

Niedhammer, Martina: *Nur eine „Geld-Emancipation“? Loyalitäten und Lebenswelten des Prager jüdischen Großbürgertums 1800-1867.*

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In July 1844, the German-language Jewish newspaper “Der Orient” published an article on political developments in Austria by its Prague correspondent. In terse, bitter language the anonymous correspondent underscored the incongruousness of a political situation in which select, wealthy Jews were granted “privileges” (Vorrechte) – for example, to buy houses from Christians in which to live outside the Jewish quarter – while the vast majority of Jews still lacked basic “rights” (Rechte). “How insulting such a privilege, granted to but a few individuals, is to the Jews as a whole,” the correspondent observed, “is obvious.”<sup>1</sup> How was it, he asked, that the ban on the acquisition of Christian houses outside the Jewish quarter – once held to be virtually sacrosanct – could be lifted? Through a peculiar kind of emancipation it seemed, dubbed by the correspondent a “Geld-Emancipation,” an emancipation of money. Financial considerations appeared to trump religious principle and historical practice, just as the same considerations managed to lift a small portion of the Jewish community out of its pre-emancipation state into as yet uncharted legal, social, and economic waters.

It is precisely this exceptional sub-group within the Prague Jewish community – the people who no longer lived within the physical confines of the Jewish quarter during the Vormärz years – that has attracted Martina Niedhammer’s attention in her fascinating and important new book. “Nur eine ‘Geld-Emancipation?’” represents a significant departure from the ways in which historians traditionally have approached the study of Jewish culture and society in Prague during the half-century that preceded formal Jewish emancipation in 1867. While its focus is on Jewish economic elites, some of whom assumed leading roles in the production and printing of textiles in Bohemia, it does not present a conventional economic history; nor, by virtue of its relatively small set of actors, can it be considered social history in the usual sense of the term. For Niedhammer has narrowed her field of vision to focus on five families – out of a possible twenty or so – who, by virtue of their wealth and occupation (wholesale trade and industry), fall into the category of “upper bourgeoisie” (Großbürgertum): the Porges (von Portheim), Dormitzer, Jerusalem (von Salemfels), Lämél, and Prizibram clans.

Such selectivity, combined with the author’s determination to write neither a social nor an economic history, produces a number of methodological challenges. Niedhammer addresses the most obvious one by labeling her study a “group biography.” (This is to be differentiated from “collective” biography, which is necessarily cumulative and comparative in perspective.) Group biographies, she argues, emphasize social networks, help to reveal loyalties, attachments, and relationships, and ultimately reconstruct the “Lebenswelten” (living environments) in which they circulated. “Lebenswelten” are further defined as “the experiences, perceptions, and

<sup>1</sup> Der Orient, Nr. 27 (2 July 1844), p. 214.

relations of the individual within a larger social structure” (p. 23). “Life worlds,” then, might also be an apt translation. The term, Niedhammer remarks, refers directly to the individual and his/her embeddedness (*Verortung*) in urban space.

In identifying “Lebenswelten” as her object of analysis, Niedhammer is also addressing several widely-accepted notions regarding Bohemian Jewish elites in the nineteenth century with which she takes issue. One image portrays wealthy Jews in the Vormärz period pursuing assimilation head-on with a concomitant loss of Jewish identity; another presumes their complete identification with German culture and political domination in the Bohemian lands; and a third is that of a self-interested elite, happy to accept privileges that the rest of Jewish society lacked and unwilling to challenge the Habsburg state regarding its Jewish policies. Niedhammer’s goal is to challenge such readings of Bohemian Jewish history precisely by focusing on the real life social networks and attachments, the self-perceptions and local embeddedness, of wealthy Jewish families in Prague.

“Nur eine ‘Geld-Emancipation?’” constructs the “Lebenswelten” of the Prague Jewish upper bourgeoisie through a series of six chapter portraits. The first, titled “On the Jerusalem Island” (after an eponymous island on the Moldau/Vltava river) looks at the economic activity of these Jewish families, their competition with Christian entrepreneurs, their encounter with legal and bureaucratic impediments – and with the anti-semitism of their Christian competitors – and their formation of a collective self-consciousness. In the following chapter, the Sophiensaal, located in Prague’s Neustadt/Nové město, is meant to symbolize the social contacts that occurred outside of the house and family, the access gained by Prague’s wealthier Jewish families to non-Jewish society, and their ensuing cultural and patriotic attachments. The families’ close connections to the Prague Jewish community and its institutions are explored in chapter three (“At the Temple on Geistesgasse”). The fourth chapter looks closely at the political initiatives launched by members of the Prague Jewish elite, its negotiations with the Habsburg authorities viewed in the context of the Court Chancery in Vienna. Chapter five, which revolves around the “Portheimka,” the Rococo palace of the Porges von Portheim family in Smíchov, explores the internal (innerhäuslich) contacts and connections among the Jewish upper bourgeoisie. The final chapter, “Nach Jerusalem!”, turns its attention to the establishment of charitable endowments for the maintenance of the Jewish community dedicated to the memory of individual families. Its particular focus on an institution for the care of small children established in Jerusalem by Elise Herz (born Lämél), in memory of her father Simon, allows for a consideration of the attachments of Prague Jews to Palestine as an “imagined place”.

Martina Niedhammer puts forth a number of important conclusions that ought to revise conventional wisdoms regarding Prague Jewish society prior to 1867. She paints a portrait of an assured social group, united by strong collective bonds (and, yes, a strong sense of noblesse oblige), who were not afraid to confront their antagonists in both the economic and political realms. The wealthier Jews in Prague may have spoken primarily German in their daily lives, but they did not uniformly identify with German in a national-political sense. They demonstrated, rather, “heterogeneous national loyalties,” reflecting the reigning cultural pluralism and

“Landespatriotismus” of the Vormärz period in general. The attachments of the upper bourgeoisie to the Jewish Quarter and its religious institutions remained strong throughout the period under review. Although the five families had left the Jewish Quarter long before the granting of free movement and settlement in 1848, they remained connected to the Jewish community and its institutions. Some of the wealthy Jews agitated for moderate religious reform; others, like the Przibrans, favored traditional Orthodoxy. But all identified with the Jewish community “as Jewish place” and considered Judaism to be a vibrant faith. Finally, in their political relations with the Habsburg authorities, despite an “ostensible loyalty” to the imperial house, Niedhammer argues, personal documents (such as the correspondence between Leopold Lämle and his nephew Gustave d’Eichtal) reveal a more critical appraisal of Habsburg policies toward its Jewish population. The families offered numerous proposals, moreover, for the amelioration of the social conditions in which Jews lived.

The book’s overarching concern, it seems, is to redeem the Prague Jewish upper bourgeoisie from a particular social criticism: the claim that they were primarily concerned, both as a group and as individuals, with social advancement and cultural assimilation, goals which they pursued at all cost. To the contrary, Niedhammer argues, the individuals who composed this social and economic elite possessed multiple and complex identities and sought to integrate different loyalties. At the same time, they were solidly grounded in Prague as place and attached to its varied cultural forms and expressions. The author has made a very strong case here. If I hesitate to endorse it fully it is only because I feel she may have misread the critique offered originally in “Der Orient” and which, in the form of a question, frames her book. In 1844 the Prague correspondent had directed the accusation of “Geld-Emancipation” not at the wealthy Jews of Prague but at the state. It was the Austrian state that offered a small segment of the Jewish population an “ersatz” emancipation based on financial considerations even as it refused to abolish the discriminatory Jewish tax or allow for complete freedom of movement and occupation. Later in the article the writer from Prague charged that the discrepancy between partial emancipation and discrimination was based on the same set of financial considerations: The Austrian state, while promoting Jewish trade and industry, while allowing the confines of the ghetto to be breached, could not afford to repeal the Jewish tax because it was in desperate need of the funds that it provided.<sup>2</sup> The state needed to get its fiscal house in order.

This is, in sum, a valuable contribution to the cultural and social history of Central European Jews in the decades leading up to emancipation, derived from a rich and varied assortment of primary sources: ego documents of various types, portraits, photographs, and gravestone inscriptions, newspapers, testaments, government documents, association records, and more. As with any truly suggestive work, perhaps, I find myself wishing that the author had considered more explicitly its implications for other contexts and other key historical narratives. What is the relationship, for example, between these nineteenth century elites and the Court Jews of earlier centuries? In terms of esprit de corps, economic innovation, connections to the

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<sup>2</sup> The Jewish tax was finally repealed in 1846.

court, and responsibility to the Jewish community, there appear to be many similarities. In what ways do our five families and others like them break with pre-modern patterns of “shtadlanut” (intercession), state building, and economic development? Phenomenologically, the breaching of the ghetto walls by the Jewish elite in Prague suggests a later “selective integration” (to borrow a term from Benjamin Nathans) in the Russian empire involving Jews who, by virtue of their meeting exceptional criteria, were able to leave the confines of the Pale of Settlement and move to Russia proper, there to interact with the Russian state and society on a very different level. Can the Habsburg monarchy prior to 1867 be said to have engaged in its own form of selective integration? And, if so, what exactly occurred in Austria in 1867, in Hungary in 1868, or in Germany in 1871? Is there a need to question the very concept of emancipation?