



A Boys' Heder in the Karpaten, in 1937, by photographer Roman Vishniac.

## From birth to marriage

### A Jewish Childhood

*Little has been written about childhood in Jewish History. What was the relationship between parents and children? How did children occupy their time? What were the different steps in a child's life? Did adolescence exist? Scholar Tamar Salmon-Mack tells us more about this mysterious age of life in the Eastern European Jewish society.*

### A demographic change: the increase in proportion of young Jews

In the early modern period and even more intensely in the nineteenth century, the Jewish population of Eastern Europe grew at a rate faster than that of the non-Jewish populations. Demographers agree that this difference was a consequence, chiefly, of lower rates of infant mortality among Jews. The effect was a continually growing increase in the proportion of young people in the Jewish population. It can be hypothesized that in certain ways, the disparate ideological movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including Hasidism, the new style of yeshivas, the Haskalah and the Musar movement, all of which gained substantial energy and participation from young men under the age of 20, were a consequence of this demographic factor. While the demographic characteristics of Jews tended to converge with those of non-Jews in the early decades of the twentieth century, the same principle may nevertheless have been a somewhat less significant element in explaining the enormous influence and importance of Jewish youth movements of a great variety of ideological stripes in the years between the two world wars.

### Adolescence: a modern notion

The period of childhood in early modern Eastern Europe was short and grew somewhat longer in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The notion of adolescence as a life stage was propounded by the *maskilim*, but did not really exist in traditional Jewish society. Still, the boundaries between childhood and adulthood were hazy and variable. For boys, a period of study marked off their childhood; for girls, who tended to remain at home, the boundaries of infancy, childhood, and adulthood were more vague. This is particularly true for those whose new husbands moved into their homes for a fixed period of years to devote themselves to Torah study—a practice known as *kest*.

Dates of birth were only sometimes recorded in family prayer books or similar books. Before governments began to record vital statistics, the absence of such information could lead to difficulties, such as determining whether a person was of marriageable age. In the second half of the eighteenth century, for example, the rabbi of Lwów noted that “especially in . . . Ukraine and its region . . . it is impossible to know with assurance the age of the husband or wife . . . many people are not settled and they wander . . . hence it is impossible to calculate their age” (Me’ir ben Tsevi Margoliot, *Or ‘olam: Me’ir netivim*, question 74).

### To the Heder

At about the age of five, boys were taken to heder where on the first day, following a medieval Ashkenazic custom, they would be presented with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet covered in honey for them to lick. This practice is noted in *Kav ha-yashar* by Tsevi Hirsh Koidanover, first published in 1705. Before the nineteenth century, girls were seldom taken to school but were instructed by their mothers, learning the relevant commandments, acquiring basic literacy and the skills of housekeeping such as cooking, knitting, embroidery, and how to launder clothes. Moreover, in families with a large number of children, the older daughters were caregivers for younger members of the family.

## Love and fear

The treatment of children by their parents was the subject of advice from rabbis and teachers. The popular work *Lev tov*, first published in 1637 and often reprinted, advised that « Each father and mother must love his children with all his soul and all his might. But they must not reveal their love in the presence [of the children] because then the children would not fear them and would not obey them. Every man must teach his children to fear him ». Rivke Tiktiner, asserting that the mother must educate her children, insisted that no pious woman would spare the rod. At bedtime, moreover, women were advised to speak words of Torah, telling the children stories that would bring them to the fear of heaven. She should speak to them particularly about those who died for the sanctification of God's name, telling the story of the Binding of Isaac, and of Hananyah, Misha'el, and 'Azaryah. Aleksander ben Mosheh of Grodno proudly asserted in his ethical will, in the eighteenth century, that he had had many children but never kissed even one of them, never took them on his knee, and never had a silly conversation with them.

## Early marriage criticisms

The age of majority did not necessarily correlate with marriage. Early marriage, a practice of the more prosperous members of the community, was followed by a period of *kest* (often three years), during which the groom lived with the bride's family and pursued Torah study. Thus neither partner could be considered independent or autonomous. It is not surprising, therefore, that a man enacted communal legislation in the early modern period to the effect that no note signed within two or three years after a marriage was valid. In Kraków in 1595, one had to be at least 20 years old before conducting business independently. In the seventeenth century both the Lithuanian Council and the Council of Four Lands enacted legislation to the effect that if a man contracted a marriage without the knowledge of his parents before the age of 18 (in Lithuania) or 20 (in Poland), his actions were considered to have no legal validity. An enactment of the Council of Four Lands barred extending a loan to anyone under the age of 25 or who had not been married at least two years. Young men not destined for early marriage or the yeshiva often became apprentices to master artisans. Contracts were arranged between the parents and the master; the youngster would live in his home for a period of years. Marriage would generally not occur before the end of that period, and Jewish artisan guilds frequently stipulated that a person be married in order to qualify for membership.

Early marriage was fiercely criticized by *maskilim*, some of whom candidly recounted their own bitter and humiliating experiences. They maintained that the teenage years should be spent learning a trade. By the end of the nineteenth century, Lithuanian yeshiva heads were discouraging their students from marrying early. Naftali Tsevi Yehudah Berlin maintained that early marriage was medically unsound (*Ha'amek davar*, on Exodus 1:7).

## Free time

Children's lives included autonomous periods of time devoted to play. The eighteenth-century memoirist Ber of Bolechów describes carving a wooden sword for his son. Sholem Aleichem mentions "hopping on one foot" as well as blindfold games, and *ekekh umekekh* (guessing game). Memoirists and folklore collectors have found references to numerous types of play, none of which was peculiar to Jewish children—hopscotch (*klas*), for example. Before the twentieth century, virtually no literature was written specifically for children, who would read adult material. It does seem though, that certain books of *minhagim* (customs), which were printed with copious illustrations, were intended to be read by both children and adults, and there were Yiddish versions of romance and adventure tales that probably appealed to children.

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Source : Tamar Salmon-Mack, « Childhood », *the YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*