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Glikl bas Judah Leib, more commonly known as Glückel of Hamelin, was the author of one of the earliest known autobiographical accounts reflecting on life in various towns and cities dotting western-central Europe\(^1\) and written by a Jewish woman. Born in Hamburg in either 1646 or 1647, Glückel was married at age fourteen to Chayim Hameln, at which time she went to reside with her husband in his parents' home in Hameln (Germany).\(^2\) She would soon thereafter become the active partner and an apparently equal decision maker in her husband’s business, as evinced by the following words, uttered by Chayim Hameln on his deathbed upon being asked if he had any last wishes: “None. My wife knows everything. She shall do as she has always done.”\(^3\) Glückel further bolsters this statement when she asserts that “… I too did my share. Not that I mean to boast, but my husband took advice from no one else, and did nothing without our talking it over.”\(^4\) Chayim Hameln and his wife, Glückel’s livelihood was based primarily on trading in jewelry and precious stones, as well as money lending and other business enterprises.

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\(^1\) Included among these sites are Altona, Amsterdam, Berlin, Vienna, Hamburg, Hameln, and Metz. Glückel also makes reference to Jewish communities such as Vilna and Lissa, situated further to the east, in what was then Poland.

\(^2\) Chayim Hameln’s surname, like many of the Ashkenazi surnames mentioned in *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln,* is a place name. There was a general lack of standardization of Ashkenazi Jewish surnames in the German lands until after the Edict of Tolerance had been issued by Holy Roman emperor, Joseph II, in 1782. More specifically, in 1787 the Jews of this region were compelled to adopt German surnames. For further insight into the Edict of Tolerance, see: Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History,* 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 36-40.


\(^4\) Ibid., 40.
At first glance, *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln* appears to be the family chronicle of a rather astute, enterprising, educated,\(^5\) and literate Jewish woman of mid-seventeenth century-early eighteenth century Germany. Indeed, Glückel states as much in the following message, aimed at her children:\(^6\) “I am writing down these many details, dear children mine, so you may know from what sort of people you have sprung, lest today or tomorrow your beloved children or grandchildren come and know naught of their family.”\(^7\)

In its microcosmic reflection on the lives of Glückel, her family, and the Jewish communal sphere of her day, *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln* serves as a sort of social history. Yet at the same time, it provides rare first-hand historical documentation of events that affected both Jews and the greater society of that given time and milieu. Furthermore, the sheer existence of this literature is unusual and rare in that it was written by a Jewish woman from the early modern period, a time when literacy among (Jewish) women – or men, for that matter – was not something to be taken for granted.

On the historical level, Glückel makes reference to several wars, including the Swedish-Danish War of 1657-58, as well as to the onslaught enacted by Chmielnicki and his followers against the Poles and Jews, particularly, in eastern Poland, in 1648. There are likewise references to the plague, which occurred during the lifetime of Glückel’s grandparents, as well as during her own lifetime. Intriguingly, Glückel also illustrates the mad fervor surrounding Sabbatai Zevi and the drive toward relocating to the Holy Land.

\(^5\) At the outset of her memoirs, Glückel reveals details about her own background, such as the fact that her father gave his sons and daughters alike, a secular as well as a religious education. (For further information about this, see: Ibid., 6). Although she does not elaborate on this education, it is noteworthy – especially, given the timeframe – that Glückel’s father deemed it worthwhile that his daughters, also be educated – and not only in religious-Jewish subject matter – but in worldly matters, as well. Glückel’s familiarity with Jewish Scriptures, in particular, is reflected in the numerous quotes she interweaves throughout the body of her text.

\(^6\) Glückel was the mother of twelve children who survived to adulthood, although she had fourteen pregnancies in total during the course of thirty years of marriage. In light of the frequent references Glückel makes to illnesses, epidemics, and the primitive state of medicine, a mortality rate of twelve out of fourteen children is quite significant.

\(^7\) Ibid., 32.
for the ultimate redemption. This latter movement was so widespread and “close to home” for Glückel and her family, that even her own father-in-law had prepared himself for the day of redemption by selling off his house, lands, and good furniture – all because he expected to depart for the Holy Land within a short time.8

One important point of which a reader should be cognizant while reading Glückel’s accounts is the fact that she was a member of upper class Jewish society. Thus, the people with whom she regularly came into contact and whom she describes in her memoirs were likewise, for the most part, members of bourgeois and high society. Indeed, Glückel’s inner circle of family (frequently, through marriage) and acquaintances reads like a veritable who’s who of early modern Jewish European history. A number of these individuals, who included the likes of Judah Berlin, Leffmann Behrens, Samuel Oppenheimer, Samson Wertheimer, Samuel Lévy, and Samson Baiersdorf had even reached the ranks of court Jews, a status that placed them on a plane far above that of common Jews of their time and social surroundings both in terms of powers and privileges.9

Among the more prevalent 17th and early-18th century institutions common to Ashkenazi Jews of Glückel’s background was that of child marriage, which by all of Glückel’s accounts, essentially, appear to have been business transactions. This is not surprising, given the relatively high mortality rates of the era, the fact that Jewish life was frequently in jeopardy, and the sheer fact that adulthood began at a far younger age than it does today. There are several examples of this throughout Glückel’s memoirs, including the aforementioned early marriage of Glückel to Chayim Hameln, which followed a two-year betrothal, beginning when Glückel was twelve. Other such cases of early marriages and lengthy betrothals (necessitated in certain cases, because the bride and/or the groom-to-be were/was not yet fully matured) include that of Glückel's grandson, Elias. He was betrothed, but did not marry until four years later, “for both bride

8 Ibid., 46.

9 Ibid., note no. 21, 290-91.
and groom were exceedingly young…” Glückel similarly comments in conjunction with her son, Samuel, who also had a lengthy betrothal period: “But as his bride was young and tiny, the wedding was postponed for nearly another year.”

Although Glückel emphasizes to her children (on page one of book one of her memoirs) that this “will be no book of morals,” the tone she uses throughout her accounts is one of moralism and self-accusation/self-flagellation, a style that is more in keeping with religious-homiletic works, and perhaps foreign to many contemporary day readers. However, it is evident that this was a mode of literary expression that was popular in Glückel’s time and to which she was clearly exposed, as a cultured Jewish woman. By the time Glückel began recording her memoirs in c. 1691, following the death of her first husband, women’s musar – or Jewish-religious moral and ethical books – had become fairly widespread, and was an encouraged form of “leisure” reading. Among the more well known of these works, which Glückel, in fact, recommended to her children, are Brantshipigl and Lev-Tov. Both of these works had been reprinted several times by the time Glückel was growing up in the mid-seventeenth century.

Glückel tends to attribute every personal (and communal) catastrophe to sinfulness, which appears, at least from this reader’s perspective, too great and unfair a crucible for one woman alone to bear. Nowhere is she more self-flagellating than in regard to her poor choice of marrying Cerf Lévy, which she did eleven years after her first husband’s death in 1689 (as seen in the following related excerpts): “Doubtless the Most High saw my manifold sins and never gave me the thought to take myself a

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10 Ibid., 258.

11 Ibid., 201.

12 Brantshipigl by Moses Henokhs Altshtul, was printed first in Krakow, in 1596, and later, in Basel, in 1602. Lev Tov by Yitzchak ben Elyakim of Posen, was first printed in Prague in 1620 and was reprinted numerous times. Both of these works were written in a western (European) Yiddish style that was common to the early modern era. For further information, see: Ibid., xiv; Rivkah (Bat Meir) Tiktiner, Meneket Rivkah: A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women by; ed. Frauke von Rohden (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), 14; Rubin, Noga, and Turniansky, Chava. 2010. Lev Tov, Seyfer. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Lev_Tov_Seyfer (accessed February 5, 2012).
husband… But the Most High pleased otherwise, and because of my sins He allowed me to resolve upon the match I will now put before you.’”¹³

“… The Most High God laughed at my plans and proposals; He had long before decreed my ruin and disaster, to punish me for the sin of placing my reliance in my fellow men. For I ought not to have thought of taking another husband … better had it been for me to remain by my children … as God meant it.”¹⁴

At the time, Glückel had thought that she was helping to insure her financial well being, so that she need not fear becoming a burden to her children. After all, Lévy had a reputation for being wealthy and an outstanding businessperson. However, this proved to be her very undoing; within two years of marriage to her second husband, he went bankrupt – leaving Glückel and her yet unmarried youngest child in a state of destitution. The sad irony is that Glückel would ultimately be forced to live out her final years in a state of dependency on her daughter and son-in-law, in whose Metz home she resided until her death in 1724.

There is much more that can be said of the numerous sub-plots, vignettes, parables, superstitious,¹⁵ and historical accounts related in The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln. However, for the sake of brevity, this reader would like to conclude by pointing out that although this work was written several hundred years ago, still, it bears a number of timeless themes to which the contemporary reader should be able to relate. Indeed, this reader found herself very much drawn into Glückel’s world and empathizing with many of her rather contemporary tribulations: her consistent financial worries – especially after the death of her first husband; her challenges in raising twelve fatherless children (eight of whom who were still unmarried and living at home at the time of their father’s untimely death); her concern regarding finding suitable matches for her children; and her

¹³ Glückel of Hameln, Memoirs, 222.

¹⁴ Ibid., 227.

¹⁵ In addition to her liberal use of Jewish Scriptures, Glückel amply employs parables that do not necessarily appear to stem from Jewish sources. Also included in Glückel’s memoirs are eerie accounts involving prophetic dreams of dead parties and other seemingly paranormal or unexplained events.
fear of becoming financially dependent on her own children. For the aforementioned reasons, this reader would strongly recommend *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln* to students and scholars of history, and to intellectually curious laypersons, alike.