

Some Strategies for Teaching *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*

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I have been using *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln* as a required primary text in various courses since the early 1980s. Over the decades I have assigned the *Memoirs* as a primary source in survey courses of the medieval and early modern Jewish experience; in upper level courses focused on women and constructions of gender in Judaism; and in senior and graduate seminars on Jewish, and sometimes Jewish and Christian, memoirs and autobiographies. Generally, I have had great success in teaching this work and in seeing my enthusiasm and affection for it reflected in the responses of my students.

However, in recent years I have encountered some resistance to my efforts to bring immediacy to Glückel's life and concerns. Oregon, a state with fewer than four million people, has a very small Jewish population and it is also the most "unchurched" American state. Many of my students at the University of Oregon are from the first generation in their families to attend college; a number of them are non-traditional in terms of age. And like most students everywhere, they lack the knowledge of early modern European history and civilization and the background in Judaism and the Jewish experience that would ease their understanding of the *Memoirs*. I find I must work harder to explain to these generally well-meaning and curious undergraduates why this book is an important historical source and a compelling human document and I imagine that many of my colleagues have encountered similar challenges elsewhere. In this brief essay, I suggest some approaches that may be helpful in teaching this book in classrooms of diverse students.

The *Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln* is a book from the past, that foreign country that differs so profoundly from our own place and time. It is a challenge for most of our students to imagine a reality that is other than their own. This is why my overarching strategy is to contextualize Glückel's reminiscences in as many and as diverse ways as I can. I provide historical background on German-speaking Europe in the seventeenth century, including religious and political differences in the wake of post-Reformation conflicts, and I explain the position of Jews in the larger social and political matrix, as well as the various ramifications of the roles of those few who served as Court Jews. Sharing maps, along with images of seventeenth-century German cities and social life from contemporaneous art, including illustrations from early printed

books, can be helpful in establishing a concrete geographic space and creating pictures of how people looked, dressed, and lived at various social levels. Using comparative documentary materials from Christian society, particularly those that place Glückel's experiences in the context of a growing urban middle class involved in mercantile endeavors and a larger society in which literate and numerate women were playing important mercantile roles, can demonstrate cultural commonalities between Christians and Jews. Similarly, a number of anxieties that are invoked in Glückel's work, among them the pressures of economic survival, preparing children for independent adulthood, the uncertainties of marriage, the fickleness of fortune, and the painful impacts of illness and death, can resonate in our students' present realities. However, while many details of Glückel's life are illuminated by enhanced knowledge of her elite Jewish milieu and her larger social setting, our students must also remember that this is a narrative constructed by one extraordinary individual in one particular historical moment for her own complicated reasons.

A significant pedagogical challenge in teaching a work written by or about someone perceived as a member of a minority, is that students sometimes project the character, concerns, and actions of that individual onto the larger group from which she comes, a projection often stemming from popular stereotypes about certain marginalized communities. In the case of Glückel the issue is usually her apparent focus on economic resources. "This book shows why Jews are so obsessed with money," a student of mine once wrote. The best way approach to statements such as these, it seems to me, is once again contextualization: everyone is deeply concerned with money and people express this concern in different ways. A teacher might discuss the fact that in societies in which Jews were not permitted to own land, movable objects such as cash and jewelry could guarantee security. Similarly, gifts of valuable objects to the right Christian nobleman or church leader could mean the difference between expulsion and continued residence permits or other privileges. Jewish communities were small and as hierarchical, in their own ways, as the larger societies in which they were tolerated. The wealthiest Jews enjoyed the status, however insecure, that came with economic success and they also provided the leadership that protected and supported those less fortunate. Knowledge of someone's financial worth and his or her place on the social ladder was written into daily life. Glückel came from an elite echelon in her Jewish community in terms of family resources, access to education, and contacts with other wealthy Jews across Europe, with whom she arranged her children's marriages. These

advantages determined her destiny, and it is worth reminding our students that wealth and social class are often significant determinants of human opportunities in every culture.

Along this line, it is also helpful to discuss dowries and their roles in European society in general; I often refer to novels by Jane Austen, where every eligible young woman is described in terms of the amount of her marriage portion; in the world of non-fiction, at least, the amount of a woman's fortune would likely determine her marital prospects. I also suggest a range of ways in which contemporary parents of means might invest in their children's futures, including investing resources in their higher education. Preemptive discussions of what Glückel is really talking about when she talks about money -- such as her apprehensions about her social standing, her desire to arrange appropriate marriages for her children, her wish to have access to powerful Jews and non-Jews when necessary, and her worries about her ability to support herself in her old age, among other anxieties -- render her *Memoirs* more accessible, resonant, and universal to student readers.

Analyzing the ramifications, both positive and negative, of gender in Judaism and the larger culture is also central to any discussion of the *Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*. So, too, is attention to changes in female education and expressions of piety in the early modern era. Our students may find a useful point of commonality, as well, in discussing the impact of technological change on the expansion of knowledge and on human possibilities. In our own times, the Internet has transformed production and consumption of information and the ways in which that information spreads throughout the world. In the early modern period printing and the cheap production of vernacular literature directed at non-elite audiences, including women, had a similar impact.

Among other things, print culture enlarged women's intellectual and spiritual aspirations and inspired some of them to become writers themselves. For Jews this meant books in Yiddish, including translations and paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible such as the *Taytsh-khumes*, first published by Sheftl Hurwitz in Prague in 1608 or 1610, and the *Tsenerene*, produced by Yankev ben Itzhok Ashkenazy (c.1590-1618), which included women among their intended audiences. These works included homilies on the weekly biblical readings from the Torah and Prophets, as well as stories, legends, and parables drawn from rabbinic literature, the Zohar and other mystical texts, histories, and travel accounts. Similarly, ethical treatises, including the *Brantshpigl* ("Burning Mirror") by Moses ben Henoah Altschuler (1596), and the *Meineket Rivkah*

(“Rebecca’s Wetnurse”) Rebecca bas Meir Tiktiner of Prague (d. 1550; posthumously published in the early seventeenth century), discussed proper conduct, woman’s religious obligations, and her relations with her husband, by a woman, were also available to female readers.

Comparing vernacular printed literature intended for Jewish women and for “men who are like women,” that is, men without significant knowledge of Hebrew, with printed pietistic German books intended for Christian girls and women, which began to appear in the 1530s and 1540s is another useful contextualizing approach. Many of these books, which included entertaining and edifying collections of moral tales and exempla from the Bible, history, and nature, included the word *Spiegel*, or “mirror,” as part of their title, further demonstrating their exemplary nature, a tendency paralleled in the Yiddish *Brantspiگل*. It is important to point out how the liberating and empowering potentialities of the new technology of printing opened imaginative and spiritual space for both Christian and Jewish women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Glückel’s lifetime of reading allowed her to see herself and her experiences against a larger landscape and empowered her to demonstrate her own piety by writing. It is valuable to let students know that Glückel’s example is part of a larger cultural phenomenon of popular education made possible by a new way of disseminating knowledge.

A good pedagogic counter-example to Glückel, is Margery Kempe (1373-ca. 1438), an early English visionary who composed an autobiographical work and was also the mother of fourteen children. Assigning *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Glückel’s *Memoirs* in juxtaposition in an advanced undergraduate and graduate courses is a fascinating learning opportunity, since both are among the earliest European autobiographies attributed to women and both are written in vernacular languages. Among their many differences, however, is the fact that Glückel could write in her own voice to acquaint her children with the important events that had happened to their distinguished family, while Margery, living in a pre-print milieu, was illiterate and was compelled to dictate her experiences on pilgrimages and her extensive visions to a priest. Many of the pious stories and teachings that Glückel shares are derived from her own broad reading, while Margery’s visions and spiritual derive from traditions she heard in church or in other contexts where information and imagery were transmitted orally and visually.

In writing her memoirs Glückel was aware of leaving her children an ethical will. Ethical wills were a popular genre of Jewish ethical or *musar* literature of the medieval and early modern period. In them the author expressed to her or his children pious advice on how best to live in the

world. Glückel was well acquainted with such literature, and refers to several of her contemporaries, who left admirable ethical wills for their children. Although Glückel refers to at least one such document written by a woman, no earlier or contemporaneous ethical wills written by Jewish women have survived. Glückel's autobiography, which goes far beyond the limited boundaries of the usual ethical will, is a unique example of an early modern Jewish woman's foray into writing, a new mode of performing piety for her children and their descendants. Comparisons with more typical examples of such documents written by Jewish men, generally in Hebrew, is another useful pedagogical approach.

The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln is a remarkable human document in and of itself and it is also an immensely important cultural artefact. Like all creative works it is best read, taught, and appreciated from numerous perspectives. Glückel produced something new in Jewish culture and our task is to help our students understand the multifaceted ways in which her autobiography is a portent of the major social, political, and religious changes that would transform Central European Jewry at the end of the early modern period.

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