

Registration of Births, Marriages, Divorces & Deaths in the 19th Century in Eretz Yisrael *Shmuel Shamir*

Nafus Books

There is a common belief that in the Ottoman Empire, which ruled Eretz Yisrael for four hundred years and whose territory stretched from Baghdad in the east to Morocco in the west and from the Persian Gulf in the south to the Crimean Peninsula and the Danube in the north, there was no central registration of births, marriages, divorces and deaths. A study of the Nafus Books (Nafus, an Arabic word, is equivalent to the Hebrew word Nefesh, meaning soul), contradicts this idea.

The Ottoman Nafus Volumes Contain:

10 Regional Census Volumes that deal with births

7 Volumes registering marriages

8 Volumes listings deaths and divorces

Mukhtar Volumes in Hebrew and Turkish

The Nafus volumes in the National Archives (465 books as well as the unofficial ledgers of the Mukhtars of the various ethnic communities) are described by Paul Alsberg, the head of the National Archives (Alsberg, p. 533-534). They are arranged as required by the Civil Registration Law of 1884 that was enacted to provide a listing of residents and to establish the requirement of recording births, deaths, marriages and divorces. It was revised in 1905 and a French translation appears in the book by George Young (Young, p. 242-262). The Nafus Volumes are not chronological, but entries are listed according to the date that the information was received by the provincial registration office. The births are recorded for the most part by family and not by personal name and according to the religious affiliation and by the city or village of residence.

The Nafus Books are not easy to read and require special skill and a good deal of expertise if one wishes to locate names of recorded Jews.

Following is a photograph of an Identity Card [Tazkara Otomania] from the Moslem year 1313 (1895) of Victoria Alluf, which in translation reads:

“Victoria daughter of Shmuel and Bulissa Alluf, born 1313 after the Hijra; 1312 tax year; member of the Faith of Moses [Jewish].

Province of Jerusalem

Locality – Jerusalem

House address: Rechov Hashalshélet

Number of the building – 308/1

Number of the location – building 1



The Nafus Books have been transferred onto microfilms and are listed in the National Archives according to these numbers:

GN 1212778, 25	Nafus Volumes	106 Births	1878-1885
		106 Deaths	1878-1885
		161 Births	1905-1913
GN 1212778,43	Nafus Volumes	165 Births	
GN 1212790,35	Nafus Volumes	166 Deaths	1914-1917
	Nafus Volumes	167 Marriages	1905-1910

In the nineteenth century, Eretz Yisrael was a province of the Ottoman Empire. Heading the province were Pashas who alternated and ruled the province along with its inhabitants that came under their jurisdiction while remaining in their hometowns. Thus, the Pashas of Damascus, Acco (Acre), Shechem (Nablus) or Jerusalem ruled in Eretz Yisrael. The central government did not interfere in the autonomous rule of the various religious communities.

The country was underpopulated. In the western part, within the borders that were later established by the British Mandate, at the beginning of the 19th century the population numbered only some two hundred thousand persons but by the end of the century the number had grown tremendously (experts disagree over the end of the century estimates).

The position of Pasha was purchased from the Sultan in Constantinople, Istanbul of today. He was appointed for a specified number of years and at the conclusion of his term, someone else replaced him. The Pashas were not sticklers for careful recording. The listings of births, marriages, divorces and deaths were sometimes included in the court records of the various cities (*sigalat* [books] of the Sharia courts), in books of Jewish Kolelim or in the books of the Christian churches, even though there was no clear requirement to do so.

The Nafus books of Eretz Yisrael deal exclusively with Ottoman citizens. Those holding foreign citizenship were registered with the various consulates or in the courts of their ethnic/religious affiliation. Cf. *Ottoman Censuses in Eretz Yisrael 1875-1918*, The National Archives, 5744, edited with introduction by Jonathan Pagis.

In addition to the Nafus Volumes, we have the books of the Mukhtars. These were not in official usage by the government but were used by the leaders of the ethnic community or heads of villages that is the Mukhtar. This local leader would from time to time prepare a list of the members of his community, for his personal use, but on occasion by order of the government.

Recording this information became obligatory under Mandatory regulations. With the conquest of Palestine by the British, the Order of Public Health 1918 (found in the Laws of Eretz Yisrael, Volume II, page 1260) required that all births be registered with the Department of Health within 15 days of its occurrence. Fulfilling this requirement was the obligation of the parents, the doctor and the midwife who participated in the birth and the Imam or mukhtar of the village or of the neighborhood. It was further established that the Ministry of Health, whose responsibility was later transferred to what became the Bureau of Immigration and Statistics, would maintain a registry of births and issue birth certificates according to the conditions established by law. Subsequent to this Order, registration of marriages, divorces and deaths was required.

The registration of marriages and divorces in the British, German, American and other consulates in the Ottoman period, was a result of the Capitulation Treaties signed with the "Sick Man of Europe," the Ottoman Sultan. These treaties granted consuls unique status as the representatives of major powers. They tried to increase their influence through various means including the recording of marriages, divorces and deaths of those under their protection.

Montefiore Censuses

The books containing the lists of the Montefiore censuses of the nineteenth century are an important tool for the genealogist researching the Jewish residents of Eretz Yisrael. They contain information concerning the personal status of individuals, families, births, marriages and deaths. The details are recorded on forms that were prepared in advance for the purpose of the census. The lists were intended to serve as a means to improve the conditions of the Jews in Eretz Yisrael, but in reality, they were utilized to distribute charitable contributions.

The Jewish community, known then as *Milet al Yahud*, conducted five censuses under the direction of Sir Moses Montefiore in the years 1839, 1849, 1855, 1866 and 1875. A close study of these censuses gives a true picture of the structure of the Jewish community of Eretz Yisrael in the 19th century, its economic condition and where its members lived. In 1839, 6,408 Jews were counted in Jerusalem and at the end of the century, their number was estimated at 41,000. The original documents are located at the Jewish College at Ramsgate, near London. The Jewish National and University Library has a copy in its Department of Microfilms of Hebrew Manuscripts.

Medical Lists

Another helpful resource for the family researcher are the lists from hospitals, physicians, midwives and mohalim of Jerusalem.

Physicians and clinics functioned in Eretz Yisrael during the time of the Bible and Talmud. In later times, especially in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries many doctors visited Eretz Yisrael as pilgrims. During their visits, they assisted the local population but did not leave a permanent mark on the health and hygiene of the country. Modern medicine begins when the first academically qualified physicians settled here with the intention of practicing their profession. From 1842 onwards, we have lists from hospitals and physicians as well as consular records.

Hospitals

The British Mission Hospital opened in Jerusalem in 1842. It was headed by Dr. Alex Gerstein and the pharmacist was Melville Bergheim. This hospital was sponsored by the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews. It was intended exclusively for Jews and in order to attract them, the hospital's kitchen was strictly kosher.

The Rothschild Hospital was opened by Albert Cohen, the representative of the Rothschild Family, in 1854.

The Bikur Holim Hospital was opened by the Perushim (non-Hasidic East European Jews) in 1867.

The Misgav Ladakh Hospital opened in 1889, under the sponsorship of the leaders of the Saloniki Jewish community.

The Turkish Municipal Hospital opened in 1890-91.

Shaarei Zedek Hospital opened by Dr. Wallach in 1897.

The Hadassah Hospital.

Physicians

Until the middle of the 19th century, the 'doctors' who practiced in Eretz Yisrael had no formal academic training and were not certified. They plied their trade out of personal pride or because they had no other skill. Some had served as medics in the army or as aides to army physicians. Many of these medics had a great deal of practical experience, through the use of various medicinal applications and even more so in the understanding of the minds of their clients. They did not see them in clinics but would circulate in the neighborhoods and the villages to bring succor to the ill (Avitzur, p. 159).

The hospitals were not open to every ill person or woman in labor. Most deliveries of babies took place at home, sometimes with the help of a midwife and sometimes with the women of the family assisting.

In 1888, a law was passed in Turkey prohibiting the practice of medicine, dispensing of drugs or operating a pharmacy or midwifery without a recognized diploma. Those holding foreign diplomas were required to send them to the capital, Constantinople for inspection. However, in day-to-day life, this order did not change anything. 'Doctors' without diplomas continued to practice but they were pushed further and further to the fringes (Avitzur p. 160). By the end of the 19th century, the relative number of doctors to the population in Jerusalem exceeded that in European cities because of the large number of hospitals that had been established by Christian religious orders and Jewish philanthropic institutions.

The opening of the missionary hospital in Jerusalem provoked great concern in the Jewish community, and within a year, Moses Montefiore sent a Jewish doctor to Jerusalem at his own expense. Along with him, he sent a pharmacy. His emissary, Dr. Simon Frankel (1809-1880) opened a clinic in Jerusalem in 1843. He received patients, distributed medicines and cared for them for fifteen years.

In the archives of the above mentioned hospitals we searched for additional records of births and deaths. Likewise, we also looked for ledgers of the Kolelim, lists of the mohalim and midwives and burial society books as well as those who make tombstones, like the Parnes family (Michael Parnes).

We discovered that these books were not found at a central location. The ledgers dealing with marriages and divorces and those dealing with burials and the production of tombstones survived to some extent and were located in the offices of the Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities, the General Committee of Keneset Israel, in Christian churches and even in the books of the Sharia Moslem Court. This material is not accessible to the general public and the family researcher will have to delve deeply and go to extraordinary lengths providing detailed information, before he will be able to get to the original listings.

Jacob Joshua in his book on births in Jerusalem provides a list of physicians who practiced in Jerusalem including the following:

- Dr. Mazariki, a Greek who spoke fluent Spanish.
- Dr. Aaron Mazia, 1858-1930, who compiled the first medical dictionary.
- Dr. Abraham Abushdid who was the father-in-law of Itamar Ben Avi, the son of Eliezer ben Yehuda.
- Dr. Aaron Yarmens, 1859-1925 who worked at Shaare Zedek Hospital.
- Dr. Segal and Dr. Touro who were ophthalmologists.
- Dr. Ashler (Eshler), an honorable German Christian.
- Dr. Nahum Korkidi.

We sought out lists and ledgers from these doctors in the hope that we could complete our research on the 19th century, but to no avail, as we found nothing.

Midwives

Another source searched for were the lists kept by the Jewish midwives who practiced in Jerusalem, Safed, Tiberias and Hebron. They cared for all, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation. Among them were, Etká Godel, the daughter of one of the founders of Meah Shearim; Haya Barr, who presented her documents from Vienna to all the Jerusalem physicians (Jacob Joshua); Feigele, the attractive Ashkenazi midwife who headed the maternity department of Misgav Ladakh Hospital; Rachel de'Harosh; Bekhora de'Hefetz; Golda (Feige) the Deaf; Madam Yitzhaki; Rachel Bakala Alcalai who delivered the members of the author Jacob Joshua's family. (Jacob Joshua).

An Additional Source

Another place for us to find this type of information is in the listings found in family prayerbooks and Bibles. In the past, and even today in some circles, it was customary to record births, marriages or deaths on the inside covers of prayerbooks and Bibles. The author of these lines found the

listings of the dates of marriages and births in his family in the prayerbook of his grandfather, Abraham Yitzhak Abadi, who inscribed them on the inside cover as follows:

I married on Sukkot 5648/1887
 My oldest daughter Malka was born on 15 Kislev 1889 [5650]
 My son Shlomo was born on 24 Heshvan 1891 [5652]
 My son Moshe was born on 20 Tevet 1893 [5654]
 My son Yitzhak was born on Friday 29 Tishrei 1898 [5659]
 My daughter Mazal-Tov was born on Shabbat 15 Av 1900 [5660]
 My son Yosef Nisim was born the first day of Hanukkah 25 Kislev 1902 [5603]
 My daughter Rachel Sara was born on Monday 17 Elul 1904 [5604]

Bibliography

(Bibliography of material available in English; complete bibliography including Hebrew items is found at the end of the Hebrew article).

Alsberg, Paul Abraham. *The Israel State Archives as a source of information on the history of Palestine during the period of Ottoman rule*. In: International Seminar on the History of Palestine and Its Jewish Settlement during the Ottoman Period, Jerusalem, 1970, ed. by Moshe Maoz. Jerusalem, Ben Zvi Institute, 1970.

Young, George. *Corps du Droit Ottoman*. Translated from Turkish. Oxford University Press, 1905. 2v.

Shmuel Shamir (Mizrahi) was born in Jerusalem (1923) and was a member of the first graduating class of the Hebrew University Law School; an active attorney with numerous hobbies among them genealogy; his numerous articles have appeared in Ha'aretz, Jerusalem Post, Davar, Haboker, Yediot Aharonot, Et-Mol, B'ma'arakha, Karka, L'veit Avotam and others. He has found the sources of his family in Jerusalem dating from 1643 to the present. He is married to Martha and the father of Irit, Yael and Zvi.