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INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

In the mid-seventeenth century, Hamburg was a thriving free port and merchant city (freie Reichsstadt). The city was governed by a council (Senat) of representatives from the rich mercantile class, with delegates from the clergy and urban class also involved in its decisions. A stock market had been active in the town since 1558 and in addition a central bank opened its doors in 1619. Around 60,000 people resided in Hamburg in 1650. Outside of the walls, to the east – at a distance of around 15 minutes by foot, according to the memoirs of Glikl Hamel¹ – lay Altona. The ruler of this city died in 1640, leaving no heirs, and as a result Altona transferred to the control of Denmark. The Danish crown sought to transform Altona into a city that would rival Hamburg.

The first Jews to settle in Hamburg, Portuguese Marranos, began to arrive at the end of the sixteenth century. In Hamburg, they returned to Judaism and established a large and

1 For the original Yiddish text see *Die Memoiren der Glückel von Hameln, 1645–1719*, Herausgegeben von Prof. Dr. David Kaufman, Frankfurt am Main, 1896; for the first translation into German see A. Feilchenfeld, *Denkwürdigkeiten der Glückel von Hameln*, Berlin, 1913, pp. 61–62. For a new English translation see *Glikl: Memoirs, 1691–1719*, edited and annotated with an introduction by Chava Turniansky, translated by Sara Friedman, Waltham, MA, Brandeis University Press, 2019.

wealthy community, which blossomed during the seventeenth century. This community began to decline towards the end of that century; much of its youth departed in the wake of economic and other restrictions. Aside from those employed as servants in Sephardi households, Ashkenazi Jews were not granted the right to settle in Hamburg prior to the second half of the seventeenth century.

By contrast, Ashkenazi Jews began to settle in neighbouring Altona from the end of the sixteenth century and following Altona's transfer to Danish rule in 1640, were granted the right to establish a community in the city. Seventeen Ashkenazi families from Altona, amongst them Glikl's family, took up residence in Hamburg in the 1620s to benefit from the superior financial opportunities which it offered. Their residence, although based on private arrangements with the authorities, was illegal. In 1648 – when Glikl, who was born in Hamburg, was three years old – these families were ordered to leave the city. Most of those exiled returned to Altona. However, there were insufficient commercial possibilities in Altona to enable all its Jews – around forty families – to support themselves. Thus, whilst residing in Altona, they were forced to seek out their livelihood in Hamburg, wherein permission to conduct business depended upon increasingly restrictive conditions.

This situation changed after the winter of 1657–1658 when, in the wake of the Swedish invasion of Altona, its Jews sought refuge in fortified Hamburg. Those exiled in the previous decade waged a successful campaign for the right to settle in the city; they were finally permitted to do so, although as Jews under the protection of Denmark. The eighteen Ashkenazi families living in the town as servants in Sephardi households joined the endeavour to found an official community in Hamburg. The amount of Ashkenazi

Jews in Hamburg multiplied swiftly and by the end of the century their number substantially exceeded that of the Sephardi Jews: in 1680, there were around sixty Sephardi families in Hamburg, whereas by 1697 the Ashkenazi families numbered more than three hundred. In this year, the Ashkenazi Jews in Hamburg received official recognition as a community. A small Ashkenazi community also took shape in the neighbouring city of Wandsbeck, which was, as Altona, under Danish sovereignty.

Under pressure from the Lutheran clergy, the Jews of Hamburg – whose residence was restricted to one designated street – were forbidden to conduct prayer services or bury their dead inside the city. These acts were permitted in Altona, where the Jews maintained a synagogue and cemetery. The religious centre of Hamburg Jewry was thus located in the Kingdom of Denmark throughout the seventeenth century. At times, public prayer services conducted secretly in private homes passed off peacefully, although on other occasions they resulted in expulsions to Altona. The Ashkenazi communities in the two cities maintained close ties, despite internal strains and the tensions between the Danish crown and the free city of Hamburg. In 1671, the Ashkenazi communities of Altona, Hamburg and Wandsbeck united under one organization, known as ‘The Three Communities’ or אה״ו (AHW, the initial letters of the cities Altona, Hamburg, Wandsbeck). This organization, which remained active until 1811, was headed by the Rabbi and the Rabbinical Council (Beit Din) in Altona. Within this framework, each community maintained its own executive independence.²

2 The above summary is based on Jutta Braden, “Luthertum und Handelsinteressen – Die Judenpolitik des Hamburger Senats um 17.

In 1665, fourteen Jewish families in Hamburg, who were not affiliated with the Altona community, attempted to establish an independent community in Ottensen, another small town near Hamburg and Altona, which was also under Danish rule. They applied to the Danish king for protection and rights similar to those enjoyed by the Jews of Altona.³ The attempt was unsuccessful, mostly due to opposition among the Altona Jews; this group was eventually absorbed by the Altona community. Among the leaders of this initiative was Jacob Sussman, to whom the five Yiddish letters written in the summer of 1666 are addressed.

The developments described above are part of a broader portrait of economic, social and cultural expansion – one could even say revolution – which transformed German Jewry from a relatively poor and suppressed group into a rich and influential community, a process which began in the 1670s under the driving force of the Court Jews.

Our knowledge about the early history of Ashkenazi Jews in Hamburg-Altona, and the closely related history of Jewish settlement in Copenhagen, is mainly based on information gleaned from official documents. Records of privileges granted to groups of Jews, concessions offered to individuals and business documentation constitute the bulk of the available source material. In addition, at least as far

Jahrhundert”, in *Die Hamburger Kauffrau Glikl; Jüdische Existenz in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Monika Richarz (ed.), Hamburg 2001, pp. 159–194. For a useful summary by the editor see *ibid.*, pp. 15–21. Both provide detailed references to their many sources in the footnotes.

3 See Bernard Brillling, “Die Streit um den Friedhof zu Ottensen”, in *Jahrbuch der Jüdischen Gemeinden in Schleswig-Holstein*, vol. iv (1931–1932), pp. 45–68.

as Hamburg-Altona is concerned, we also possess Jewish material, including community regulations (Takanot) and protocols, complete with minutes and decisions reached by the community leadership. Private documents such as letters, memoirs or descriptions of family or community life are rare; exceptional in this respect are the memoirs of Glikl Hamel. Indeed, Glikl's memoirs serve as a major source for the study of Jewish social and cultural life in northern Germany during the latter half of the seventeenth century.

Two collections of Yiddish letters discovered in Scandinavian archives offer an opportunity to supplement the information found in Glikl's memoirs, elaborating further on Jewish life in Hamburg-Altona and Copenhagen.

The first collection consists of five Yiddish letters,⁴ archived together with extensive material concerning the arrest and interrogation of three Jews, Jacob Sussman,⁵ Jeremiah Fürst, and Nathan Elias, together with the Norwegian doctor Johan Urse, in Copenhagen on 3 August 1666 and their subsequent interrogation.⁶

All five letters are addressed to Jacob Sussman, and were apparently confiscated upon his arrest. Although only two of the letters are dated, the content of the others reveals that they were all written between the end of July and 10

4 See letters A-E below, pp. 27–38.

5 For other spellings of Jacob's surname, see below, Letters A, B and D; Gunther Marwedel, *Die Privilegien der Juden in Altona*, Hamburg 1976, p. 431 ('Personenregister' under 'Sostmann').

6 The letters and related material are located in the Riksarkivet (Norwegian State Archives), Oslo: Danske kanselli skap 9, Pk. 149. The material has never been published, although Oskar Mendelsohn included extracts of it in his book *Jødernes historie i Norgeb*, Oslo, 1969, vol. 1, pp. 20–21.

August 1666. Four of the letters (A–D) were sent from Hamburg and their writers do not appear to have been aware of Sussman’s arrest. Of these, two were written by Sussman’s wife Schönchen bas Shlomo, as her signature appears on one of them (A), or Sheyndl bas Zalman, as her signature appears on the other (B). The third letter (C) was written by Nathan ben Aaron Neumark, and the fourth (D) is signed by Abraham Levi. The fifth letter (E) is unsigned, yet its content indicates that it was written by one of the other Jews arrested together with Sussman in Copenhagen, most likely Nathan Elias.

The chain of events, which resulted in the writing of these five letters, began with an encounter in Hamburg in 1665.⁷ A Norwegian medical doctor, Johan Urse, contacted Abraham Levi, looking for a Jew with whom he could discuss a business project. Abraham Levi led Dr. Urse to the home of Nathan ben Aaron Neumark, a prominent leader of the Altona community.⁸ A number of other Jews were also present at the meeting. Urse informed them that he had found gold and silver ore near his home in Langesund, Norway. He had learned that there were Jews in Hamburg who knew how to extract precious metals from ore. He then suggested that the Jews should accompany him to Norway to dig out the ore and arrange its transportation to Hamburg for processing into gold and silver. The Jews rejected his proposal, most probably because they feared it was illegal. They may have realized that the ore legally belonged to the sovereign of the United Kingdom of Denmark and Norway.

7 Described in the interrogation documents kept together with the letters (see previous note).

8 See Marwedel (above, p. 5, n. 4), p. 160-161. (Nathan Arons) Neumark visited Copenhagen in 1670 in order to apply for the renewal of the rights (privileges) of the Altona community.

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The great intimacy of the letters – which allows us a glimpse into the relationships, views, responses and emotions of the correspondents – makes it difficult for us to understand all their details, especially – but not only – with respect to financial matters. The business connection between the sender and addressee relied not merely on their shared knowledge and experience, but also on a common language replete with codes, hints and allusions incomprehensible to an external reader. The language of their correspondence is, to a certain extent, a secret tongue; it is likely to conceal from us not only ironic or joyful tones, but also the real meaning of euphemisms and dysphemisms or the intention of rhetorical phrasings. In some cases the writers use common verbs and nouns to indicate something else entirely.³⁵ Woven into this language of merchants are also various technical terms, not all of which can be understood and explained appropriately in the context of the letters. Indeed, these represent only a fragment of the continuous correspondence between the senders and addressees, thus making it difficult to understand accurately the development of the matters under discussion.³⁶

The various hands in which the letters are written pose an additional obstacle to their understanding: each writer formed

35 See Letter VII (below, p. 54, n. 24). On other obstacles to the understanding of the letters, see below.

36 Thus, for example, the husband asks his pregnant wife to write to him after the birth with all the details (see Letter X below, p. 65). The only letter written by his wife in the collection (XII, below, pp. 69–70), in which she informs him of the name she gave to her newborn daughter, indicates that in the interim they had exchanged further correspondence.

the letters differently, used different abbreviations and made a range of typographical errors and personal mistakes. Anyone seeking to decipher the letters encounters words which are illegible, omissions, erasures and other impediments. These factors, as well as the lack of punctuation, hinder a full grasp of the letters and their appropriate translation. Therefore, we decided to provide the fullest possible synopsis of each letter, accompanied by the necessary comments. Square brackets are used here to indicate our doubts, incertitudes, suggestions and conjectures. The abbreviation R. stands for Reb, the traditional Jewish title or form of address, corresponding to Sir or Mister, for a man who is not a rabbi (used preceding the forename).

Several letters, as already mentioned, carry the address in German (gothic) script. All of them follow formulas common to contemporary German letters.³⁷

The original Yiddish text of the letters is reproduced in the Hebrew section of the book.³⁸

The letters are replete with many acronyms, some common and others rare. We have therefore included an alphabetical list of acronyms, in addition to a detailed list of ‘senders and addressees’.

The reproductions of the letters are followed by facsimiles

37 The use of the various forms for addressing the addressee: “Herrn Herrn”, “Hern Hern”, “H~ Herrn”, etc. (see letters A, B, D of the first collection, and Letters VII, VIII, XVI, XVIII of the second collection) is a relic of an address formula such as “unserem wohlgeborenen Herrn, Herrn Friedrich” and the like. The abbreviation gg~ (in letters B, D, VII, XVI) stands for “günstig gruß” (or “gruß günstig” as in Letter VIII), a common greeting formula at the time. We are most grateful to Prof. Erika Timm for this information.

38 See pp. 85–123, and the explanation on p. 82, n. 1.

of some of the originals. We fervently hope that in the future, technological innovations will make reading these letters easier and that experts with more skills and experience will be able to understand them in full.

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איגרת A¹

מאת : שוינכן בת שלומה בהמבורג
אל : בעלה יעקב זוסמן בקופנהאגן
הכתובת בגרמנית.²
ללא תאריך.

פֿיל הונדרט גוטר זעליגר יאר דיא זאלין אייך ווערין וואר.³ צו הנט מיינס ליבן מן היקר והנעלה כמ"ר יעקב יצ"ו. שוב⁴ ליבר יעקב, ווישן איך אייך אויף דיז מאל קיין חדושי'ם] צו שרייבן נייארט זייט ווישן פֿון מיינס אונ' אייארי ליבה קינדר גיזונד הייט, דאש פאר האף איך אוך צו הָערין פֿון אייך ביז הונדרט יאר, אמן. שוב ליבר יעקב, אלזו זייט ווישן דאש איך האב אייאר קליין כתב מקבל גיוועזין אונ' איך מיך זער משמח גיוועזין דאז איך האב גהוירט דאש איר זייט בשלום איבר גיקומן. שוב ליבר יעקב, זייט ווישן דאש מיר יומפֿיר ליזבעט דאז גזאגיט האט וואש איר האט אן איר בפֿולין אונ' איך האב מיך זער משמח גיוועזין, דען איך האב מיר פֿיל גוטץ דער אויש פאר נומן דאז איך פֿאר האף דאש איר מיר ווערט דיא אנדרי פאשט אלי גלעגין הייט שרייבן, אונ' איך בעט אייך זער, זעכט אייך וואל פער אונ' לאט אייך דער גייטץ ניט פֿאר פֿרין [פֿירן] אונ' בידענקט אייאר ווייב אונ' אייאר ליבה קינדר. שוב ליבר יעקב, וועלט אייך גבעטן האבן, ווען איר מיר ווידר שרייבט, אלזו זאלט איר מיר דאש פֿאר איין גרוש חדוש

1 ראו לעיל, עמ' 27.

2 ראו שם.

3 נוסחת פתיחה מחוזרת (יאר / וואר) ונפוצה (בשינויים למיניהם) באגרות בידיש בעת החדשה המוקדמת (ראו למשל להלן, עמ' 119, הערה 63. מערכת המונחים, הלשוניות, הצירופים והנוסחאות הנהוגים באיגרות בנות הזמן בעברית ובידיש עדיין מחכה למחקרה. לעיון חלקי ראו מרוודל (לעיל, עמ' 11, הערה 15), וכן חוה טורניאנסקי, "צרוור אגרות בידיש מירושלים משנות הששים של המאה השש-עשרה", שלם, ד (תשמ"ד), עמ' 170-178. מקורות אחדים לתבניות מחוזרות מצוינים בהערות שלהלן.

4 שוב] מציין מעבר לעניין אחר, כמו 'weiter' בגרמנית, או 'further' באנגלית.

שרייבן, דאש הר"ר נתן אונ' הר"ר ירמי' [ה] זיין נאך קאפינהגין קומן, דען שמשון דלימה זיין דוד האט פון פלענזיבורג גשריבן וויא ר' נתן אונ' ר' ירמי' [ה] נאך קאפינהאגין וועלין, וועלכש דאש [---] טמה דניאל האט דאש גיוואר ווארדין אונ' ערש זיך זער דער איבר פֿאר וואן נדרט. דרום לאט עש אייך אוך איין חדוש זיין אלש ווען איר נישט דער פֿון ווישט. [ער] האט מיך גיפראגט, אביר איך אים משיב גיוועזן איך ווייש פֿון זיא נישט. דרום, ליבש קינד, ווען איר מיר מעכט וואש שרייבן דא אן גלעגין ווער, אלזו ליגט איין קיילן [קליין] צעטילכין אין מיינס בריב דאש איך מיין בריב קאן אידר מן ווייזן אונ' שרייבט אין מיינס בריב. ווען איך ווער וואש פֿון מיין סחורה פֿר קופין, וויל איך דיר תקיף [תיכף] געלט צו האלץ שיקן. דען דניאל קומט אלי פאשט אונ' פֿארגט [פֿארגט] וואש שרייב[ט] דיין מן גוטץ, אלז[ו] קאן איך אים מיין בריב ווייזן. ווען איך ווער ביו' [ם] ו' גוטה בריב פֿון אייך האבן, אלזו וויל איך אייך כד"ש שרייבן. זאל איך אייך וואש חדושי' [ם] שרייבן פֿון מלך המשיח? אלזו קומט נתן הנביא מיט צעהין חכמים נאך קונשטאנטנאפיל. ווען ער דא ווערט זיין // אלזו זאל דיא גולה [גאולה] מפורסים ווערין. דיא אנדרי פאשט וויל איך אייך מער שרייבן. היר מיט פֿיל הונדרט גוטר יאר פֿון דינים ליבן ווייב שוינכן בת שלומה ז"ל. איך אונ' דיא קינדער לאזין אייך זער גרישן. אין אייל גשריבן, האט ניט פֿיל צייט איבר [י] ג.