Each Generation and Its Own Memoirs? The Jewish “Aware Ego” in Three Ashkenazi Ego Documents

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Dear Ruth, daughters and members of the Hundert family, and esteemed colleagues:

Three memoirs in Hebrew have been published in Jerusalem in the past few years—two by men and one by a woman, two originally written in Hebrew and one in Yiddish. They cover more than 300 years in the history of Ashkenazi Jewry, crossing geopolitical borders that stretched, until the Holocaust, from Germany and Alsace in the west part of the continent to the Austrian and Russian empires in the east. The memoirs of Glikl bas Leyb of Hammel, a God-fearing businesswoman who was graced with writing talent, were published by Chava Turniansky in 2006. These chapters, written in Alt Yiddish between 1691 and 1721 [and including copious material about the history of the author’s family in previous decades], were published at a considerable delay. Family memoirs were not considered a genre worthy of publication at the time this work was written. In 2023, two eighteenth-century memoirs, proofed and annotated by our late colleague Gershon David Hundert, were published in Hebrew. The wine merchant Dov Birkental of Bolechow, Western Ukraine, penned an account of his life and commercial and public activity toward the end of the century in which he lived, but it took until the early twentieth century for parts of it to start appearing in print. The third autobiographical work, produced by of the Odessa businessmen, writer and linguist Isaac Spivakoff in his ninth decade, enjoyed a better fate. The Hebrew manuscript of *My Boat on the Ocean Waves* was preserved by members of the family for some fifty years until the author’s granddaughter presented it to the rabbi of the city of Mendoza, Argentina, who published it in his Spanish translation. The Hebrew original was published in Jerusalem a little more than two years ago, with a foreword of mine attached. Anyone who reads the three works in sequence will find the multifaceted historical-cultural world of Ashkenazi Jewry unfurled before them. It was to this world to which Professor Gershon Hundert devoted his influential scholarly and educational lifework—an enterprise of investigation, understanding, and teaching. The remarks to follow are dedicated to the blessed memory of Gershon—a close personal friend, a beloved colleague, and a loyal supporter of the Israeli academic community, with whom we were privileged to work for many years.

The historian Natalie Zemon David [who passed away in autumn 2023] positioned Glikl bas Leyb Hammel, a woman who left behind a rare ego document in her time and place, in a comparative study that deals with three creative and vigorously active women: a Catholic nun, a Jewish merchant, and a Protestant painter and naturalist—three women from different religious groups who lived and acted in the pronouncedly male world of Early Modern Europe. Davis’s decision to place the Jewish businesswoman, whose economic activity spanned the expanses of Central and Western Europe, alongside two Christian women, also abundantly active in their fields, blurred the inward-facing boundaries between Jewish history and European history, in which, in its “external” cultural and economic contexts, Jewish men and women operated in the European sphere. Her parallel investigation of the three women’s life stories yielded superb case studies, rich in insights, for comparison of the Jewish societies of the Early Modern Era with Europe’s Protestant and Catholic societies. Below, in contrast, I offer different chapter headings and a different chronological and cultural perspective for comparison of Glikl’s life story with Birkental’s and Spivakoff’s autobiographical accounts. The concise comparison that I will present spans autobiographies that link three centuries and cross the historians’ imaginary line that separates the Early Modern Era from the Modern Era. It also traverses the imaginary boundaries between the two branches of the Ashkenazi Diaspora: the Westjuden and the Ostjuden.

Let me say something about the previous publication dates of these three autobiographical works, the circumstances of their exposure to a readership beyond the family circle, and the language in which they were published. Turniansky aptly defined the metamorphoses from pen to print of the memoirs that Glikl wrote—metamorphoses that stretched from the late seventeenth century to our very day—as “a chapter in cultural history.” Indeed, the dates, circumstances, and manner of their publication teach quite a bit about the changes that occurred in the status of the memoir genre in the eyes of the writers and their readers. Copies of Glikl’s memoir were handed down by her descendants from generation to generation. They were preserved for nearly 150 years as family documents before being exposed to scholars’ prying eyes and wide circulation. Even the German translation produced by Berta Pappenheim, an offspring of the family and a well-known feminist in her time, published in Vienna in 1910, was, Turniansky finds, “a private project meant to disseminate among family members, in a language all of them could understand, memoirs that were completed some 200 years previously.” It took until 1896 for the original text in Yiddish to see the light of day, and even then it was not accessible to the public at large because it appeared in a language no longer widely known among the Jews of Germany: Alt Yiddish. Only in the twentieth century, when this unique text began to be considered a valuable historical source, a work that contains educational values, a literary classic of an importance that transcends the boundaries of time and place, and a constitutive document in the history of Ashkenazi Jewish culture, did translations of the work into various languages appear. The fate of Dov Ber Birkental’s autobiographical manuscripts—*Divrey Binah* and *Memoires* (the original title of the latter work is missing to this day)—was not much different. The public took little interest in them, to put it mildly, in the days preceding the Jewish cultural renaissance that swept the lands of Eastern Europe in the “long nineteenth century.” The writing of these texts and their publication were several generations apart. Unlike Glikl, however, the *Galitsianer* wine merchant, blessed with a well-developed historical consciousness, was keenly eager to publish his writings. So it was, at least, in regard to *Divrey Binah,* which describes in minute detail the memoirist’s role in the Jewish struggle against the Frankist heresy. This we adduce from two letters from the early nineteenth century, in one of which a leader of the Lwów community attests to the author’s mission: “To record all of these events in written letters and etch [them] in an iron pen and lead, so that it may be a keepsake for generations to come.” Birkental’s writings somehow landed in the library of the Maskil Joseph Perl, where the historian and geographer Abraham Jacob Brawer discovered them in the early twentieth century. Brawer, a future memoirist himself, recognized the immense value of the writings and published parts of them in the journal *Ha-Shilo’ach* in 1917–1921. The manuscripts of the memoirs made their way to a library in London; one of them was first brought to the knowledge of the scholarly community in 1913 and was published in Hebrew and in English and Yiddish translation in 1922. Since then, the two texts have occupied a central place in the historiography of East European Jewry. The memoirs of Isaac Spivakoff, as I said above, waited only fifty years until they were redeemed from oblivion. They were published in Spanish in 2015–2018 and in their original language, Hebrew, in 2022.

Why did a wealthy businesswoman, forty-five years of age, decide in 1691 to begin writing her memoirs, and for whom did she commit her life story to writing? What readers did an aged wine merchant have in mind when he labored over his autobiographical works in the early days of Austrian rule in Galicia? What inspired an erstwhile Odessa industrialist to write an autobiography in 1962, when he reached the age of eighty-five? What commonality unites three autobiographical works created in three different parts of the border-transcending Ashkenazi cultural sphere?

Glikl, addressing herself and her posterity, explained the very experience of writing as a kind of therapy. She explicitly announced her awareness of the therapeutic value of writing a work of subjective-personal nature that was meant solely for the eyes of the small family circle. The writing experience, apart from being part of her religious world, helped her to cope with a socioeconomic crisis in which the solidity of her business, undermined by with the death of her husband, was identified with the male authority that had passed on. Turniansky also proposes that the memoir be viewed as a pedigree of sorts. Thus Glikl writes in a direct appeal to her family’s posterity: “My dear children, I write this to you lest today or tomorrow your children or grandchildren come and not know their family. Therefore, I present you with these matters briefly so that you [in the plural] will know from which people you have come.” Although Glikl states explicitly that she does not intend to leave her offspring with a *musser bukh*, the chapters of her memoir contain short and long ethical passages. The contents, form, and style of the work reveal the influence of a range of textual models. They are instructive of deep social and cultural involvement of the author, an offspring of the wealthiest merchant class in the Ashkenazi lands, who came into close contact with court Jews, practical life, and the worldview and the customs of life of the social group to which she belonged. In the memoir, one may detect stylistic, formal, and contentual echoes of various literary genres in Alt Yiddish and other tongues, including community records, personal chronicles, urban merchants’ books of account, and genealogies. Although Glikl does not proclaim it explicitly, her unique persona, that of a Jewish woman of the Early Modern Period, emerges clearly from the text.

The nexus of commercial ledgers and autobiographical writing and the presence of the memoirist’s “aware ego” also surfaces in Birkental’s writings. Here, however, unlike in Glikl’s text, it is stated overtly and clearly. Hundert hypothesized that the Galician wine dealer’s memoirs originated in a commercial ledger of some kind, in which the author inserted stories and accounts of events in his life and developments in his era: “He may have written his book to prepare his offspring for the wine business, since almost half of the book in our possession is devoted to his activities in this trade.” However, alongside commercial guidance for his children and commemoration of the family history, Birkental intended to produce two history books in these works (combining his personal story and his success in business, in the community, and in the religious domain, in which he claims to have played an active and influential role). Skillfully he exploited his exceptional and informally acquired linguistic knowledge for purposes of intercession, establishing commercial relations, and written and oral religious debate and apologetics. In a certain sense, Birkental uses Christians’ writings to present Jewish readers with a counter-history to the history of the Christian world [!] by taking the Jewish side in religious polemics and defending Judaism. However, his very exposure to Christian writings and, *a fortiori* his publication of translations of them (even in “censored” and “edited” form), as Hundert discerned well, were acts of subversion against the corporative religio-linguistic world in which he had been raised, educated, and sent into action. He did not flinch from admitting, more than once, that he also found good and correct things in the writings of gentile authors here and there, and it is evident that he had internalized something of the common political discourse in pre-partition Poland. While Glikl, an opinionated and prodigiously active woman, places the men in her family at the center of her personal biography and her economic endeavors, the “aware ego” developed by Birkental, an enterprising man who generated action, affirms his business skill, linguistic capabilities, and commercial successes time and time again. Just the same, his memoirs repeatedly point to the influential role of Jewish merchants’ wives in running the husbands’, fathers’, and brothers’ businesses and making family decisions. Sometimes he accuses the wives of making the decisions or fanning wrongheaded conflicts and disputes. He repeats this pattern in regard to women’s Torah education. His account of a woman steeped in Talmud who helped him learn a difficult *sugya* reveals unabashed amazement*.* A commonality between Glikl and Birkental in their form of writing—a merchant’s personal notebook—is their detailed attention to the financial worth of assets, income and outgo, proceeds of loans, and profit-and-loss—in a bourgeoisie spirit that integrated wealth, family lineage, social status, and community activity into the presentation of an individual personality.

Unlike Glikl and Birkental, Spivakoff composed his autobiography at a time when the bookshelf of Jewish memoirs was creaking under hundreds of ego documents in Gentile and Jewish languages. From this standpoint, his writings, in consideration of these other works, is most valuable for the historian as a serial rather than an individual record. The memoir genre blossomed and attracted public interest. The author was well aware of its modern nature and was alert to the impact of European literary conventions on the form and content of his writing. Spivakoff addressed himself to this explicitly. He presented two exemplary autobiographies in European literature that centered on conscious shaping of the individual’s image: “The most complete and handsome autobiographies are of Rousseau and of Goethe, so the famous writers say. I think that every cultured man […] has important moments that deserve to be revealed and publicized.” Even though Spivakoff, like his two predecessors, paints tableaus in the life of a Jewish businessman, it is hard to see formal or contentual influence of commercial notebooks in his writing. He builds the first part of his autobiography as a coming-of-age novel (a *Bildungsroman*), whereas the second part reads like a “tale of migration.”

Three centuries of individuals’ lives in three different milieus that hosted three different manifestations of Ashkenazi Jewish culture find expression in the memoirs. Glikl and her family live in several urban communities in the Western Ashkenazi Diaspora, Birkental inhabits a shtetl in Western Ukraine and sojourns in the big city, Lwów, on business; Spivakoff is born in the great commercial city Odessa, site of the second-largest Jewish community in the Russian Empire, and lives there until after the Bolshevik Revolution. Israel Halperin (1910–1971), the scholar of premodern Ashkenazi Jewry, notes three sociocultural characteristics that the two wings of Ashkenaz shared: **language:** Yiddish, which served not only as the vernacular but also as a written language within a bilingual framework alongside *loshn hakoydesh,* the Holy Tongue; **religious custom**: *minhag Ashkenaz-Poyln,* the German-Polish custom, which spread from Central Europe to the eastern reaches of the continent; and**community organization:** the semi-autonomous kahal, which was structured, functioned, and related with the authorities atop a Central European feudal corporative template. These three characteristics attained their greatest influence in Ashkenazi society and culture toward the middle of the eighteenth century and began to weaken, or to change, in tandem with the growing power of the economic, political, and cultural changes that swept into motion in the New Era. What do these three characteristics of the Ashkenazi Diaspora, noted by Israel Halperin, have to do with memoir-writing that centers on the life-story of an individual and recalls the experience of his or her contacts with a family and a community? The traditional bilinguality of vernacular and *loshn hakoydesh*—in which the two languages mingled spontaneously as they served in agreed-upon gender, class, and genre capacities: the **religious custom**(as a socio-cultural reflection of the total presence of the halakha and the mystical teachings in quotidian life), and **the community order,**which rested on family lineage, economic class, and **Torah authority** (*Yikhs, gelt, un toyre*)—were in the Early Modern Era three integrated channels along which the strength of the organic bond between the Jewish individual and the urban public in a corporative feudal world acted, or was enacted. Glikl deals scantily with the corporative communal backdrop that tethers her life-story to her two husbands. However, it exists and exerts a backstage influence all the time. Belief in the sanctified status of the community did not deter Glikl from describing controversies, disputes, antipathies, and competition for wealth and influence among members and women of the Metz community. All of this finds significant expression in Glikl’s descriptions of family life, which she inserts into her reports on her two husbands’ perilous economic activity within the community framework of the cities they inhabited. For example, she describes her second husband’s economic failure and reports that the King of France sent a letter ordering her to relocate to the community of Metz and instructed her “to have them summon you before the kahal. […] If these Jews wish to remain in Lorraine, their Rock and Redeemer should preserve in the Pinkasim of the kahal that they will no longer have burger rights in Metz; in brief, they [the Balebatim / “householder” class [הוספתי] ] were very badly off.” All of which in Yiddish. However, when she arrives in the aftermath of this affair following the death of her unfortunate husband, she expresses her profound religious faith in the connection between the kahal’s activity and Divine providence—in a mingling of Yiddish and *loshn hakoydesh.* Birkental, immersed in the affairs of the Bolechow community, describes in his memoirs, written in Ashkenazi Hebrew, a similar relationship among members of the community, leaders of the kahal, offices of the royal authorities, and the Polish nobility. He boasts of his personal success in deceiving the Council of the Four Lands and the Polish Royal Exchequer in order to spare the Jews of Bolechow from a financial loss. He describes all this, and much more, uninhibitedly in the sense of economic *Realpolitik*. Concurrently, at the level of intellect and creed that brings the consciousness of a member of an ancient ethno-religious community into sight, Birkental embellishes the Jewish autonomy, likens it to the self-rule that the Jews enjoyed in Babylonia in the Talmudic era, and damns the royal government for having dissolved the Council of the Four Lands in 1764. He actually knows, and believes, that the semi-autonomous councils in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth enjoyed a status equal to that of the parliaments of the Polish nobility—representing the nation and being considered a nation (*narod* in Polish). [Incidentally, in Latin documents from the eighteenth century, the Council of the Four Lands was called the *Natio* or *Universitas Judaeorum.*] His “aware ego” meshes inextricably with the corporative body that preserves, by God’s will, the separate existence of the Jewish nation. In his later years, this activist community functionary witnesses the subjugation of the Jewish corporative body to centralized Austrian rule and also, afterwards, to its formal eradication. Although he writes favorably about the Enlightened Absolutist regime, between the lines the reader senses his displeasure over the dissipation of the old feudal corporative order in which the personal story of this successful and influential ego is woven. Spivakoff, born ninety years after the dissolution of the Council of the Four Lands, was already born into a post-corporative sociocultural reality. The kahal had been officially disbanded in Russia in 1844, thirty years before his birth. The allegiance of the Jewish entrepreneurs to Russia’s imperial rule, which his ancestors had shared, was put to the test by the Tsarist regime’s anti-Jewish policies. The personal episodes that he committed to writing in faraway Argentina in new Odessa Hebrew [*nota bene*: not *loshn hakoydesh*!] recount experiences from an era in which the old corporative complexion of the premodern nation swiftly lost its hard edge in all its manifestations—religious, socioeconomic, and linguistic. Spivakoff is aware of the magnitude of the change, which he experiences as a product of the big city, and is an intellectual participant and Zionist political activist in the processes that crystallize an alternative collective national-cultural identity, an Imperial one.

And what about the language in which the three texts were written? Glikl, educated mainly in Yiddish, was not fluent in *loshn hakoydesh* but accessed materials from the religious literature through the medium of Yiddish literature. She was not been privileged with a Torah education; in premodern Ashkenazi society, that was for males only. Moreover, her knowledge apparently did not exceed that of other upper-class women in the communities of Ashkenaz. Her memoir attests that she had harvested her considerable Torah knowledge from the corpus available on the Yiddish bookshelf. Her decision to write in Yiddish was only natural under the conditions of the bilingual system in which she had been raised and educated. Birkental was born and raised in a similar bilingual milieu, but unlike the female Glikl, he received a Torah education of the kind imparted to boys by wealthy householder-class families in the communities of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The aged wine merchant chose to write his works in an Ashkenazi Hebrew replete with terms and concepts drawn from a panoply of languages including East European Yiddish. The influence of the East European Yiddish vernacular on his Hebrew is highly evident. Glikl’s and Birkental’s choices of the language of their writing represented the place and roles of the two languages in the Ashkenazi corporative culture. In neither case were they ideological or political; they represented the socio-linguistic norm in the corporative society of the Early Modern Era. That Spivakoff, an exile from the Russian Empire, chose Modern Hebrew and not Yiddish—a language of which he disapproved intellectually—or Russian, in which he had taken his high-school studies in Odessa, was emphatically political and ideological. It represented what had survived—and had been born—from the premodern Ashkenazi bilingual culture, against which he had consciously rebelled by the time he reached adolescence.

As stated, the memoirs were written by urban Jewish businesspeople, successful entrepreneurs in the fields of finance, commerce and manufacturing, who lived and acted in various stages of the development of the capitalist economy in different parts of Europe. The three authors devote considerable space to their education and sources of knowledge that prepared them for the challenges of life as members of a religious minority in diverse ethno-religious milieus in which they were destined, in accordance with their education and family background, to pursue risky business careers. They shared the inclusion of economic activity in their accounts of personal and family life, mobility across the expanses of the continent, and the impact of years of business experience on their worldview and writing style. Glikl, like others of her generation and class, measures material affairs and spiritual values in financial terms. For example, she likens records of the performance and violation of Jewish commandments to debit and credit entries in a balance sheet. She hardly describes objects, pictures, furniture, or even the houses where she had lived. Is this dearth of material realia in her memoirs a form of “alienation” between object and person, the kind attributed to the transition from a feudal economic to a capitalist one? Or does it represent a literary convention of her time, a state of mind in her era, and perhaps a conscious decision by the author, as Turniansky hypothesizes? Birkental, who enjoyed entrée to the homes of nobles and merchants, also sized up the world in terms of monetary values. In contrast to Glikl, he provides abundant descriptions of objects, including works of art, and sets their prices in a personal and emotional context. For example, he describes in minute detail and with undisguised pride a ritual object that he had ordered from jewelers in Lwów and mentions the price of each of its components. This kind of personal relation to the works of artists and crafters was suited to the urban corporative culture that still prevailed in the Kingdom of Poland on the eve of the country’s partitioning. Spivakoff was schooled and raised in an explosive Odessan milieu that churned with keen business competition, aggressive capitalism, a dense cauldron of ethnic cultures, and bygone religious traditions that refused to integrate. However, the memoirist, a successful dye manufacturer and supplier of oils on a pan-Imperial scale, did not devote his autobiography to description of his business achievements and failures. This entrepreneur, who had grown rich and led a way of life at home that typified the Jewish bourgeoisie in the large cities of Tsarist Russia on the eve of World War I, admits to his readers: “Indeed, I devoted myself to trade and industry for a living. They did not give my will and my life total fulfillment, but I made a living from these businesses, did I not?” In the spirit of the modern autobiographies that many of his contemporaries (especially those drawn to socialist ideas) wrote, he frowns on total devotion to business and exudes an anti-capitalist spirit with romantic undertones. He does not identify, he testifies, with any political party or movement that puts forward a platform of social radicalism, and his grudge against these currents grows in the aftermath of what he experienced in his hometown, Odessa, under Bolshevik rule. However, the memoir is dominated by an ambivalence that sanctifies, on the one hand, the objects of home in a *balebatish* [householder-class] [הוספתי] spirit and smiles on economic success, and, on the other hand, frowns on the influence of wealth and property on relations between men and women, parents, and children, and plays down the role of money in creating a poem, literature, a painting, and music.

In Glikl’s family, women and men did acquire foreign languages and adopted leisure pursuits that were prominent among the upper classes of non-Jewish urban society. However, mastering European languages, like studying poetry or a musical instrument, were considered— at least in Glikl’s eyes—legitimate due to their utility in seeing to economic necessities. She mentions favorably a daughter of high parentage who learns French and keyboard music performance because she sang and played the clavichord for upper-class Christian guests who came to redeem a pledge in order to add pleasure to their visit and thwarted a robbery in her father’s house because she understood the robbers’ language. Glikl says nary a word about the cultural importance of knowing a foreign language or studying poetry and musical performance apart from quoting something one of the robbers said: “[Her father] did something very useful and invested his money well when he made sure that his daughter would learn French.”

In a bourgeois Jewish home in Odessa in the run-up to the Bolshevik Revolution, in contrast, playing the piano was both a conscious and externalized manifestation of acculturation and a concrete material expression of the bourgeois reality. In one chapter of his he memoir, written in exile in Argentina, Spivakoff documents the cultural devastation that the Bolsheviks wrought in the cosmopolitan city on the Black Sea coast. He devotes several agitated lines, among other things, to the confiscation by the new revolutionary authorities of musical instruments from bourgeois homes and Christian and Jewish houses of prayer in Odessa, including the piano that his daughter played. As he searched for the looted instrument, the owner of the piano reached a government warehouse. There, he says, he saw some fifty pianos that the government thieves had appropriated from other citizens—and not only pianos but also organs from houses of worship and the city’s Great Synagogue. At one of his stops, he was told: “Comrade! You would do better to leave your piano in the Communists’ hands, lest in your ‘arrogance’ you end up missing the head on your shoulders.” Confiscation of the organ, an epitomic symbol of the Odessa group’s tendencies to integrate into Western culture, like confiscation of the piano, a musical instrument considered a domestic cornerstone of Central European bourgeois culture (so according to the sociologist Max Weber) and the private property of an affluent Odessa Jew, seemed akin to the “destruction of the Temple” in Isaac Spivakoff’s eyes. Indeed, he described the event as “a second Ninth of Av in my home.” He also saw it as the destruction of the urban social order of the bourgeoisie: “Many houses, solid buildings, were razed to their foundations for no reason whatsoever.”

Let us sum up: a God-fearing businesswoman from Ashkenaz, a community-functionary wine importer from Galicia, and an Odessa manufacturer lover of Zion who emigrated to Argentina bequeathed to us three ego documents that capture some three hundred years of the Ashkenazi Diaspora culture. These documents give the contemporaneous historian an opportunity to track, from a comparative perspective, the sweeping changes in individual, familial, and social life in the Ashkenazi cultural sphere from the Early Modern Era to the aftermath of World War II. This tracking reveals the durability of the premodern linkage of men’s and women’s consciousness of self-identity, the nature of family relations among spouses, parents, and children, and formal or voluntary membership in a distinct and separate ethno-religious corporative entity. It points to a change that gradually transformed the nature of relations between Jews and their surroundings. This change, first evidenced among families of the economic elite in the communities of the Western Ashkenazi Diaspora back in the seventeenth century, continued to spread in subsequent centuries in the urban spaces of East European Jewry. It gave rise, as Spivakoff’s memoir shows aptly, to a wealth of new Jewish identities that bundled historical and cultural continuity with manifestations of rebellion against the old corporative reality. The memoirs of the refugee from Odessa were neither unique nor exceptional in their generation and place, and neither were those of Glikl and Birkental. They were one link in a corpus of multilingual writings by his contemporaries who documented the designing of innovative metamorphoses of the “aware ego” —an “ego” that consciously repositions itself as part of a post-corporative collective national-ethnic-cultural Jewish identity.