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Jews: The Makers of Early Modern Berlin

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Conlan Vance

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HIST 445

Professor Le Bar

Paper 1

Jews: The Makers of Early Modern Berlin

“An Edict Concerning the Fifty Families of Protected Jews Who Are to Be Admitted but Who Are Not, however, To Have a Synagogue.”¹ This was the title of the edict that Frederick William, Margrave of Brandenburg and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire decreed on May 21, 1671. This would be the beginning of the admission of Jews into what would become Brandenburg-Prussia. Like his contemporaries, he was a pious Christian and willing to convert Jews whenever possible, but he did see the economic advantages of tolerating them and allowing them to settle in his territories.² In addition to taxes that citizens of Brandenburg-Prussia had to pay, there were taxes that only applied to Jews, that they were required to pay as well. The revenue generated by these taxes allowed Frederick William, partly, to build up a centralized, bureaucratic state, free from the control of the privileged estates.³ This shows the beginning of the central role either directly or indirectly that Jews would take in the economy of Brandenburg-Prussia, centered in Berlin. Over the next decades, Jews would become immersed in the

¹ Frederick William. “The Readmission of the Jews into Brandenburg (1671),” in *the Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791*, by Jacob Rader Marcus and Marc Seperstein (Hebrew Union College Press, 2015), 249.

² Introduction, “The Readmission of the Jews into Brandenburg (1671),” 248.

³ Jonathan I. Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550-1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 148.

economy of Berlin through their use in courts but more so through their trading, specifically, the ways in which they traded and how they used these to free themselves from some of the constraints of German Christian society.⁴ Thusly, this will be shown by looking at Jews in Brandenburg-Prussia in the later 17th century, Jews in Berlin, and Jews and their relations to the economic sphere of Berlin.

Historiography

There has been much scholarship when it comes to Jews and their various roles in the economy of Berlin but the ones that will be looked at and discussed are selected works of Andreas Anchuelo, specifically, *Jews in Berlin*, Jonathan I. Israel, specifically, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550-1750*, David B. Ruderman, specifically, *Early Modern Jewry*, Derek Jonathan Penslar, specifically, *The Origins of Jewish Political Economy*, and R. Po-Chia Hsia and Harmut Lehmann, specifically, *In and Out of the Ghetto: Jewish-Gentile Relations in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany*. The premise of Anchuelo's work was that Jews are and were an important part of the history of Berlin. Before their expulsion from Berlin in the sixteenth century to their readmission beginning in 1671, Jews became an important part in the economic revival of Berlin especially after the Thirty Years' War.⁵ The premise of Israel's work was that the expanding Jewish role in political and economic spheres was the first fundamental emancipation of European Jewry.⁶ The premise of Ruderman's work was that the princes in Germany used Jews to bolster their own economic standing by using them for economic growth

⁴ Jonathan I. Israel, 149.

⁵ Andreas Anchuelo, *Jews in Berlin*, ed. Andreas Nachama, Julius H. Schoeps, and Hermann Simon, trans. Michael S. Cullen, Allison Brown, and Cindy Optiz (New York, NY: Berlinica, 2015), 16.

⁶ Israel, 3.

and revival.⁷ The premise of Penslar's work was that there were connections between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews and the economic policies of Germany and other parts of Europe.⁸ The premise of R. Po-Chia Hsia and Harmut Lehmann's work was that the economic activity of Jews expanded in new ways in the Early Modern period and that Jews became more integrated into the economy of Brandenburg-Prussia during this period as well.⁹ What will be added to this is that Jews not only became economically integrated into Berlin from being a part of the princes' courts but also by creating new forms of production.

To understand the role of Jews in the economic sphere of Berlin, one must go to the beginning of tolerance of Jews in Brandenburg-Prussia. As stated earlier, Jews did not begin to be involved in the economy of Berlin until the readmission of fifty Jewish families into the lands of Brandenburg-Prussia in 1671 by Frederick William. This was not done simply because of Frederick William's tolerance of Jews as is commonly stated but because of the revenue that could be generated by the trading from Jews and the taxes that could be imposed on them.¹⁰ These fifty families were not the first Jews to be allowed to trade within the lands of Brandenburg-Prussia, twenty-one years earlier in 1650, Frederick William allowed Polish Jews to do just that. This could be seen as even more important than the readmission in 1671 because it was just two years after the Thirty Years' War. The reasons for allowing Polish Jews to be able

⁷ David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 78.

⁸ Derek Jonathan Penslar, "The Origins of Jewish Political Economy," *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, 3, no. 3 (1997): 26-60, accessed February 11, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.ewu.edu/stable/4467503>.

⁹ Stefi Wenzel-Jersch, "Jewish Economic Activity in Early Modern Times," in *In and Out of the Ghetto: Jewish-Gentile Relations in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany*, ed. R. Po-Chia and Harmut Lehmann, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 92.

¹⁰ Wenzel-Jersch, 92.

to trade in Brandenburg-Prussia was for similar reasons as allowing the fifty Jewish families, meaning it was for economic stimulus of the region.¹¹ Jews were not the only religious minority allowed in Brandenburg-Prussia, French Huguenots and other Christian minorities later on would be allowed to settle but it would be much easier for them than Jews. As Anchuelo describes it, “Whereas the Jews were merely permitted to enter Brandenburg...the Huguenots were invited to Brandenburg for perpetuity and granted the same civil rights as the Germans. The acceptance of the Huguenots was based on religion and a perceived shared humanity...the acceptance of the Jews was based on the need to improve commerce and trade. Whereas the Jews had pay...the immigration of the Huguenots was paid for by the state and organized by Brandenburg officials.”¹² The Jews however were the first of these religious minorities that began this cycle of tolerance in Brandenburg-Prussia. Jews were the first of religious minorities to be readmitted because as Anchuelo describes, “Jews filled a major economic function in feudal society. They were better than all others at buying and selling agrarian products. They understood how to master liquidity crises and they were able to provide very necessary services to mediate between the cities and the countryside.”¹³ Neither was this the first edict calling for Christian citizens to tolerate and protect Jews but was one of the first that was enforced and back up by the ruler that created it, “No one shall lay violent hands upon them...every magistrate...shall accord them...the right of civic hospitality; and shall not treat them in any other way, if they would avoid our high disfavor.”¹⁴ Jews in Brandenburg-Prussia were not typical of Jews in Germany, in

¹¹ Andreas Anchuelo, 17.

¹² Anchuelo, 18.

¹³ Anchuelo, 17.

¹⁴ Frederick William, 252.

general as has been shown this far, it was not just any Jews that could be readmitted but wealthy families.

There was a reason for this as Anchuelo describes, “It belonged to the territories of middle Europe that had suffered greatly during the Thirty Years War...the land was devastated, and about 50 percent of the population had fallen victim to the war and its following periods of starvation, epidemics and murderous lawlessness. The Great Elector was sensitive to these disasters and developed a major reform program to fight his territorial backwardness.”¹⁵ This also explains why Frederick William reached out to these wealthy, Jewish families and not the other way around, he needed people that could generate stimulus in his territory and bring trade back and increase it as well which is also why he allowed Polish Jews so early on.¹⁶ This was not something that could happen to every Jew because Jewish communities during this period were either fine or they weren't, there was no in between.

Second, Jews in Berlin stemmed from the original fifty families that were readmitted into Brandenburg-Prussia. In order to settle in Berlin these families needed to obtain *Schutzbriefe* or protection letters which was influenced by Israel Aaron, the Jewish Court Agent. He most likely saw these families as competition and wanted to maintain his influence in the courts, so he tried to make it so as few as possible of these families settled in Berlin. This would prove to be ineffective because by 1672, forty families had settled in Berlin. Even with these complications, Jewish life began to flourish in Berlin, a cemetery was built in 1672 as well as schools for their children.¹⁷ It was also around this time and later that Jews began to “conceive of themselves as

¹⁵ Anchuelo, 17.

¹⁶ Ruderman, 79.

¹⁷ Anchuelo, 19, 24.

integrally linked with the economy of their host society and in the decades to come these Jews would become intimately involved in the culture of their host society.”¹⁸ During this time, these Jewish families had to pay an annual *Schutzgeld* or protection fee of eight talers, this was in addition to the taxes that other citizens had to pay.¹⁹

Jews in Berlin were restricted as with the rest of Europe to a small number of trade activities but even though the “occupational structure of the Jews in this period changed relatively little, their economic activity...took on completely new dimensions.”²⁰ This economic activity of Jews which will be expanded upon later drew the ire of both the nobility and guilds alike. With the latter considering Jews “uncomfortable competition and anxious that they would corner the market in used goods.”²¹ This shows that along with taxes that large revenues could be and were extracted from these Jews living in Berlin which helped turn Brandenburg-Prussia from a backwater territory, devastated by the Thirty Years’ War to a major European powerhouse in the decades to come. Some of these Jews however would become wealthy which could be seen in ever larger dowries and growing expectations by children for financial generosity from their parents.²²

Finally, the ways in which these Jews fit into the economic sphere of Berlin were in a few different ways but the most widespread was their involvement in trade and how it differed from their Christian counterparts. The way that Jews differed from Christians in trading is also what caused Christians to think that they were bad for trade. As Stefi Wenzel-Jersch describes it, “two

¹⁸ Derek Penslar, 30-31.

¹⁹ Anchuelo, 22.

²⁰ Wenzel-Jersch, 91.

²¹ Anchuelo, 22.

²² Gluckel of Hameln. “The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln (1691-1719),” In *the Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791*, by Jacob Rader Marcus and Marc Seperstein (Hebrew Union College Press, 2015), 468.

issues aroused the indignation of the resident population...cheap prices, and the sales method of going to the customer and directly offering him the goods.”²³ This is why the estates of Brandenburg-Prussia sent a complaint to Frederick William in 1672 where they accuse Jews as, “being harmful than useful to the state...and could cause a complete ruination of trade.”²⁴ The estates made these accusations because in their minds they felt that the ways that Jews practiced trade was exploitative because they did things that Christians were barred from doing. Ironically, Christians would take up similar practices two centuries later. Jews had to do this because they found “themselves confined to certain occupations excluded from guilds and corporations and blamed for exploiting this situation that they were placed into.”²⁵ Frederick William, however rejected these accusations and stated, “we are still of the consistent opinion that the Jews with their trade are not harmful to us or the land but that they, on the contrary, appear advantageous.”²⁶ Frederick William did this because it was in line with his general strategy of weakening the towns and estates in order to achieve a measure of centralization.²⁷

It was not only occupations associated with trading where Jews could be found but they were also found in ones that were not subjected to guild controls like seal engraving, gem cutting, and metal extracting. This shows that the assertion that the vast majority of Jews supported themselves by means of money lending and commodity is simply not the case though many would do something associated with trading just not all. This can be seen in state policy

²³ Wenzel-Jersch, 93.

²⁴ “Petition of the Estates to the Great Elector (1672),” in *Jewish Economic Activity in Early Modern Times*, by Stefi Wenzel-Jersch, in *In and Out of the Ghetto: Jewish-Gentile Relations in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany*, ed. R. Po-Chia and Harmut Lehmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 92.

²⁵ Wenzel-Jersch, 94.

²⁶ Wenzel-Jersch, 93.

²⁷ Jonathan Israel, 148.

toward Jews which was determined by expectations of commercial or financial rewards in return.²⁸

In conclusion, Jews in Berlin from the time of their readmission in 1671 had become a necessity for Brandenburg-Prussia in order to rebound from its destruction in the Thirty Years' War. This can be seen in their extensive use in the courts of Brandenburg-Prussia and the taxes that were extracted from them. However, this can also be seen in the ways that Jews traded with the German Christian majority. And, how they were able to circumvent some aspects of the society that were used to keep them down. This has expanded on the ways in which Jews used their roles in the economic sphere of Berlin to help improve their lives and possibly of Jews in positions similar to theirs.

²⁸ Wenzel-Jersch, 95.

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