



Book Review

The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln

Marvin Lowenthal, translator.

Review by Kalman Goldstein

From 1690 to 1715, Gluckel composed sections of her memoir, intended as a moral guide for her fourteen children. Pious, well read in the *tehinot*, religious books for women, she wove quotes from Torah, Tanakh, and Talmud describing the unceasingly dramatic events of her life. Passed down within the family, Heinrich Heine a descendant, finally translated into English, it contains a gripping portrait of life among German Jews a century before Emancipation.

Even before her first widowhood, her husband Chayim had consulted her on business affairs, and after his death she carried on, extinguishing his debts and establishing her own repute. Gluckel loaned money at interest, supervised money changing, bought and sold pearls and gems, had a stocking factory, and created fancy lace for the gentry. She balanced out complex bills of exchange, credit assessments, and customs duties between the petty German dukedoms of the time. Her affairs took her from Hamburg, by rented coaches on dangerous roads, to regional fairs, in Vienna and Berlin, Amsterdam and Metz, Leipzig and Frankfort, often places where Jews did business on sufferance but were forbidden to reside. Assuming financial risks entailed accepting paper from powerful gentry who might renege. The travel itself, where a journey of 25 miles required careful preparation and calculated expenses, was usually wearing. Before each business trip, she had to purchase not only a travel permit, but a letter of protection from a Gentile noble; she was proudest of one from the Duke-Elector of Saxony. Often chief among her business calculations were dowry negotiations, over what were then great distances, with families whose probity was a matter of both gossip and sound knowledge: Gluckel spent her years of widowhood making matches for her fourteen children. At least one contract required the mediation of a *bet din* in a “neutral” city. Finally, Europe was at war during much of her adult life: the later wars of Louis XIV involved Metz, where she lived after 1700, and the Rhineland in general. Doing business with Samuel

Oppenheimer, Court Jew to the Austrian emperor, might result in late transmission of bills of exchange while the Ottomans threatened Vienna.

Gluckel's life as well as livelihood was often insecure. As a child, she and her family had to flee Hamburg for nearby Danish Altona when a mob forced expulsion of the Jews. An extended chapter of her Memoir dealt with the murder of two Hamburg Jews: Abraham Metz and Aaron ben Moses. When a Jewish woman accused a Gentile of the murders, a mob gathered, and only the publicly viewed exhumations of their remains saved the entire Jewish community from attack. On another occasion, Hamburg's Jews narrowly escaped a "blood libel" plot. More than once, she noted the openly antisemitic hostility of Hamburg's dock workers; Jews lived in Hamburg only on sufferance of the Town Council, because they were good for business. So Gluckel's generally successful affairs were a lifesaver as well.

Constantly she reminded her children that her fate was in God's hands. But sometimes humans shared agency. Her correspondence was often read by strangers; she depended on couriers. A contretemps involving one of her children threatened the whole family's *yicchus*. Her second, very rich husband vetoed her business activities; then his bank failed. From being a 'bird in a gilded cage' she was reduced to charity; she spent old age living with a daughter. God had chastised her, she wrote, for remarriage rather than making Aliyah as she had vowed.