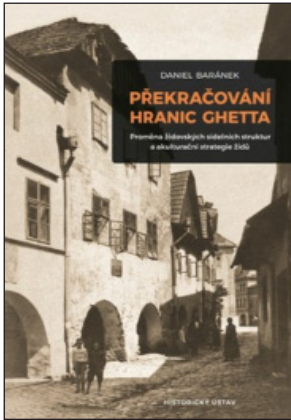


Daniel Baránek: Překračování hranic ghetta: proměna židovských sídelních struktur a akulturační strategie židů [Crossing the Ghetto Borders. The Transformation of Jewish Settlement Structures and the Acculturation Strategies of Jews], Historický ústav, Praha, 2023, 167 pp., ill

This book by Daniel Baránek presents a socio-historical analysis of Jewish-non-Jewish relations in the Bohemian lands between 1848 and 1921. The Author argues against



the prevailing historiographical focus on conflict, particularly antisemitism, and critiques the oversimplified “assimilation narrative” that often frames Jewish history. The research’s primary objective is to illuminate the more subtle, “non-eventful” aspects of daily life and gradual social change by examining the complex interactions between Jewish and non-Jewish populations. To achieve this, the Author undertakes a comparative micro-historical study of four towns with traditional Jewish ghettos: Boskovice, Hranice, Kolín, and Loštice. His analysis is structured along two principal axes. The first dimension, spatial, tracks the physical migration of Jewish populations out of the former ghettos into Christian parts of towns, leading to analyses of settlement patterns. The second dimension, sociocultural, enables investigation of the various acculturation strategies employed by Jews across spheres

such as social clubs, politics, religion, and education.

Baránek’s research offers a sophisticated mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of census data with cartographic visualization and a qualitative theoretical framework to interpret social behaviors.

What strengths and scholarly contributions can the monograph bring to readers? Thanks to its methodological rigor, theoretical sophistication, and significant historiographical interventions, I divided the book’s strengths into four main gains:

1) Innovative Methodological Approach

The research design is a major strength. The Author combines a comparative micro-study with advanced cartographic analysis, providing a novel way to visualize and understand historical demographic shifts. The Author’s use of hexagonal grid maps is particularly innovative. Unlike traditional maps that color entire houses, this method normalizes for building size. It offers a more precise, more accurate representation of population density, avoiding optical distortions, which is a powerful tool for spatial history. The research successfully integrates disparate sources – census records, historical maps, and city directories – into a coherent analytical pipeline, leveraging modern tools, such as RDF databases and OpenHistoricalMap.

2) Transparency and Rigor in Data Handling

The Author demonstrates exceptional academic integrity by openly acknowledging and systematically addressing the limitations of the historical source

material. The study forthrightly states that many census records are missing, especially for Boskovice and Kolín. Instead of ignoring this gap, the Author develops a mathematical model based on linear interpolation and approximation to estimate the missing population data for the cartograms. Crucially, the Author tests the model's reliability by running simulations on complete datasets to calculate its margin of error. This transparency builds significant confidence in the study's conclusions, even those based on modelled data.

3) Robust Theoretical Framework

Baránek's study moves beyond simplistic binaries like "assimilation" versus "orthodoxy". It employs John W. Berry's model of acculturation strategies (integration, assimilation, segregation, marginalization) as its core analytical tool. This framework allows for a much more nuanced understanding of Jewish past behavior. It demonstrates that individuals and groups could adopt different strategies in different social contexts – for instance, pursuing integration in civic society while choosing voluntary segregation in education to preserve cultural identity. This dismantles the flawed "assimilation narrative" by showing that actual assimilation was extremely rare.

4) Significant Historiographical Intervention

Baránek's findings directly challenge long-held assumptions in Czech-Jewish history. His research compellingly argues that economic factors, not anti-semitism, were the primary drivers of Jewish migration patterns. The decline in Jewish populations in these towns was not due to increased emigration driven by persecution, but to a decrease in immigration from outside as the towns became economically stagnant. The Author finds no evidence that antisemitic campaigns directly caused

emigration. The study posits that the key variable for successful Jewish integration was not the absence of anti-semitism, but the presence of a liberal faction within the non-Jewish society that provided a welcoming counterpart.

While the Author's handling of the research challenges is exemplary, the study is nonetheless constrained by certain inherent limitations stemming from the source material and the project's scope, which this review must discuss. The first is data incompleteness and too faithful reliance on modelling.

The study's most significant weakness is the fragmentary nature of its primary dataset. In two of the four case studies, Boskovice and Kolín, the Author was only able to locate 45% and 65% of the expected Jewish census records, respectively. While the mathematical modelling used to fill these gaps is rigorous, conclusions for these towns inevitably rest on a foundation that is partially estimated rather than entirely empirical. This introduces a degree of uncertainty that cannot be wholly eliminated. The census records themselves were not always filled out consistently, with frequent omissions of key data points, such as date of birth or length of stay in the municipality. This complicates the reconstruction of population groups, particularly for earlier census years.

The second problem is limited generalizability. The Author is correct to caution that the findings from this four-town study cannot be automatically applied to all Jewish communities in the Bohemian land. The research focuses on four "traditional" communities from a pool of over 200 in Bohemia and 52 in Moravia. These towns were selected explicitly for data availability and to represent specific town sizes, but they may not be representative of the broader experience, especially when compared to newly established communities in major industrial cities like Brno or Ostrava.

The study deliberately focuses on smaller towns with pre-existing ghettos, excluding the large, dynamic communities that formed in major cities post-emancipation. The socio-spatial dynamics in a city like Prague or Brno were likely very different, limiting the applicability of these findings to the entire Jewish population.

The third problem I identify is the inherent constraints of census data. The decennial nature of the census records presents an unavoidable analytical challenge. As the Author notes, the ten-year gap between censuses can mask significant mobility. A person classified as a “settler” (present in the same town in two consecutive censuses) may have moved away and returned in the intervening years. This flattens a potentially dynamic reality into a static picture and may underrepresent the true extent of population churn.

Despite the inherent limitations imposed by the available historical sources, *Crossing the Ghetto Borders* is a methodologically sophisticated and intellectually compelling work of social history. The Author’s innovative use of cartographic analysis, transparent handling of incomplete

data, and application of a robust theoretical framework set a high standard for the field.

The study’s strengths – particularly its rigorous challenge to the narratives surrounding antisemitism and assimilation – far outweigh its weaknesses. By demonstrating that economic opportunity and the presence of liberal allies were more decisive for Jewish migration and integration than persecution, the research makes a transformative contribution to the historiography of Jewish life in Central Europe. The limitations identified are not failures of the researcher, but rather honest acknowledgements of the challenges of working with fragmentary historical data.

This research is a valuable and insightful analysis that successfully advances the scholarly conversation, providing both a new model for conducting socio-spatial history and a more nuanced understanding of the complex realities of Jewish life after the fall of the ghetto walls. ■

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