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Fieldwork Methods and the Sociology of Jews : Case Studies of Hassidic Communities

Jacques Gutwirth

Directeur de recherche au CNRS
Laboratoire d'anthropologie urbaine
CNRS UPR34

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Abstract

The fieldwork method of studying Hassidic groups is that of urban ethnography: the group and its individual members always exist within wider entities. This is soon apparent when one attempts to establish contact. It is certainly true that the Belzer, like most Hassidic communities --whether of Antwerp or of Montreal-- wish to remain as much as possible a closed group; but in fact, this is never the case. Apart from a small number whose occupation keeps them at the heart of the community --such as the melamed or teacher in their own school-- the others are engaged in a trade or profession which is part of a much wider socio-economic network, even if the range of the occupation is itself somewhat limited. The research worker must be aware of the influence which the exercise of a 'lay' profession may have on religious behaviour. Such wider research is essential.

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jgutwirth1@aol.com

<http://www.lau.cnrs.fr/spip.php?rubrique43>

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FIELDWORK METHOD AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF JEWS: CASE STUDIES OF HASSIDIC COMMUNITIES

Jacques Gutwirth

Research methods

ANTHROPOLOGICAL fieldwork is mainly based on two complementary techniques: participant observation and open-ended interviews. Unlike sociological enquiries—which usually rely on questionnaires in order to collect socio-cultural data by seeking responses to preselected questions—anthropological research observes behaviour and attitudes which occur largely without any instrumentation by the fieldworker. In my opinion, and that of many others, this type of research has been shown to be, and still is, the most rewarding for the study of Hassidic communities.

I would go even further. I hope to show that starting with an intensive fieldwork study of a given Jewish group, one comes—of necessity—to know and to analyse for the sake of the research itself a whole sector, or even in some cases the entire spectrum, of the larger Jewish community. An example in point is my study of Antwerp Jewry. It was while I was working on the Belzer Hassidim of Antwerp for my doctorate research that I was able, by the gathering of complementary material, to produce a wider analytical study of that city's general Jewish population which, in 1966, amounted to about 10,500. I wanted to know why Antwerp Jewry—remarkable in many aspects, for it is largely dependent on the diamond industry—possessed such a strong Jewish identity. There was a strikingly high attendance of pupils in Jewish day schools, for example, and a widespread use in daily life of Yiddish as the general language of communication.¹

In 1971, I undertook research among the Belzer Hassidim of Montreal, and again I was able to study not only that particular group, whom I reported on in my article for this Journal ('The Structure of a Hassidic Community in Montreal')² but also the wider Jewish community of the city, whom I discuss in my 'Hassidim et Judaïcité à Montreal'.³ Since I had only the very limited period of two months for

my research in Montreal, there was then no question of my being able to study a Jewish population which numbered at the time more than 120,000. However, with the help of data from another piece of research carried out at the same time among the Hassidim of Montreal by William Shaffir⁴ and the demographic research of Louis Rosenberg,⁵ I was able to analyse the interactions and overlappings among several Hassidic communities, their relations with the Jewry of the city, and to see the whole within the wider context of Quebec and its own peculiar problems.

In 1975–76, I was able to carry out fieldwork for a longer period among a Hassidic community of Boston. On that occasion I was studying an ‘American’ group, that is, one whose spiritual leader had been born in the United States, and whose followers were largely second or third generation Americans. Naturally, in that case also, there was no question of my studying a Jewish population now estimated to total 195,000 and spread out in a vast urban and suburban area. On the other hand, starting from my intensive study of the community of the *Bostoner rebbe*, I was able to extend my research to cover the Orthodox sector and also to gain some further insight into the Boston wider Jewish community.

The fieldwork method of studying Hassidic groups is that of urban ethnography: the group and its individual members always exist within wider entities. This is soon apparent when one attempts to establish contact. It is certainly true that the Belzer, like most Hassidic communities—whether of Antwerp or of Montreal—wish to remain as much as possible a closed group; but in fact, this is never the case. Apart from a small number whose occupation keeps them at the heart of the community—such as the *melamed* or teacher in their own school—the others are engaged in a trade or profession which is part of a much wider socio-economic network, even if the range of the occupation is itself somewhat limited. The research worker must be aware of the influence which the exercise of a ‘lay’ profession may have on religious behaviour. Such wider research is essential.

The traditional Hassidim whom I have studied were (and still are, in part) reticent when faced by the curiosity of the research worker; this is often the case, of course, with minority groups. Even when he is observing behaviour—for example, religious ritual—which is not simply put on for his benefit, or listening to apparently truthful replies to his questions, the anthropologist is not shown all, he is not told every thing. One way of providing a check, or of filling in lacunae, is to have individual private conversations. Notwithstanding the apparent solidarity of the group, there will always be some dissension which will be revealed in gossiping. Moreover, one can collect important data from peripheral groups. For example, in Antwerp, I found that conversations with employers, clients, and colleagues of Hassidim in the milieu

of the diamond industry yielded very fruitful information. I was able then to understand the roles of Hassidim within that industry, as well as the balance of interests and pressures on both sides. I was finally able also to grasp the significance of this economic specialization for the persistence of a Jewish community which was far more traditional in Antwerp than elsewhere.

In Montreal, the gainful occupations of the Belzer Hassidim had a far wider range; there again, contacts and observation in various areas allowed me to obtain a better view of the group and of the somewhat important roles of the individual members who trade in the kasher products. Of course, kasher foods help in promoting the continued survival of the wider Jewish community not merely because of the religious requirement, but because delicatessens, special types of bread, pastry, etc., provide links with the eastern European old way of life.

The merits of intensive fieldwork and of the broader comparative approach soon become apparent when one studies Hassidim. Although Jewish ritual among various Hassidic groups is of a similar nature, yet each group will be eager to point out that faithful adherence to the teachings of their own *rebbe* (charismatic religious leader) entails special customs and modes of behaviour. The 'other' Hassidim are different—and the implication is that they are not quite as worthy. Upon further enquiry and observation, the fieldworker does, in fact, find significant differences between the forms of Hassidism. These may be reflected in personal appearance (such as the wearing of a special type of hat or other clothing), or they may be concerned with the aspect of the synagogue (varying attitudes concerning its aesthetic attributes or its opulence). Or again, there may be sharp contrasts in politico-religious attitudes—for instance, the anti-Zionist Satmar and the pro-Zionist Lubavitch. There are also differences based on geographic origin, occupations, and social and kinship networks. Of course, the lines of demarcation between different groups of Hassidim are not as clear-cut to a non-specialist as are those between Hassidim and other more or less observant Jews.

A Hassidic group has only comparatively autonomous institutions; it is closely linked to wider entities, often non-Hassidic. Except in the case of some powerful Hassidic congregations in New York (such as the Satmar and the Lubavitch), it cannot depend entirely upon its own resources for its religious requirements: *kashrut*, schools, Talmudic academies, cemeteries, etc. For example, the Belzer Hassidim of Antwerp are members of the *hevra kadisha* which serves the city's wider Orthodox community; they depend on it to bury their dead; in Montreal, three groups of Hassidim—of Belz, Satmar, and Vishnitz—maintain jointly a school for their girls; while the *Bostoner rebbe* supervises the purity of the milk which is sold to members of groups other

than his. Thus, one comes to perceive in every case that the community under study is part of a wider setting.

The method of intensive fieldwork is particularly useful in providing dynamic insight. Such insight will also have to take into account the historical perspective. The strongly structured and cohesive groups of Belzer Hassidim, in Antwerp as well as Montreal, came into being only after the Second World War; their members were survivors of the Nazi genocide, and their origins were diverse. As for the community of the *Bostoner rebbe*, after a humdrum existence for several decades in the old Jewish districts of the West End and of Dorchester, it was established in 1961 in Brookline, where it quickly flourished in a most striking manner. In all three cases, one must analyse the past, see the links with the present, and thus follow the development of the group; in some cases, one can draw upon available material: for example, the archives of philanthropic institutions which helped the refugees when they arrived in Antwerp and Montreal. In addition, interviews and informal conversations may bring to light valuable information.

Clearly, some Jewish communities—such as those of Antwerp and Montreal—make it possible for traditional Hassidim to live in their midst and survive economically. On the other hand, such Hassidim had not prospered in the past in Boston. However, both recent fieldwork and the Boston Community Surveys of 1965 and 1975⁶ (which provided data of very great importance) show some of the reasons why the Boston Hassidim are now a fairly successful group, living as they do in the midst of a highly skilled and economically prosperous Jewish community.

The 1975 Survey revealed the following occupational structure of Greater Boston:⁷

| | % Males | % Females |
|--------------------------|---------|-----------|
| Professionals | 40 | 36 |
| Managers and proprietors | 27 | 12 |
| Clerical and sales | 21 | 44 |
| Blue collar | 11 | 6 |
| Unspecified | 1 | 2 |
| | 100 | 100 |

Unlike the case among other traditional Hassidic groups, the occupational distribution of the *Bostoner rebbe's* community is more or less similar to that of the wider Jewish society, especially in the high percentage of professionals.

Statistical and demographic official data on Jewish communities vary in availability from country to country. There were none for

Antwerp, while in the case of Montreal the Census Reports give precise figures. When I was working among the Belzer Hassidim of Antwerp, I started with a list of members of the group which I had been able to compile in the course of my fieldwork. It was then, and only then, that I was able to check my data against the official city records of Antwerp. But demographic data on the Belzer Hassidim had only little significance without a comparative approach. Of course I could not make a detailed demographic study of Antwerp Jewry; but I was able to make some rough estimates: for example, it seems that in the mid 1960's the majority of Antwerp Jews had been established in that city before 1940 or were descended from such established inhabitants. (This was contrary to the general opinion then prevailing in the community.)

The Bostoner Hassidim

Over a period of six months in 1975–76, I carried out field research among the 'Beth Pinchas' community, whose leader is Grand Rabbi Levi I. Horowitz, known as the *Bostoner rebbe*. That community consists of about 150 households; its headquarters are in Beacon Street in Brookline, which is a well-to-do district near the centre of Boston and also close to that city's large universities.

It was clear from the outset that in order to understand the somewhat complex structure of Beth Pinchas, and its religious and ideological beliefs, I would certainly have to look beyond the small group of actual Hassidic disciples of the *rebbe*. The greatest number of his followers are Orthodox Jews: they consist not only of traditionally observant immigrants, most of whom came to the United States after 1945, or their children; there is also an appreciable number of *baalei tshuva*, literally 'repenters', that is, Jews who had shown in the past a small degree of religious observance or none at all, but who now had come to embrace *Yiddishkeit*, traditional Orthodox Judaism, and in some cases, Hasidism. Many of the children of the immigrants and these 'repenters' are university students or graduates working on the campuses or employed in various laboratories in the Boston area.

The *baalei tshuva* have joined the community largely owing to the remarkable missionary activities of the *Bostoner rebbe*; he considers it to be one of his fundamental tasks to ensure that large numbers return to the practice of the Jewish faith.⁸ His Hassidic centre includes a seminary for women and a Talmudic academy for men; they aim to educate those largely ignorant of the Jewish tradition and of the texts of the Torah. The *rebbe* also organizes *shabbaton*: weekends when he himself and the members of his group receive guests in their various homes; they join in the Sabbath prayers and rituals, and on the Friday night partake of the elaborate festive meal, which is served in a traditional Hassidic style at the home of the *rebbe*, in the Beth Pinchas

headquarters. There are very often students among the guests; the *rebbe* directs a great part of his missionary activity towards the student body: there are about 30,000 to 40,000 Jewish students in the Boston area,⁹ many of whom have come from other areas of the United States (and are therefore somewhat uprooted), and like the majority of American Jews they are not Orthodox.

A great deal of money is required to finance the missionary activities of the *Bostoner* Hassidim, their educational institutions, and their hospitality in their own homes and at the table of the *rebbe*. The latter has brought together a support group of benefactors who make donations, often of large amounts. Most of them are American-born children of immigrants who were, on the whole, observant Jews and came to the United States before the Second World War. These benefactors are rich businessmen who live in wealthy suburbs and tend to be Conservative Jews—that is, they do not adhere to the strict code of practice of the traditional Jewish Orthodox movement. However, they are aware that the *Bostoner rebbe* is a dynamic leader actively engaged in an attempt to restore Jewish traditional practices, which they see as conforming to the ideas of the established order; for the businessmen, such zeal is of especial importance in the context of Jewish students. The latter—especially since the Vietnam war—have often proved very susceptible to ‘subversive’ influences of all types, from Maoism to the Hare Krishna movement; some of the children of the benefactors have been thus ‘lost’ to their parents.

It must now be apparent that from the beginning of my fieldwork, I became aware of the necessity of taking into account the attitudes and the concerns of a sector of the economic establishment and of the student population. While regularly attending the *rebbe*’s synagogue, I also noted that among the members of his community there were some leaders of Boston’s Jewish day schools: the executive director of the New England Hebrew Academy (a school of the Boston branch of the Lubavitch Hassidim);¹⁰ the headmaster of the Maimonides school, which is linked to the Young Israel movement (modern Orthodox); the headmaster of a small suburban school; and a teacher in Boston’s Hebrew College (the only Jewish teaching institution in the Boston area which is of university level). This teacher also practises as a *mohel* (circumciser) in the *rebbe*’s community. Thus, the *Bostoner* Hassidim had important, though quite informal, links with the Jewish educational system.

I also noted that some members of Beth Pinchas occasionally attend a *shtibel* (a small Hassidic prayer house) of the Lubavitch Hassidim, while others take part sometimes in the prayers and sometimes in the other activities of the Orthodox Young Israel movement in Brookline. On the other hand, a few followers of the Lubavitch and some Young Israel members attend Beth Pinchas services. Moreover, the ‘sister-

hoods' (the female chapters) of Beth Pinchas and of the Young Israel synagogue regularly organize joint cultural activities.

Beth Pinchas does not have its own school; the children of its members attend either the Lubavitch or the Maimonides School. The founder and present head of that latter school is Rabbi Joseph D. Soloveitchik, a learned Talmudist of international reputation, who is an eminent professor at New York's Yeshiva University. He lives in Brookline, and on Saturday evenings he gives lectures on the Talmud in the Maimonides school; they are open to the public and many Beth Pinchas members attend them. A few other members occasionally go to a small synagogue whose rabbi is a Harvard University professor and the son-in-law of Rabbi Soloveitchik: he is also the son of the Talner *rebbe*, hence descended from a Hassidic dynasty, and it is on this account that he maintains his small synagogue—admittedly more Orthodox than Hassidic in style. Again, one can see some of the many links between the Beth Pinchas group and various Boston Orthodox groups and scholars.

According to the 1975 *Community Survey* of the Jewish population of Greater Boston, barely 5 per cent of the total were Orthodox: fewer than 10,000 in a total of 195,000 Jews; the 1965 Survey had noted a much larger proportion—14 per cent of the then total of 208,000. The 1975 Survey has therefore revealed a very sharp and very startling decline in the numbers of the Orthodox in Greater Boston in only ten years. It stresses the increase in membership of the Reform Movement and of assimilatory ideologies. Nevertheless, the small Orthodox sector in Boston makes its presence very clearly felt, not only as a result of its own dynamism but also because it receives some support from non-Orthodox institutions and individuals in the region. Just as the *Bostoner rebbe* has a special relationship with his benefactors, so does Beth Pinchas, as a movement, play the role of faithful upholder of Jewish traditional values, not limited to the religious sphere.

During the period of my fieldwork in Boston, there were the bicentennial celebrations of the United States; these included so-called 'ethnic-months', and November 1975 was the 'Jewish Month'. Several cultural events were organized by the Jewish community, some of them being staged in the City Hall. About one-fifth of all these events were connected with Orthodox Jews: there was a film on the Lubavitch Hassidim shown in two Conservative synagogues; and a special public lecture by Rabbi Soloveitchik delivered in his school. A show with sound effects and slides on the hand manufacture of *matsot* by the followers of the *Bostoner rebbe*¹¹ and a 'festival' of Hassidic melodies chanted by a small musical group under the direction of the *rebbe's* son were two events organized by Beth Pinchas; they were held on a Sunday afternoon in Boston City Hall and drew large crowds, since both the time and the place were popular. Many of the songs had Zionist

overtones; and since it was shortly after the notorious United Nations resolution condemning Zionism, the public showed their approval.

The *Bostoner rebbe* stresses his spiritual links to the Holy Land: both his father and grandfather lived in Jerusalem before 1914. He links the original background of his 'dynasty' with a pro-Israel ideology; and the leaders of various other Jewish movements in Boston certainly support Israel.¹² It seems that the *Bostoner rebbe's* group were granted a somewhat important part in the events of the 'Jewish Month' on account of the *rebbe's* energetic missionary zeal as well as the vigour of his Jewish identity, both religiously and politically. Of course, the 'Jewish Month' was an unusual event, but it led me to more basic data. As I noted earlier, universities are, in Boston, influential centres which are receptive to various nonconformist ideologies. Such famous institutions as Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as well as many others, exert strong assimilatory influences. Their Jewish students, although numerous, are nevertheless a minority; there is a strong statistical probability that they will marry out, and that they may become affected by various prevalent ideologies remote from Judaism.

On the other hand, Boston's Jewish institutions (as is often the case) have leaders who are both rich and of a high social status;¹³ it is therefore not surprising that they support free enterprise capitalism and its values—and the latter are certainly compatible with the religious values of Orthodox Jewry. The secular leaders therefore extend willing support to the Hassidim who, although they constitute a small minority, are remarkably dynamic. Thus, the *Bostoner rebbe's shabbaton* received a grant from the Combined Jewish Philanthropies both in 1975–76 and 1976–77. The C.J.P. also gives substantial support to the Hillel Houses for Boston's Jewish students.¹⁴ Boston University's Hillel House (which is the largest in the city) is under the direction of a rabbi who belongs to the Lubavitcher Hassidim. (Boston University is said to have a large proportion of Jewish students: 30–40 per cent.¹⁵) The experience of my colleagues and my own fieldwork observations have shown me that one can rely on a disciple of the Lubavitcher *rebbe* (Menachem Mendel Schneerson) to combine tactical ability, and the subtlety needed in a student milieu, with a strategy aiming at the propagation of religious and ideological modes of behaviour of the most traditionally Orthodox and Hassidic type.

The C.J.P. also subsidize Jewish day schools in Greater Boston. One may at first be surprised that in 1975–76 and in 1976–77, about 80 per cent of day school allocations went to either Orthodox or Hassidic schools; but then, these account for three-quarters of all Jewish day schools in the region. I could go on citing yet further examples of the influence of the traditional Jews; for instance, the only bookshop of some importance which specializes in Judaica has a very strictly Orthodox management.

Conclusion

Sociological surveys can, and do, gather valuable basic demographic and other data. However, they sometimes fail to reveal important trends and interactions between various sectors of the population they survey. I was able to complement the data I gathered by my own anthropological fieldwork with other material—such as Jewish newspapers, pamphlets, annual reports of various organizations, etc. In that way, I was able to note, especially in Boston, the links between the dominant majority institutions and the minority Jewish Orthodox community—although the patterns of interaction were certainly ambivalent and far from being openly admitted. They were not revealed in any sociological surveys or enquiries. For example, the 1975 *Community Survey* of Greater Boston does not suggest any relationships between the opposite poles of religious observance. The Survey gives the impression of a Jewish population which is fragmented and scattered, and where Reform Judaism (which certainly does not require much religious observance) and various assimilatory forces are gaining ground. For instance, mixed marriages are said to be increasingly prevalent and, moreover, generally more acceptable. All this may well be true. However, such a general picture fails to show up the subtle shades in the background, or the attempts made at influencing ideologically Boston Jewry by various means and at various points, which were revealed by intensive fieldwork techniques.

I have used that method to study Hassidim in three countries, and it has enabled me—of course, in varying measure—to arrive at a sociology of Jewish populations in these cities. The technique should be equally rewarding in other fields of research. I recently became interested in the problem of the ‘repenters’ in the United States and also in that of converts (from Christianity to Judaism and vice versa); and I am confident that in these cases as well as in others—for example, mixed marriage, the family, education—intensive fieldwork within groups, districts, universities, etc., combined with a broader comparative approach, will yield useful and reliable insights, which would prove to be scientifically valid.

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This is an English version of a paper for the *Colloque International: Communautés juives (1880–1977), Sources et Méthodes de recherche*, held in Paris on 13–15 February 1978. The translation from the French is by Judith Djamour.

NOTES

¹ See Jacques Gutwirth, 'Antwerp Jewry Today', *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. X, no. 1, June 1968, pp. 121-37.

² *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. XIV, no. 1, June 1972, pp. 42-62.

³ *Recherches Sociographiques*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1973, pp. 291-325.

⁴ William Shaffir, *Life in a Religious Community: The Lubavitcher Chassidim in Montreal*, Toronto and Montreal, 1974.

⁵ See, for example, Louis Rosenberg, 'Changes in the Geographical Distribution of the Jewish Population of Metropolitan Montreal in the Decennial Periods from 1901 to 1961 and the Estimated Possible Changes during the Period from 1961 to 1971', *Canadian Jewish Congress Research Papers*, 1966, A, 7. That Congress has also published other useful demographic papers by Rosenberg, in various series.

⁶ M. Axelrod, F. J. Fowler, Jr., and A. Gurin, *A Community Survey for Long Range Planning: A Study of the Jewish Population of Greater Boston*, Boston, 1967; F. J. Fowler, Jr., *1975 Community Survey: A Study of the Jewish Population of Greater Boston*, Boston, 1977.

⁷ See *1975 Community Survey . . .*, op. cit., p. 47.

⁸ In this way, but on a much smaller scale, his efforts are very similar to those of the Lubavitcher *rebbe* and his movement, whose headquarters are in Brooklyn, New York; that is a much larger Hassidic organization, with international ramifications.

⁹ See M. Schapira, ed., *Jewish Boston, 1973-74*, Boston, 1973, p. 5.

¹⁰ The Academy has pupils from nursery school to high school, for boys and for girls. Until about May 1976, the Lubavitch movement made its presence noticeable in Boston largely through this school.

¹¹ See my 'Les pains azymes de la Pâque' in *Objets et Mondes*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1976, pp. 137-48.

¹² More than 60 per cent of the expenditure of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies in 1975-76 (\$7,903,400) and 1976-77 (\$7,698,700) went to the Israel Emergency Fund and the United Jewish Appeal (most of whose funds go to Israel). See the details of the budgets published in Boston's *The Jewish Advocate* on 5 November 1975 and 5 August 1976, respectively. See also A. Iser *et al.*, 'C.J.P.: A Question of Priorities', *Genesis* 2, January 1975, p. 1.

¹³ See A. Marcus, 'C.J.P. Meeting Looks Inward' in *Genesis* 2, November 1975. He states on p. 7: 'Candidates were judged on the basis of merit and interest as well as wealth and status.'

¹⁴ See *The Jewish Advocate*, 5 November 1975 and 5 August 1976. The budgets also show that *Genesis* 2, the monthly 'newspaper of Boston's Jewish Student and Young Adult Community', was one of the 'Jewish Student Projects' receiving a subsidy from the C.J.P. In the April 1976 issue, an Editorial on the first page stated that it was 'aiming to become fiscally as well as editorially independent'.

It is interesting to note that in 1975-76, the managing editor of *Genesis* 2 was a very orthodox female student.

¹⁵ See B. Lynn and M. Fitzimmons, 'Students Complain About Religious Holiday Policy', *Genesis* 2, February 1976, p. 7.