

# A Journey into the Life of the Jews of France in the 20th Century

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## Introduction

The example of the destiny of my family is typical of the fate of the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe in the first part of the 20th century, exploded between France and the USA, mainly. As part of genealogical research, the distance does not allow to physically go through the rooms of the local, departmental or national archives. The digitization of documents and online archives, considering the specificities of availability of personal data according to French law and policy of municipal, departmental and national archives services concerning digitizing, indexing and online publication, allow easier access to information about individuals and families. However, it will remain long periods without access to information. This presentation will only bring up the French digitized sources available since 1900. Soliciting an association such as GenAmi allows to overcome the language barrier and allows access to existing but not digitized archives.

## Rozencwajg-Cajgfinger family

My maternal grandfather Juda-Lejb **Rozencwajg** (**Rosenzweig** in French spelling) arrives in France, around 1919-1921. He was born on October 28, 1895 in Kowalkow, 78 miles south of Warsaw, not far from Ilza, Radom, Zwoleń and Lipsko in the Polish territories of the Russian Empire. He is the second child of Jankiel **Rozencwajg** and Ruchla **Feldsztajn**. On February 26, 1896, his mother Ruchla died prematurely, at the age of 25. Since then, his name had been forgotten, and it's only in 2015, through JRI-Poland and the archives of State in Radom, that it was found by the discovery of her death record. Jankiel **Rozencwajg**, born on June 7, 1867 in Krupow, not far from Ilza, is farmer-director of a large estate of a Russian general in Kowalkow at least from 1895 to 1921. Jankiel remarries in 1897 with Cyrla **Zommer**. They have 11 children. How Juda-Lejb decides to leave for France? This decision is probably related to history and politics of Poland. After a long period of Russian domination, Poland regains its independence in 1918 with the proclamation of the Second Republic and its recognition by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The restoration of Poland is followed by an agrarian reform, 936,000 hectares are redistributed from 1920 to 1925. The lands of the Russian general are expropriated and Jankiel loses his job of farmer-manager. The family takes the road to the city of Lodz, as evidenced by the family registration form in this city, dated August 17, 1921. All the children are registered by the city except the eldest sister, Chaja Estera who married in 1911 with Nuchem **Gilberg**, and Juda-Lejb, may already be on the way to France. After a long journey, Juda-Lejb arrives in the small town of Piennes, in Meurthe-et-Moselle, Lorraine, in the East of France, 31 miles from Metz and 62 miles from Nancy. Why in this city of barely 1800 inhabitants in 1921? At Piennes and nearby, the largest iron mines in France, need workers. In 1921 or 1922, Juda-Lejb brings to France his first cousin through their respective mothers and future wife Ruchla **Cajgfinger**. They marry in France. She was born on March 20, 1898 in Wola Lipieniecka, near Szydłowiec. Ruchla's family live in Szydłowiec. The home town of the **Cajgfinger** is Gniewoszw.

The censuses of 1921, 1926, 1931 and 1936 in the cities of Piennes and Joudreville teach us that Juda-Lejb also brought to France several members of his family as well as those of his wife Ruchla. They are all merchants or traders, working on their own or for others. Juda-Lejb, his wife and three children, who arrived in Nancy in 1929, were enrolled on the census of Nancy in 1931 and 1936, as well as his sister Chaja Ester, widowed, with two children. He is a merchant, she is a grocer <sup>(39)</sup>.

The civil status indexes of the time tell us that Juda-Lejb and Ruchla suffered the deaths of two young children: Henri in 1926 and Adolphe in 1928. In a likely will for integration, my grandparents obtained French nationality by decree on September 3, 1930 and most of the cousins obtained it until the 1950s <sup>(22)</sup>. After the Second World War, the family is scattered over Nancy, Lyon, Paris, Toulouse, Grenoble <sup>(28) (29) (34) (35) (36) (37) (38)</sup>.

## Atlas-Gelberger family

After the death of his wife Chaja **Atlas** on December 14, 1892 in Lemberg, Galicia (now L'viv, Ukraine), at the age of 39, my paternal great-grandfather Oszyas **Pressler** left this city, to settle in Vienna, Austria, with five children. One of his sons, Philip Joachim **Atlas**, my grandfather, born in 1887 in Lemberg, married Antonia **Gelbberger** on August 10, 1919. My father Max was born on February 20, 1920. The **Gelbberger** are from Brzesko, near Krakow and arrived in Vienna at the latest in 1897. My grandmother Antonia had 10 brothers and sisters. The **Gelbberger** arrive in Strasbourg in the 1920s: my grandmother, her husband and father, two of her brothers, Izak and Adolf Abraham with their wives and children. It was not possible to trace the presence of the family in Strasbourg due to lack of data online, except for the death certificate of my great-grandfather in Strasbourg in 1932, that reveals where he lived <sup>(39)</sup>. My father is naturalized French on August 19, 1939, three weeks before the declaration of WWII <sup>(22)</sup>.

I have therefore no connection with the French Jews before 1920. My family has been present in France for almost 100 years and has been part of the immigration of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe <sup>(2)</sup>.

### **What explains the simultaneous presence of families in France and in the USA?**

Ruchla's cousins left Poland to the United States: the brothers Morris and Jankiel **Cajgfinger** (**Zeigfinger** in American spelling) in 1910 and 1920. After the war, following the deportation of her husband Mosei **Meicler**, Perolla **Piekarczyk** emigrates to the USA with her children. On a more distant branch, all living descendants of my 4th great-uncle Szlama **Cajgfinger**, live in the USA. A brother and two sisters of Judah-Lejb emigrate to the USA: Hersz Grzegorz, Perla and Leah **Rozencwajg**. Two uncles of my father managed to flee Austria at the time of the Anschluss: Edward Elie **Atlas**, after being interned during the Juden Aktion in Dachau and then Buchenwald from June 1938 to February 1939, manages to flee Austria for Venezuela before ending his life in Denver with his wife Marya Charlotte **Atlas**, a first cousin; Zelig **Atlas** also flees Vienna for the USA with his wife and two of his three daughters, Hertha Lara and Edith. The third daughter Gertrude married before the war in England, lived there 20 years before emigrating to the USA, followed by her children. Marya Charlotte **Atlas**, before being joined by Edward Elie, tries to flee Europe on the boat MS St Louis, that leaves Hamburg in May 1939, to be driven back from Cuba and get back on the same boat in Belgium in June. My father did not keep connections with his Atlas family, it has been a very long time before finding still alive descendants of the uncles **Atlas**. A woman genealogist found in 2015 on the JewishGen Family Finder has finally allowed to reconnect the **Atlas** cousins settled in the USA. Finally, Schaje **Gelbberger**, my great-uncle, Antonia's brother, left for the USA before 1916 and changed his name to Samuel **Gilbert** at the time of his naturalization. Migration occurred before, during, for those who managed to flee Poland or Austria, or after the Second World War for those who survived. In 1956, Poland allows the Jews to leave the country and emigrate. The last members of my family leave Poland for France or Israel, then for the USA. It appears that the American branches separated from my French family had no more notion of the existence of French family branches. The descendants of other family branches not shown here also live in the USA: **Altman**, **Gradowczyk**, **Pomeranc**.

### **The different migrations of Jewish populations to France (2)**

France is very attractive for Jews from Central and Eastern Europe fleeing the persecution and discrimination of Tsarist Russia. Even if the majority emigrated to the USA, a wave of Jewish immigrants arrives in France between the 1880s until 1914. They are not very well welcomed by their French coreligionists in ancient communities who had more or less favorable times in France. In the 1920s, the progressive restriction of immigration to the USA and the establishment of labor agreements between France and Poland lead the arrival in France of many Poles, including Jews from Central and Eastern Europe, looking for a job and, possibly, a better life. In the 1930s, the rise of Nazism in Germany lead to the influx of German Jews. From 1948 to 1975, hundreds of thousands of Sephardic Jews leave the newly independent Arab countries and about 235,000 Jews from North Africa seek refuge in France because they are French (Algerian) or French-speaking (from Morocco and Tunisia). The French Jewish community become predominantly Sephardic, reviving religious practice, respect of kashrut and strengthening ties with Israel.

### **The Second World War and the Holocaust in France (2)**

At the outbreak of war in 1939, the Jews were mobilized for the French Army like all the French people. But German Jews refugees in France were imprisoned as enemy nationals. French people in the East of France, particularly leaving in Alsace and Lorraine, including the Jewish populations, are displaced towards the Center and South West of France, in the free zone. As soon as the time of the armistice of 1940, the newly created French State quickly put in place the first anti-Jewish measures in parallel with German anti-Jewish measures: expropriation of wealthy Jewish families, aryanization of Jewish-owned businesses, plunder, prohibition of certain professions, confinement of foreign Jews, obligation of wearing the yellow star, arrests, raids, hounding of Jews, including children, and, above all, deportation to extermination camps. The decrees published in the Official Journal <sup>(9)</sup>, by the appointment of provisional administrators, reveal the list of members of my family despoiled of their business or trade by the French State. Resistance groups are organizing to save Jewish children. Survival is organized by hiding, with false papers, especially in the area not occupied by the Germans until 1942, helped by many French who will be named "Righteous among the nations". French policemen failed a rounding up of Jews in Nancy. Some small towns collect, protect and hide Jewish families or children separated from their relatives who have been deported. Jewish organizations organized themselves in 1943 and created the Council of Representatives of the Israelites of France, whose task was to unify rescue actions. Many Jews choose to fight against the Nazi Germany by engaging in resistance. Others will join General de Gaulle in London. Out of 330,000 French Jews, 74,000 are deported including 11,000 children and 55,000 foreigners. 4,200 Jews die in France murdered, exhausted or sick in French camps. 3% of French Jewish deportees survive death camps. Three-quarters of the Jews in France will survive. The Memorial of the Shoah, through the work of Serge **Klarsfeld**, informs about all the victims of this period <sup>(19)</sup>. My French family is relatively spared, having fled the East of France and stayed in the Center or the South-West of France. However, several families have not had that chance. Abram **Cajgfinger** and his wife Frajda Ruchla are arrested in the East of the France and deported to Auschwitz. Their son Leon, absent at the time of arrest, will survive and be picked up by other members of the family. Josek **Grynberg** is arrested in Nice in 1943, interned in Drancy and deported to Auschwitz. His wife Ester Marja **Wekselman** (daughter-in-law of my great-

grandfather Icek Lejbus **Cajgfinger**) and their three daughters Chana, Rywka and Cywia Dobra are arrested in 1942, interned in Pithiviers and deported to Auschwitz. The wife of their brother Chaskiel Mendel, Rachel **Vaicbourdt**, and their two children Maurice and Annette are also deported to Auschwitz in 1944. The children are ages 8 and 5. Icek Josek **Cajgfinger** has better luck. He is arrested in Limoges in August 1943, interned in Drancy, sent to Auschwitz in a convoy in November 1943. He succeeded with eighteen other deportees to escape from the train in the East of the France. Wounded, he is rescued by a couple, lockkeepers, who will look after him, hides him and accompanies him to Lyon. He will enter the resistance. The couple will be recognized as Righteous among the Nations <sup>(18) (19)</sup>. Hermann **Gelbberger**, (my father's first cousin), born in Strasbourg and having followed his parents in the center of France in the Périgord, is summarily executed by the Germans on February 16, 1944 with thirty other young people, refractory to compulsory workfare, in a disused mill, where they were staying <sup>(10)</sup>. Others are deported. He was 19 years old. The circumstances are not completely clear.

## **Geography and geopolitics of France** <sup>(3) (4) (5) (6) (7)</sup>

France is in Western Europe. It is bordered by six countries: Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and Spain and three seas (Manche, Mediterranean Sea, North Sea) and an ocean (Atlantic Ocean). It also has overseas departments and territories. France is divided into territorial subdivisions. From twenty-seven regions, the division has reduced the number to eighteen in 2016: twelve metropolitan areas plus Corsica, five departments and regions overseas. France is also divided into 101 departments. Each department has a chief town. There are 36,658 towns, 430 over 20,000 inhabitants. Each local authority has powers conferred by laws of decentralization.

## **The organization of archives by the State and local authorities**

Town halls are responsible for keeping the registers of civil status: birth, marriage and death certificates. There is no distinction between the different religions. The time of issuance and free consultation of birth and marriage certificates is now 75 years (instead of 100 years). Acts of less than 75 years are issued only to people concerned, spouses, ascendants and descendants. Death certificates are issued at any time to any person who requests it. The request can be made online <sup>(16)</sup>. A law requires municipalities with less than 2000 inhabitants to pay their archives over a hundred years to the departmental archives. The others remain free to deposit them or not. Only 400 cities have their own archives <sup>(39)</sup>. Beginning at the end of the 18th century, the decennial tables were created by the administration. They summarize the content of registers of civil status (births, marriages, deaths, divorces, recognition of children) in alphabetical order. Annual tables are also established, indexing year after year the different registers. The alphabetical classification overcomes the absence of numerical indexing of the archives. These tables are preserved in the town halls or in the departmental archives <sup>(14) (39)</sup>. The publication of digitized archives depends on the policy of each administration. Online documents often come down to publishing images without indexing. The Ministry of Defense is putting on-line databases of military personnel who are victims of armed conflicts <sup>(10)</sup>. Military registers, that keep military services, are also available in departmental archives until the 1940s <sup>(12)</sup>. To search for a record, add 20 years to the date of birth of the conscript. Modern censuses in France have taken place every five years from 1891 to the present day. Nominative data are available after 75 years. They are preserved in the departmental archives <sup>(39) (14)</sup>. The Central Registry Office of Nantes is responsible for the civil registration of French citizens born abroad <sup>(17)</sup>. The National Overseas Archives preserves the colonial archives <sup>(13)</sup>.

## **Modern and contemporary digitized sources**

Genealogy sites and local genealogical associations regularly publish indexed lists <sup>(22) (23) (24) (26) (41)</sup>. A tool based on precise statistical data locates geographically the names of people born in France from 1891 to 1990, enabling research to be targeted on departments <sup>(28)</sup>. Currently, with the development of Internet, many directories are available online: private and professional directories, white pages <sup>(29) (30) (31) (32) (33) (34)</sup> and so on.

## **Did not find anything?**

Do not hesitate to contact and join the French association GenAmi. On its website, members have access to numerous databases about Jews in France, the list of books owned in the library, research guides in France, copies of the association's journal, indexes of acts and a list of links to other sites. A very active forum completes the available tools.

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