Moments of upheaval are particularly fruitful for excavating the historical past. The eruption of a cause célèbre affords an opportunity not only to examine particular ruptures, but also to gain insights into the structures of social life that are interrupted by them. The news of the coming of the Messiah in the years 1665–66 represents one such moment in the story of the Jews of Hamburg as recounted by the memoirist, Glikl of Hameln. In Book III of her remembrances, Glikl reports the transition between elation and despair as promises of the Jews’ redemption first came to northern Europe only to be dashed by the conversion of the redeemer to Islam in Constantinople. Glikl’s account of the Sabbatean movement in Hamburg is revealing for its vivid portrait of the energy of the Jews in the city when the news first arrived, for thinking about the communication of news between distant communities—especially the entrepôts of the Sephardic diaspora in the Italian Peninsula, Ottoman Empire, and northwestern Europe—and for considering the differences between the various Jewish groups within the city of Hamburg itself.

The Author and the Text

Glikl, daughter of Judah Leib, was born in Hamburg in 1646 and died in Lunéville in Lorraine 1724. A daughter of a trader and businesswoman, she was married at the age of 14 to a businessman named Haim of Hameln, with whom she operated a firm that traded in precious metals and stones. Glikl bore 14 children, of whom 12 survived past infancy.

Glikl’s text was not written as a diary that chronicled events immediately as they transpired. Instead, Glikl produced her memoir as a reckoning with the past, prompted by family hardship. Glikl appears to have worked on the text in two distinct stages. She tells her children, for whom the memoir was written, that she was first motivated to stave off her melancholia after the death of her husband Haim (1690). But a significant portion of her remembrances are dedicated to a retrospective self-fashioning after the bankruptcy and death of her second husband, Cerf Levi of Metz (1712). Whereas the first union was characterized by affection, partnership, and prosperity, the second was marred by financial ruin, poverty, and hardship. Her recollections of the Sabbatean movement in Hamburg are therefore also part of a backward glance through history, colored by the changing fortunes of her family.

Glikl’s Zikhroynes blend personal narrative with the larger context of Jewish life and collective peoplehood, and intersperse moralistic folktales and elements of popular piety with recollections of events. As such, the text might be profitably considered at once a memoir of things past, a justification for the present, and an ethical will for the future of her intended audience, to whom the work is addressed: her
The Context: The Sabbatean Movement \[5\]

The Sabbatean movement \[6\] originated in Palestine in 1665. It centered around a man, Shabbetai Zevi, who for much of his life had experienced mystical visions, which manifested in extreme forms of asceticism mingled with flagrant violation of traditional Jewish practices such as observance of fast days and of dietary laws. In the spring of 1665, Shabbetai’s personal prophecies were transformed into an international Jewish affair when he attracted the support of Nathan of Gaza, who publicly proclaimed Shabbetai to be the Jewish messiah. Jews from across the Ottoman Empire and Europe became adherents of Shabbetai. The movement was intense but short-lived. In December of 1665 Shabbetai traveled from Palestine to Izmir and then onward to Constantinople, with the declared intent to overthrow the Ottoman Sultan. Arriving in Constantinople, Shabbetai was imprisoned by the Sultan’s guards, and, in the winter of 1666, after being offered a choice of conversion to Islam or death, he chose the former. The movement did not collapse after the loss of its leader; word of Shabbetai’s conversion inspired creative rationalization of this act of seeming betrayal, and adherents of the movement (in one form or another) have continued into the modern period.

Networks of Letters

The movement traveled on the wings of letters. The information converged at certain points, such as Hamburg. Glikl reports that news came to Hamburg in the form of letters around February 1666, written by Jews in Ottoman Palestine, Egypt, and especially from the Jewish community of Izmir, reporting on rumors and prophecies. The letters came to the Sephardic (“Portuguese”) Jews of the city, who had ties to Jews in the Ottoman Empire on account of their membership in a large trading diaspora that stretched from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. These descendants of the Jews of Spain and Portugal could be found primarily in the ports of northern Europe and the Mediterranean, and they conducted long-distance communication through letters. Earlier letters had arrived from Egypt to Hamburg that announced the news of the Messiah’s arrival. Originating in the Ottoman Empire, the letters did not primarily come addressed to the Ashkenazic (“German”) Jews of the city, whose networks linked them to other Ashkenazic Jews in Frankfurt, Prague, Worms, and Poland-Lithuania. Nevertheless, Ashkenazim too were swept up in the excitement in Hamburg. The flow of information thereby also reveals insights into the contacts between the different Jewish groups in Hamburg’s urban spaces.

News Arrives in Hamburg

Glikl reports that with each arrival of a letter, the recipients would carry it to the synagogue to be read aloud. Despite the fact that this synagogue was the domain of the Sephardic Jews, the Ashkenazic Jews followed into their spaces in order to hear the tidings of the messiah’s arrival. The very costume of the Sephardic youth reflected their embrace of major change: broad silk ribbons that they wore as sashes (“this was the livery of Shabbetai Sevi,” says Glikl), and they made their way to the synagogue to with great fanfare. The heresy-hunter Rabbi Jacob Sasportas similarly described the events, recalling the audiences of gentiles who came to marvel at Jews engaging in song and dance over the imminent redemption. It seemed as though their long-standing hopes had been fulfilled and their prayers had been answered: an end to their dispersal.
was at hand, and an ingathering of their exiles would return them to the Land of Israel where they would no
longer live as a tiny minority that was tolerated but subjugated. In fact, Shabbetai Sevi’s followers began to
alter their practice in keeping with their belief that a messianic era had arrived: they abolished the Ninth of
Av day of mourning for the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem—observed by Jews for centuries—expecting the
swift reconstruction of the Jewish holy places in Jerusalem, and composed prayers for the newly arrived
King Messiah. Not all Jews were prepared to openly acknowledge such dramatic change, at least not
publicly: leaders of the Sephardic community attempted to take measures to prevent word of traveling
beyond the synagogue (to Christian neighbors). The energy of the movement still garnered the attention of
non-Jews, however, and reports about the Jewish messiah by Christian observers circulated in the
Netherlands, France, and England.

**Believers and Disappointments**

The ramifications of hope were practical, immediate, and—for some—lasting. In March 1666 prayers for the
King Messiah were introduced into the Hamburg synagogue. Jews made provisions to leave their homes
and lives in exile and to travel to Jerusalem. As Glikl reports, “some of them, alas, sold everything they
owned, their house and homestead, and waited daily for redemption.” Jews of the surrounding region fixed
their attention on Hamburg, the bustling port city, as a point of embarkation for the ingathering of exiles to
the Holy Land. Glikl’s father-in-law, a resident of Hameln, shipped two crates filled with linens and dried fruit
and meats—all of the goods he would need for his new life in Palestine—and set up a temporary home in
Hildesheim. Those crates languished for over a year in Hamburg, until finally the family discarded the
withering food before it ruined the rest of the contents of the crates, and still they waited longer (three
further years) without fully giving up hope. Glikl’s father-in-law’s sojourn in Hildesheim became a permanent
settlement.

This spirit pervaded Jewish society in Hamburg and nearby Altona, reaching beyond the conduct of
individuals into matters of communal order. The expectation of immediate redemption prompted a
resolution to a longstanding dispute over a burial ground in Ottensen. When the Ashkenazic Jews of
Hamburg sought to establish a communal presence that was independent both of the Sephardim in the city
and of the Ashkenazim of neighboring Altona, they set their sights on gaining the rights of burial in the
city—an important marker in communal autonomy. When this administrative affair was resolved in 1666,
messianic hope seeped into even the legal provisions of the document:

> “Even if the redemption in the World to Come arrives before this time, that is before Hanukkah 5427
[December 1666] the Hamburg Community must give the Altona Community [the remaining] 50 Reichstaler,
and the Altona Community must donate it for the rebuilding of the Temple [in Jerusalem]. If the Redemption
should come between Hanukkah 5427 and the New Year of 5428 [ie, between December 1666 and
September 1667], then of those 50 Reichstaler 25 should go to the rebuilding of the Temple.”[7]

But the messiah did not come. Within a short time the movement inspired a counter-movement of faithful
who sought to restore order by weeding out heresy wherever they could find it. Glikl faulted the sins of Jews,
especially their failure to deal in loving kindness with one another, as responsible for the failing. Her casting
of the events of 1666 are tinged with gendered language and motherly sentiment. In describing the
anticipation of redemption, she evokes the image of a mother crouching on the birthing stool, expectant of
the joy of a newborn child, only to find no child coming, simply the nothingness of wind. Glikl knew of such
pains, herself; her chronology of the movement roughly coincided with the short life of her daughter, who died after only three years of life. In looking back on those years and recording the painful memory in her Rememberances, she could not resist linking the pain of a bereaved mother with the collective anguish of broken messianic promise. And yet she closes her telling of this episode with lingering hope and the prayer that one day God will bring joy to the Jews with complete redemption.

Select Bibliography


Selected English Titles


Notes

[1] Jewish messianic movement of the followers of Schabbtai Zvi
[2] transshipment port
[6] messianic jewish movement which was well-found by Schabbtai Zvi

About the Author

Joshua Teplitsky, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of History at Stony Brook University. His work focuses on Jewish life in the German-speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire and Habsburg monarchy in the early modern period (16th–18th centuries) with an emphasis on the city of Prague. His book, Prince of the Press, on the life and famous library of David Oppenheim (1664-1736), is forthcoming with Yale University Press.

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