



Court Jews

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COURT JEWS (Court contractors and suppliers). Medieval princes used the commercial and financial services of individual Jews. However, as an institution, the Court Jew is a feature of the absolutist state, especially in Central Europe, from the end of the 16th century onward. Trying as far as possible to extend his power over the whole of his territory, the ruler set up a centralized administration as part of his court, which at the same time became the power center, presenting a lavish display of luxury. Economically, a Jew could be of great service to such a ruler. In Poland many landed estates were administered by Jews (see *Arenda) and a large part of the trade in agricultural products was in their hands (see *Agriculture). This, combined with the emergence of early Jewish capitalist commercial activity by Sephardim in the *Netherlands , with their connections with Levantine trade through Jews in the Ottoman Empire, made the Jew in Central Europe particularly suited to be an agent for provisioning armies with grain, timber, and cattle, as well as a supplier of diamonds and other goods for conspicuous consumption. As tax-collecting and enlargement of the scope of taxation often lagged considerably behind the growing expenditure of court, army, and bureaucracy, this type of regime developed an almost chronic financial deficit. Here the Jews with their organizational skill and their far-reaching connections could help, through the frequent supply of commercial credit or ready cash, as also through the supply of foodstuffs, cloth, and weapons for the army, the most important instrument of the prince's power. The institution of the Court Jew did not emerge suddenly but developed gradually during the 16th and 17th centuries. Early Court Jews like Michel *Jud and the mintmaster *Lippold were exceptions. Another phase is represented by Jews who were entrepreneurs of the mints during the "Kipperzeit" (a period of economic instability at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, 1618–48, characterized by galloping inflation). The best known of this period, Jacob *Bassevi von Treuenberg of Prague (1570–1634), was the outstanding minting entrepreneur. Several Jews in the Hamburg region maintained close contacts with the courts of the neighborhood, such as Samuel Herscheider with the court of the archbishop of Bremen, Nathan Spanier with the count of Bueckeburg, and Alvaro Dinis with King Christian IV of Denmark. In the Thirty Years' War Jews were employed as army provisioners and spies by both the Swedish and imperial forces. It was only during the second half of the 17th century, with the further evolution of the mercantilist policy and baroque culture of the absolute state, that the Court Jew became a kind of requisite of the princes' court, a member of the group of officials through whom the state or territory was governed. Court Jews were then found in most of the principalities of the Holy Roman Empire, and in some of the adjoining states, such as Poland and Denmark. In some places they lived near the court, and in others the court made use of their services in one of the great commercial centers like Frankfurt or Hamburg. They were given a great variety of titles: *Hofjude*, *Hoffaktor*, *Hofprovediteur*, *Hoflieferant*, *Hofagent*, *Kabinettfaktor*, *Proviantlieferant*, *Kommerzienrat*, *Kommerziendirektor*, and the higher appellations of *Oberhoffaktor*, *Obermilizfaktor*, or *Generalprovediteur*; many had titles from several princes. Their rights were similarly various; the chief privileges included a limited official standing, sometimes combined with a salary, direct access to the prince, exemption from the jurisdiction of the rabbinical courts (and submission to the jurisdiction of the royal court – *Hofgericht*), and freedom to travel and settle anywhere in the empire. Their highly varied activities included finance,

commerce, and diplomacy, but they were responsible especially for providing the prince and his court with merchandise and money, supplying metal for the mint, provisioning the army, undertaking commercial and diplomatic missions, and investigating proposals for the promotion of trade and industry, e.g., tobacco.

Industrious and often restless, the Court Jews showed a strong drive toward success, both in business and social status, with the allied urge "to assimilate as completely as possible to his environment in speech, dress, and manners" (S. Stern, *Court Jew* (1950), 11). A decidedly dynastic attitude led them to prefer marriages with the families of other Court Jews and to attempt to secure their positions for their descendants, both contributing factors to the tendency of their families to form a particular group within Jewry. The personal relationship between the prince and the Court Jew was based not only on common interests but also on the isolation in which both lived: the prince in his omnipotence and inaccessibility and the Court Jew because of his descent and religion. Thanks to his privileged position, the Court Jew was often able to act as *shtadlan* for the Jewish groups; frequently, he was the head of the community and could procure the right to establish new settlements and prepare the way for emancipation. On the other hand, his often adventurous and risky career, necessarily involved with the court intrigues, could end abruptly on the death of the prince, with the gravest consequences for the Court Jew's property, and even life.

Protestant and Catholic princes alike opened their courts to Jews. Among the earliest were Frederick William, elector of Brandenburg from 1540, and Christoph Bernhard von Galen, who was elected prince-bishop of Muenster in 1650. The latter, partly influenced by tolerant motives, was at the same time eager to include the Jews in his mercantilist-expansionist policy: in the 1650s he employed the services of the *Gomperz* family on the lower Rhine; Nini Levi was made *Judenbefehlshaber* in 1651, and later Abraham Isaac became Court Jew. In the bishopric of Minden Behrend *Levi* gained access to the court. From 1655 Israel Aaron was an army factor in Prussia; he was permitted to live in Berlin in 1663 and two years later became a salaried servant of the court. His widow Esther Schulhoff married Jost *Liebmann*, who then succeeded to Israel Aaron's position and supplied the court with jewels. At the same time Simon Model, whose brother-in-law Bonaventura Sachs was influential at the court of Saxony, was Court Jew to the margrave of Ansbach, and Leffmann *Behrends* served the court of Hanover; the latter's contribution was instrumental in the elevation of Hanover to an electorate, and he also made substantial loans to the Hapsburgs and other dynasties. Other Court Jews were his cousin Behrend *Lehmann* at Halberstadt, who also gave financial assistance to Elector Frederick Augustus II of Saxony, and Aaron Beer at Frankfurt. Behrend *Lehmann* and his cousin both helped Frederick Augustus of Saxony to gain the throne of Poland, where he also employed Jewish factors. Samuel *Oppenheimer* and Samson *Wertheimer* made their careers at the imperial court in Vienna, where later they were followed by members of the *Arnstein*, *Eskelles*, and *Pereira* families. Emperor Charles VI favored employing Jews in his court; Prince Eugene of Savoy, commander of the Austrian army, depended heavily on Jewish army purveyors. During these decisive years, when Austria rose to the status of a great power through her wars with the Turks, Jewish loans probably accounted for one-third of the annual revenue. The Karlskirche in Vienna was financed by Jewish loans, as was Schoenbrunn Palace built by Maria Theresa. Five generations of the *Gomperz* family served at the Hohenzollern courts; later, members of the *Ephraim*, *Isaak*, and *Itzig* families were mint masters. Also influential were Marx *Assur*, who received the title of *Hoffaktor* in Saxony and Sweden, and Behrend *Lehmann's* brother-in-law Jonas Meyer, who took up residence in Dresden, where *Lehmann's* son *Lehmann Behrend* also lived. The Saxon

court probably used the services of the largest number of Jews; around 1707 it had connections with about 20 Jewish jewelers. At the court of Brunswick the David family, especially Alexander David, became firmly established.

As in the south, the greater number of Court Jews came from Frankfurt, so in the north, Hamburg (with Altona and Wandsbek) became a similar center. Various members of both the Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities were in the service of the Danish court, beginning with Alvaro Dinis (Samuel Jachia) at Glueckstadt; later, members of the de Lima and de Casseres families served as factors and financial or diplomatic agents. Gabriel Gomez (Samuel de Casseres) was made *Generalfaktor und Hofprovisor* by Christian IV, retaining his position on the succession of Frederick III and later being appointed *Finanzkommissarius* as well. Diego Teixeira de Sampaio (Abraham Senior) and his son Manuel (Isaac Hayyim) served Queen Christiana of Sweden as financial agents and resident ministers. In the service of the crown of Portugal abroad, notwithstanding their religious status, similar positions were held by Duarte Nuñez da Costa (Jacob *Curiel), his son Manuel, and his brother Jeronimo (the latter of Amsterdam), while Manuel Bocarro (Jacob *Rosales) was in the service of Spain, and Daniel and Joshua *Abensur in that of Poland. However, they were employed in diplomatic or consular, rather than financial, functions. From 1683 Jacob Mussafia, a mint master, was Court Jew of Duke Christian Albert of Schleswig-Holstein-Gottorp and later of Duke Frederick IV and his prime minister Wedderkop; he was followed by his son Joseph, who was involved in a famous law suit following the fall of Wedderkop. Other outstanding families of Court Jews in Hamburg were the Fuersts and the Goldschmidts: Samuel Fuerst served Bernhard and Johann Asolf, dukes of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg; Jeremiah Fuerst became Court Jew of Duke Christian Louis of Mecklenburg in 1679 and of Sachsen-Lauenburg; Israel Fuerst served the court of Holstein-Gottorp. Bendix Goldschmidt and the Hindrichsen family were financial associates of the Fuersts; remaining in Hamburg, Goldschmidt became an agent of Goertz and later served the Danish court as a *Kammeragent*, while the Hinrichsen family took up residence in Mecklenburg-Schwerin. Ruben Hinrichsen became the salaried *Hofagent* of Duke Leopold II; Moses Josephs (Moses Wessely) of Glueckstadt was in the service of Peter I of Russia, and at the same time had dealings with the Danish court. All the petty German courts had their Court Jews: there was Moses Benjamin Wulff, Saul Samuel, and Moses Heyman at Weissenfels; Berend Wulff and Assur Marx at Sachsen-Merseburg and Sachsen-Zeitz; Samson von Baiersdorf at Bayreuth; the Van Geldern family at Duesseldorf; Simon Baruch at Kurkoeln; and the Heine family at Bueckeburg. Noah Samuel Isaac of Sulzbach, who helped finance the marriage of the Wittelsbach prince-elector Charles Albert to Princess Maria Amalia of Austria in 1722, was at the same time a banker of the elector of Cologne and of the Teutonic Order.

Joseph Suess *Oppenheimer , court factor of Duke Charles Alexander of Wuerttemberg, had dealings with many other rulers, including the elector of Cologne, the landgraf of Hesse, and the elector of the Palatinate, but it was in Wuerttemberg where his financial influence reached its peak. At the same time, he saw possibilities of political action which would transform the duchy into a modern absolutist state based on mercantilist principles. He failed, however, and was executed in 1738. By then the zenith of the Court Jew had already passed. Although Jews served the German courts as mint entrepreneurs well into the first half of the 19th century, in general, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, which gave rise to wide-ranging changes in patterns of finance, commerce, and international trade, put an end to the epoch of the Court Jews.

In all their varied activities, the Court Jews played a remarkable part in the development of international credit facilities especially in the Central European states and to some degree in northern Europe also, from the mid-17th to late-18th centuries. Generally, they were agents who arranged transfers of credit rather than possessors of vast capital in their own right; through their far-reaching commercial relationships and their organizing skill, they were able to provide funds more swiftly than most Christian bankers. Because of their specialization in the money business, they were able to furnish the silver for the mints more easily and could better act as army purveyors, once more because of their ability to organize and their network of family relationships. With their entrepreneurial spirit, they contributed in part to the process of industrialization within the frame of mercantilist policies. There is no doubt that they were instrumental in the growth of the modern absolute state, and at the end of the era there emerged a group of several important Jewish private bankers (see *Banking and *Bankers) who exemplify the transition to modern methods of economy and government, primarily the Rothschilds, the Goldschmidts, the Oppenheimers, and the Seligmans. However, it should not be forgotten that the courts had their Christian bankers, entrepreneurs, and army agents, too, who also played a part in this development.

Sources:S. Stern, *Court Jew* (1950); idem, *Der Preussische Staat und die Juden*, 4 vols. (1962); H. Schnee, *Hofffinanz und der moderne Staat*, 6 vols. (1953–67); J.R. Marcus, *Jews in the Medieval World* (1938, paperback 1965), 291, 415ff.; H. Kellenbenz, *Sephardim an der unteren Elbe* (1958); C. Roth, *Essays and Portraits in Anglo-Jewish History* (1962); idem, in: JSOS, 5 (1943), 355–66; R. Straus, *ibid.*, 3 (1941), 15–40; F. Redlich, in: *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History*, 3 (1951); Carsten, in: YLBI, 3 (1958), 140ff.

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