

Nimrod Gaatone – French embassy humanities and social studies fellowship

My name is Nimrod Gaatone and I am a Ph.D candidate at the department of Jewish History in Bar-Ilan University in Israel, under the supervision of Dr. Orly Meron, a leading specialist of Jewish economics and social history. My thesis is entitled: "Economic and Social transformations in the Sephardic communities in the Atlantic rim during the early modern era: The case of the Jewish community in St. Esprit-les-Bayonne 1723-1790". Since the beginning of 2013 I am also a fellow Ph.D candidate at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris, under the auspices of the director of the Jewish Studies Center, Prof. Sylvie-Anne Goldberg.

The Jewish community in Bayonne, at the south-west of France, originated from former crypto-Jews (commonly referred to as "marranos") who escaped from the Iberian peninsula, mainly in fear of the ongoing manhunt by the Spanish and Portuguese inquisitions. These migrants settled in the south-west of France, during the 16th century, where they have been granted with a "lettre patente" by the king of France. They were regarded as foreign merchants and enjoyed some benefits, although demanded to practice the Christian religion, because the Jewish religion was officially banned in France since 1394. However, many of them went back to practice Judaism in public and established flourishing Jewish communities in several localities, among them, Bayonne, near the Atlantic coast. In 1723, the king of France, Louis XV, recognised them "*De-Facto*" as Jews, however they were still regarded as privileged foreigners and not as local residents. Only in 1790, during the French revolution, the national revolutionary assembly officially declared the Sephardic Jews in France as "active citizens" and offered them full emancipation.

My research deals with the economic and social history of the Bayonne community between the recognition of its Jewish identity by the king in 1723 and the emancipation in 1790. Its main goal is to explore the economic activities of the Jews, with a special focus on their commercial practices in the Atlantic Rim, and to evaluate the importance of these activities for their social status in their area of residence, in order to understand the socio-economic background that led to the emancipation. My research also aims to consider those social and economic transformations in light of recent trends in Jewish History studies, such as the research of the history of the Jews in the Atlantic Rim in the early modern era, as well as the research of the cross-cultural social and economic relations between Jews and non-Jewish interlocutors.

This research was difficult to conduct in Israel due to the fact that most of the documents and the research materials are available in France and the ongoing travels Israel-France cost high expenses. However, thanks to the French Embassy humanities and social studies Grant I was awarded in the summer of 2013, I was able to come to France in October 2013 and make significant progress in my work. In order to ease my transfer, "Campus France", the French governmental agency responsible for hosting foreign academic grantees, welcomed me already on my arrival at Charles De-Gaulle airport and has been assisting me since then in every step of the way.

As my research involves the collection of historic documents, most of them unrevealed to this day, I need to travel rather frequently in search of these materials which are scattered all over France and sometimes in other countries, such as Spain. "Campus France" has been supporting these travels since my arrival, both financially and

logistically, such as by making reservations to train and airplane tickets, but also with good advice. For example, when I got sick during one of my first travels (not to worry, it was just a seasonal virus that passed quickly!), the "Campus France" agent explained how the healthcare system in France works and advised me how to find a doctor. Furthermore, the medical insurance offer by "Campus France" covered most of my financial expenses. With this gracious help, I have been able to collect a great amount of rare and important historic documents, that shed new light on the social and economic history of the Jews in the South-West of France.

My stay here enables me to meet important scholars in my field of research and enjoy their generous assistance and wise advice. Furthermore, I am able to participate in various seminars, courses and academic venues, and even to join a prestigious research team. In addition, I am able to enjoy the amazingly rich archives and libraries of France, which conserve precious and rare materials not to be found elsewhere. Another important benefit is the possibility to join local societies, such as genealogical circles, groups of history amateurs and, of course, distinguished members and descendants of the Jewish community, who are happy to share their family's long and fascinating history with me.

As I concentrate on a very highly demanding project, I do not enjoy a lot of free time. However, my frequent travels allow me to visit exciting places, both in France and in other destinations. I love the beautiful Atlantic coast of France, whether Bayonne, famous for its wonderful chocolates, or Biarritz with its gorgeous beaches and luxurious shops and restaurants, and the Pyrenees mountains, mainly the picturesque route connecting Bayonne and the beautiful town of Pamplona in Spain, through the village of Saint Jean Pied-de-port and the historic site of Roncevaux, a must for every history amateur.

Naturally, living in Paris offers many cultural possibilities and I try to enjoy them when possible. "Campus France" offers assistance also in the cultural aspect through its leisure department, for example by organising excursions such as a gourmet cooking class I took part in, and many other activities as well as cheap tickets to the cinema.

In conclusion, my stay in France is both very fruitful, in terms of making progress in my academic research, and very pleasant. I thank Mr. Jonathan Sitbon, the academic project manager at the French embassy in Tel-aviv, and Mrs. Melanie Recuerda, the Middle East coordinator in "Campus France" Paris, for their ongoing support to my research.

I would like and to highly recommend my fellow Israeli students to apply for the French embassy academic grants.