimonies describe many cultural and social contacts between the two groups, which attest to a high level of tolerance, especially for a medieval environment. Of course, conversions from one religion into another also occurred. Jews were, even though it was illegal in the eyes of the Church, also returning to Judaism, which was occurring not only due to remorse but also out of material reasons, as a baptized Jew lost all his/her rights to inheritance (TD 349). Even though the relations between the two groups were surprisingly good, previous interpretation that three or four seats in the synagogue of Maribor were intended for Christians might be incorrect (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 453; LY I, 31), as it is now clear that the term *nochrin* (»foreigners«) refers to Jews from outside of town and not Christians, and the term *hadarat ha-melech* (»splendour of the king«) to splendour of God or the Torah and not the king of the land. Another example of good relations is that when a common place of residence was under attack, members of both religions participated in its defence (TD 328). Relations were even so good that sometimes Christians gave to their Jewish neighbours and business partners precious gifts for holidays (TD 78, 83).

What strikes out most in regard to relations between Jews and Christians not only in Maribor but also in the whole of Styria and other historical Slovenian lands up to 1400 is a relative 'lack' of persecutions of Jews, especially if the area is compared to the imperial lands north of the Alps or even with Upper and Lower Austria. In this regard, the Slovenian lands bear more resemblance to the Italian lands. Though attacks, disturbances, discrimination and even one case of outright slaughter (in Wolfsberg



in Carinthia in 1338, when more than 70 Jews died) (Jelinčič Boeta 2009a, 245) did occur, explicitly violent events were very rare. It is of special interest that in some 300 years of Jewish community of Maribor we do not have even one single recorded case of attacking the local Jews, which is, compared to other areas of Europe, simply remarkable.

3 Decline and expulsion

From the 14th century onwards, we are witnessing a general decline in the economic power of the Carinthian Jews, a decrease in the size of the Jewish population and its concentration in larger communities. By the end of the 14th century, smaller communities already disappeared, and the same goes for communities of Friesach and Villach in the 15th century. At the time of expulsion in 1496, the Jews in Carinthia live only in St. Veit and Völkermarkt. From the 15th century onwards, the position of Jews in Styria started to deteriorate, as well. The general economic crisis and the competition of Christian population in trade and money-lending grew, as grew the demands for limitations against the Jews the burghers and the nobility asked for. Such was the case in 1418, when the burghers of Styria complained to the Habsburg duke Ernest the Iron. As in 15th century Christians also started to lend money and the ecclesiastical prohibition against taking interest among Christians started to weaken, Jews were slowly pushed out of this business. Simultaneously with the decrease in their economic power, hatred of the Jews started to grow, partly due to the increased activities of the preaching monk orders, especially the Franciscans. From the middle of the 15th century onwards, also the Turkish incursions started, which had a catastrophic economic effect and contributed to the decrease of the Jewish population. In 1496, the only Jewish communities in Southern Styria were in Radkesburg (Radgona), Maribor and Slovenska Bistrica (Windisch Feistritz). Despite these developments, even after 1400 not one case of group physical attacks on Jews in the area is recorded.

After the death of Frederick III (1493), the demands of the Land Estates increased under the new Emperor Maximilian I, and at their assemblies in Maribor (1494) and Graz (1495) they offered the Emperor a compensation for the expulsion of Jews. Maximilian accepted their demands and in 1496 the Jews of Maribor were expelled. Some left towards Burgenland,



while others towards Istria, Triest, Gorizia and Gradisca. Some of them settled in Ljubljana until the expulsion of 1515 and then continued to the coast or to Burgenland (Brunner 2000, Schöggel-Ernst 2000).

Abbreviations

GJ	Germania Judaica
GZM	Gradivo za zgodovino Maribora
LY	Leket Yosher
PK	Psakim U-Chtavim
Reg I	Regesten zur Geschichte der Juden in Österreich im Mittelalter.
TD	Trumat Ha-Deshen

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