

"Jews, Frankists and Converts in Habsburg Moravia, 1700-1900"

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Prossnitz, the second largest Jewish community in Moravia, popularly known as the “Jerusalem of the Hana (Plains),” received occasional mention in the responsa literature of the eighteenth century. For example, Rabbi Meir Eisenstadt, rabbi of Prossnitz from 1702 to 1744, responded to the following question, which was published in his *Panim Me’irot*.

I was asked how to spell **Prostitz**, since the Gentiles who inhabit the town and the villages speak Bohemian and call it **Prostějov** and this is how they write it in their registers and legal documents, but some Gentiles, such as the officials and dignitaries who speak German, call it **Prossnitz**.¹

For the purposes of a *get*, Eisenstadt concluded that the proper spelling of his town was “Prostitz,” a decision that was accepted as authoritative by Moses Sofer, who quoted from Eisenstadt’s responsum several decades later.² For Moses Sofer, Prossnitz had special significance, since he was not only headed a yeshiva there before moving to Strassnitz, Mattersdorf and finally Pressburg, but his first wife, Sarah Jerwitz, also hailed from its Jewish quarter.³ During his seven years in the “Jerusalem of the Hana” (1787-1794), Sofer also came into contact with a number of “Schepsen,” as the adherents of

¹ Meir Eisenstadt, *Panim Me’irot*, vol. I, #21.

² Moses Sofer, *Hatam Sofer*, EH, #36.

³ On his marriage to Sarah Jerwitz in 1785, see *Ozar ha-Sifrut*, III (1889-90), 20-21.

Sabbateanism were popularly known. Indeed, when a Prossnitz Jew cast aspersions on Jacob Emden's books, Moses Sofer immediately understood him to be a Sabbatean.⁴ One of Moses Sofer's students described the town as "full of members of the sect of Shabbetai Zevi."⁵

Gershom Scholem collected numerous references to Sabbatean activity in Prossnitz, a Jewish community that he characterized as "the largest Sabbatean center in Moravia."⁶ Scholem devoted particular attention to Prossnitz, because this center of Sabbateanism in the 18th century also became a center of Haskalah and Reform in the 19th century. As Scholem liked to point out, Leopold Löw, who taught in Prossnitz in the 1830s, viewed Prossnitz as evidence for a nexus between Sabbateanism and Haskalah. With regard to Prossnitz, Löw noted that

Sabbateanism left behind it important anti-rabbinic elements. There are even those who think they can discern in the sons of the Sabbateans, even though they know the Zohar by name alone, and are not versed in the principles of the heretical sect at all, that they nonetheless inherited from their fathers a certain carelessness in the observance of rabbinic customs. They say that some reached

⁴ Jacob Katz, "Towards a Biography of the Hatam Sofer," in *Divine Law in Human Hands* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), 418; Katz cites Hezekiah Feivel Plaut, *Likutei Hever ben Hayyim* (Munkacs, 1879), 1a.

⁵ Jacob Katz, "Relationship between Sabbatianism, Haskalah, and Reform," in *Divine Law in Human Hands* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), 509; Katz cites Hezekiah Feivel Plaut, *Likutei Hever ben Hayyim* (Munkacs, 1879), 1b.

⁶ Gershom Scholem, Review of "M.J. Cohen, *Jacob Emden, a man of controversy*," *Kiryat Sefer* (), 332.

the same conclusions via the study of Lessing and Mendelssohn that their fathers had reached by the study of the Zohar.⁷

Scholem, of course, developed this kernel into an overarching theory in his groundbreaking essay, “Redemption through Sin,” first published in 1937. In the conclusion to this essay, he observed the following:

It was surely no accident that a city like **Prossnitz**, which served as a center for the Haskalah in Moravia upon the movement’s spread there one generation earlier, was also a bastion of Sabbatianism in that country. The leaders of the “School of Mendelssohn,” who were neither Sabbatians themselves, of course, nor under the influence of mysticism at all . . . found ready recruits for their cause in Sabbatian circles, where the world of rabbinic Judaism had already been completely destroyed from within, quite independently of the efforts of secularist criticism.⁸

Significantly, even Jacob Katz, who found numerous loopholes and leaps of faith in Scholem’s overall argument, conceded that the example of Prossnitz demonstrated a nexus between Sabbateanism and Haskalah. In Katz’s words, “Wherever Haskalah encountered a community which contained Sabbatians, the Sabbatians showed a pronounced tendency to follow it. This phenomenon is apparent in the communities of

⁷ Leopold Löw, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II (Szegedin, 1890), 172. Translation adapted from Jacob Katz, “Relationship between Sabbatianism, Haskalah, and Reform,” in *Divine Law in Human Hands* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), 510.

⁸ Gershom Scholem, “Redemption through Sin,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 141.

Bohemia and Moravia, according to the testimony of Leopold Löw, and in particular in the two main cities of Prossnitz and Prague.”⁹

Prossnitz: Moraivan Center of Sabbateanism

In the popular imagination, Prossnitz was associated with Sabbateanism to such an extent that its Jewish inhabitants were popularly known as “Schepsen” – a term derived from the abbreviated form of Shabbetai Zevi (שב"צ). To a large extent, we can thank Juda Leib b. Jacob (c. 1670-1730) for the inexorable connection between Prossnitz and Sabbateanism. This Sabbatean prophet, better known as Leibel Prossnitz (or Prostitz), made Prossnitz his home (and his surname) in the late 17th and early 18th centuries; there, he found many adherents, including R. Meir Eisenstadt, author of *Panim me'ivot*. Though Leibel was excommunicated twice, he seems to have retained a strong following in Prossnitz and elsewhere in Moravia.

When Leibel came to Prossnitz, the ground had already been prepared by Judah Hasid and Hayyim Malakh, Sabbatean preachers who sojourned in Moravia in 1699 on their way from Poland to the Holy Land. They spent considerable time in both Nikolsburg and Prossnitz, where they presumably had an impact on Leibel.

Leibel’s adherents may have included Jonathan Eybeschütz, who studied with R. Meir Eisenstadt – and lived in Prossnitz – at the beginning of the 18th century. In fact, the Mannheim rabbinical court that excommunicated Eybeschütz (and Leibel) in 1725 for alleged Sabbatean activity made mention of Eybeschütz association with Leibel and drew the logical conclusion. When the Emden-Eybeschütz controversy became full-blown in

⁹ Jacob Katz, “Relationship between Sabbatianism, Haskalah, and Reform,” 510.

the mid-18th century, Moravia's Jewish communities consistently sided with Eybeschütz, accusing Jacob Emden of profaning God's name through his unwarranted attacks on the "Angel of God." In 1751, the Nikolsburg Jewish community excommunicated the enemies of Eybeschütz, and the communities of Holleschau, Prossnitz, Neu-Raussnitz, Kremsier, Kromau and Hotzenplotz quickly followed suit. As might be expected, Emden accused the defenders of Eybeschütz – who were overwhelmingly from Moravia – of being Sabbateans themselves.¹⁰

The jury is still out on Jonathan Eybeschütz, and we do not know whether his Moravian defenders were motivated by Sabbatean sympathies or rather by loyalty to a fellow *Landsmann* (his father, Natan Nata, had been rabbi of Eibenschitz – hence the name – and a son was married to the daughter of Gerson Politz, rabbi of Nikolsburg). However, we do know with relative certainty that another son, Wolf Eybeschütz, was a Sabbatean, and that he counted a large number of Moravian Jews among his followers, particularly from Holleschau and Prossnitz. Indeed, it was in Prossnitz that he proclaimed himself the Messiah in 1762.¹¹

For the last decades of the 18th century, we have considerable evidence of Sabbatean activity (or at least accusations of Sabbateanism) in Moravia. This is reflected in the responsa, epistles and sermons of Eleazar Flekeles, Ezekiel Landau, Mordechai Benet and Moses Sofer, which point to Sabbatian activity – real or imagined – in Prossnitz, Holleschau, Gaya, Nikolsburg and Kojetein. In the eyes of Flekeles, Kojetein – where he served as rabbi from 1779 to 1783 – was infested with Sabbateans.

¹⁰ Moritz Duschak, "Die Herschel-Eibenschitz'sche Fehde in Mähren," *Die Neuzeit* (1864): 23, 34-35, 46-47.

¹¹ Oskar Kwasnik-Rabinowicz, "Wolf Eibenschitz," *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in der Tschechoslowakei* 1 (1931), Heft 4, 269-270.

Of course this last period coincides with Jacob Frank's sojourn in Brünn (1773-1784), and it is to this period that I will briefly turn. Peter Beer noted that Frank attracted a particularly large following in Moravia, and it seems that Prossnitz played a role second only to Brünn. Already in 1769, four years before Frank's arrival in Moravia, two Podolian Frankists came to Prossnitz, where – according to Jacob Emden – they were protected by the head of the Jewish community and even allowed to preach in the synagogue.¹² When Frank arrived in Brünn, he took up residence with his cousin, Schoendl Dobruschka, herself a native of Prossnitz.

Soon after his arrival, the private tutor of Schoendl's twelve children, a certain Salomon Gerstl, converted to Catholicism – undertaking a step that was common among Polish Frankists, but apparently quite rare among their Moravian counterparts. Indeed, one of the major differences between Frank's followers in Poland and Moravia is that the former often converted to Christianity, while the latter remained openly practicing Jews. However, there seems to be one glaring exception to this rule: a group conversion that took place in Prossnitz in the summer of 1773.

In a history of the Jewish community of Prossnitz published in 1863, the Moravian rabbi and historian Moritz Duschak noted the following: “A hundred years must have passed since the date when – in a single night – thirty five Jewish souls left the *Judengasse* and converted to Christianity.”¹³ As it turns out, Duschak was slightly off, since only ninety years had passed when he wrote the article, and only twenty six Jews had converted on a single day (though another nine Jews did convert over the following

¹² Jacob Emden, *Sefer Hitabkut* (Lvov), 83b

¹³ Moritz Duschak, “Geschichte der israelitischen Gemeinde zu Prossnitz,” *Ben Chananja* (1863), 522; Duschak also mentions this group conversion in “Die Herschel-Eibenschitz'sche Fehde in Mähren,” *Die Neuzeit* (1864), 46.

ten months). These converts also merited brief mention in Gerson Wolf's *Judentaufen in Oesterreich* (1863), where a document is cited in which one of the converts – Peter Steinbruck – complains to Empress Maria Theresia about Jewish trade restrictions that were still in place, despite his new status as a neophyte.¹⁴ Scholem and others took note of the close proximity between Frank's arrival in Moravia and this mass conversion, which propelled me to search through archives in Vienna, Olomouc (Olmütz), Prostějov (Prossnitz) and Brno (Brünn) for records of the conversions, a search that finally bore. As the Prossnitz baptismal register can attest, six Jewish “families” converted to Catholicism on May 6, 1773, namely:

1. Jacob Steinbock and his three sons
2. Mathias Mandelblüh, his wife and two daughters
3. Peter Steinbruck (who later complained to Maria Theresia), his wife, two daughters and three sons
4. Franz Gottpreis, his wife and daughter
5. Johannes Mandelzweig, his wife and son
6. Franz Abel, his wife, a domestic servant, and two 19-year-old boarders

In total, twenty-six Prossnitz Jews converted, and – as the baptismal register indicates – they all lived in the same house (#34).¹⁵ It appears that Jacob Steinbock was the instigator this group conversion, not only because he was the first Jew to be baptized, but also because we have already encountered him under a different name. Jacob Steinbock

¹⁴ Gerson Wolf, *Judentaufen in Oesterreich* (Vienna, 1863), 78-79.

¹⁵ MZA (Brno), Sbirka matrik, E 67, “Matrica Ecclesia Prostannensis,” ff. 17-18.

was none other than Salomon Gerstl (after baptism), the private tutor of the Dobruschka children in Brünn.¹⁶ It is also possible that there is another connection to Schoendl Doburschka (née Herschl) among the converts. Franz Steinbruch, one of the 19-year-old boarders, was named Tobia Hirschl prior to his baptism.

Prossnitz: Moravian Center of Haskalah and Reform

Prossnitz was also the center of the Haskalah in Moravia, particularly from the 1820s to 1840s. In this period, a small circle of *maskilim* met in the home of Jacob Steinschneider, the father of Mortiz Steinschneider, attracting local *balabatim*, as well as many students from R. Moses Katz Wanfried's renowned yeshiva. Among the participants in this circle were Moritz Steinschneider's uncle Dr. Gideon Brecher, a central figure in the Moravian Haskalah; Rabbi Löb Schwab and his son-in-law, Rabbi Leopold Löw; Rabbi Joseph Weisse, an educational reformer and contributor to *Bikkure ha-Ittim*; Rabbi Hirsch Fassel; and Adolf Jellinek. From the list (a veritable who's who of Habsburg Jewry), it is evident that these individuals were representatives of a conservative, "rabbinic Haskalah" (viz. Raphael Mahler, Michael K. Silber). Many of these *maskilim* collaborated on their scholarly projects. For example, Gideon Brecher's Hebrew commentary on the *Kuzari* (1838-40) included contributions from Fassel and Weisse. His work on circumcision (1845), which defended the ritual but called for the

¹⁶ The document cited by Gerson Wolf lists the Jewish names and baptismal names: Jacob Steinnbock = Salomon Gerstl; Peter Steinbruck = Isak Broch; Johannes Mandelzweig = Salomon Mandel; Franz Gottpres = Marcus Moyses; Mathias Mandelblü = Lazar Abraham; Franz Abel = Lazar Marcus; Franz Steinbruch – Tobia Herschel

elimination of *meziza*, included a foreward by Fassel and a historical essay by Moritz Steinschneider (then in Leipzig).

If we look at the biographies of these Jews who spent considerable time in Prossnitz – as well as other Moravian *maskilim* such as Joseph Flesch (“father of the Moravian [Jewish] enlightenment”) and other contributors to *Bikkure ha-Ittim* with no connection to Prossnitz – there is one experience that ties them all together. It is not a shared Sabbatean past (for which there is no evidence), but rather a youthful sojourn in Prague or Vienna, the major metropolises of the western crownlands, where they established contacts with local *maskilic* circles. Jacob Steinschneider and Joseph Flesch studied in Prague at the turn of the 18th/19th centuries, and members of their children’s generation could be found there throughout the 1820s and 1830s. Many of these Moravian Jews brought the Haskalah back to their home communities, but the well-trodden road to Prague (or Vienna) was not unique to the Jews of Prossnitz.

In fact, the specificity of Prossnitz can be found more in the economic sphere than anywhere else. In the first decades of the 19th century, it was the hub of Moravia’s burgeoning textile industry. Situated at the crossroads of several trading routes that traversed Moravia, Prossnitz had been an important trading center for centuries. By the beginning of the 19th century, however, the activities of a single Jew placed Prossnitz on a whole new level. Veith Ehrenstamm, the son of a small-time cloth merchant, who moved to Prossnitz (from Bohemia) in 1752, became “the most important army purveyor” in the entire monarchy by the end of the Napoleonic Wars. His economic rise began in 1786, when he contracted with the Habsburg army to supply provisions during the second Turkish War. He supplied salt, tobacco, wine, grain, carts, horses and other items, but he

specialized in uniforms, particularly after receiving permission to set up a clothing factory – with the latest machines from England and Holland – in 1801. In 1812, he supplied Moravia's entire uniform quota for the army; between 1820 and 1823, he joined forces with a Jewish army purveyor in Prague to provide new uniforms for all the regiments in the monarchy. From the very beginning the factory employed 3,000 workers, making Prossnitz Moravia's undisputed textile capital in the first half of the 19th century.

Ehrenstamm's prodigious wealth made him the financial pillar of the Prossnitz Jewish community. Not only did he pay 1/12 of the community's entire tax burden, but he also supported the community's religious and educational institutions through generous donations. In the 1820s he bequeathed a new building to the community for use as a religious school and helped endow a school fund so that children from Prossnitz's poorest families could receive proper religious education. (Ehrenstamm's own children, of course, were taught by private tutors.)

More significantly for our topic, Ehrenstamm built himself a private library with well over 200 Hebrew and Aramaic works, comprising more than 500 separate volumes. Perhaps the largest collection of Jewish books in Moravia, Ehrenstamm's library was largely made up of traditional rabbinic literature. However, there were also a number of works that reflected the spirit of the Haskalah. The library contained 15 books on Jewish grammar, 13 books on ethics, philosophy, geography and astronomy and 3 volumes of *Bikkure ha-Ittim*. Ehrenstamm's library, a symbol of social status for its owner, provided an invaluable resource for the intellectually curious in Prossnitz's Jewish community. Though Ehrenstamm's own sons were more enticed by extravagant living than diligent

study, other inhabitants of Prossnitz - like Brecher, Steinschneider, Jellinek, Fassel and Weisse – presumably made use of this valuable resource. Indeed, just as the Berlin Haskalah was unimaginable without the wealth and social aspirations of the Itzig and Friedländer families, the Prossnitz Haskalah depended, to a large extent, on the largess of Veit Ehrenstamm.

Another specificity of Prossnitz is related to the Sabbatean/Frankist heritage, but *not* in the manner presented by Scholem and Katz. Scholem focused on the anti-rabbinic tendencies of Sabbateanism, arguing that the *maskilim* found “ready recruits for their cause in Sabbatian circles, where the world of rabbinic Judaism had already been completely destroyed from within.” Katz, as already mentioned, agreed that the Haskalah found fertile ground in places like Prossnitz, where Sabbateanism had made considerable inroads in the 18th century.

I would argue, however, that Scholem and Katz placed too much emphasis on the alleged religious nihilism of the Sabbateans in Prossnitz, while ignoring the impact of the group conversion to Catholicism in 1773. As we know from Moritz Duschak, many of these converts and their offspring remained in Prossnitz well into the nineteenth century.¹⁷ If he could identify these families a full ninety years after the group conversion, it is possible that they still maintained social, economic and familial bonds with their Jewish relatives, particularly as Moravian society became more secularized throughout the nineteenth century. I set out to map the social and economic networks that tied Jews and former Jews together, speculating that continued relations between these groups may have brought Jews closer to their Christian neighbors.

¹⁷ Moritz Duschak, “Geschichte der israelitischen Gemeinde zu Prossnitz,” *Ben Chananja* (1863), 522

Using a wide range of birth, marriage and death registries preserved in the Moravian state archives, I set out to trace the descendants of the Prossnitz converts and determine whether there were any noticeable patterns. It was impossible to trace many of the individuals (e.g. Freund, Freundin, Glückselig, Sonnenschein and Rosenblüh) past the first generation, but I had much greater luck with the larger families that converted in 1773. These include the Abel, Gottpreis, Mandelblüh, Mandelzweig, and Steinbruch families, which constituted the majority of the converts. I observed the following patterns.

1. *Endogamy in the first generation.* In the 1790s, there were three marriages among the converts or their children. There was an Abel-Mandelblüh marriage, an Abel-Steinbruch marriage, and a Mandelblüh-Mandelzweig marriage. This should not come as too much of a surprise, because the families of converts may have been on intimate terms before the conversions and the conversionary experience certainly served as a bonding experience for many of these individuals. Interestingly, the pattern of endogamy does not continue past the second generation.
2. *Departure from Prossnitz.* Moravia's Jews were beset by restrictions on marriage, residence and occupation, but conversion to Catholicism, for all intents and purposes, annulled these restrictions. In addition to the Familiants Laws, which placed severe limitations on marriage, Moravia's Jews bristled under the ban against residing outside of Moravia's fifty-two Jewish communities. Prossnitz Jews were oriented toward nearby Olmütz, a royal free town and district capital, which held important weekly fairs. Jews, however, had been expelled

from Olmütz in 1454 and they were not allowed to stay there overnight, except with special permission. Not surprisingly, members of the Mandelzweig and Mandelblüh families settled in Olmütz in the 1770s and 1780s, now that their religion was no longer an impediment to doing so. Franz Karl Mandelzweig (1793-1864), the first-born son of Franz Mandelzweig and Mariana Mandelblüh, settled in Brünn around 1821, and went on to become an acclaimed German-language playwright.

3. *Orientation toward German culture and politics.* Descendants of converts from the Mandelzweig and Mandelblüh families became involved in politics, expressing a striking preference for German liberal politics. Franz Mandelblüh (1807-1878), grandson of Matthias Mandelblüh, was a member of the Moravian Diet, and his son-in-law, Joseph von Engel (1830-1900) was even mayor of Olmütz. Several other Mandelzweigs and Mandelblühs were also elected to the Olmütz town council, all of them as German Liberals. It is noteworthy that the political and cultural proclivities of these individuals were almost indistinguishable from those of Moravia's Jews in the second half of the nineteenth century.
4. *Identified as "Jewish" by others.* In addition to sharing political and cultural proclivities with Moravia's Jews, these converts and their descendants retained identifiably "Jewish" surnames. This was the case with Mandelzweig and Mandelblüh, in particular. As a result, the male descendants of these families were sometimes identified as (or mistaken for) Jews, often in the context of contested municipal elections. As late as 1944, a history of the Jews of Olmütz

even mentioned their forebears – the converts who left Prossnitz – as the first Jews to settle Olmütz in modern times.¹⁸

In addition to mapping the families of the converts, I also set out to trace the descendants of the converts' relatives who remained Jewish in 1773. I wanted to see if there was continued social contact between these two groups. Based on my exploration of the various registries, I have not found evidence of continued social relations (e.g. in the form of marriage), but I have detected a continued “social memory” of the mass conversion in 1773. Indeed, Jewish scholars such as Moritz Duschak and Gerson Wolf wrote about the conversions in the 1860s, indicating that the memory of 1773 was still alive almost a century later. More significantly, these conversions were still remembered in 1940s, thanks in part, to the distinct family names adopted by the converts – and the prominent role many of them played in German politics. In fact, the above-mentioned history of the Jews of Olmütz, published in 1944, not only identified Mandelzweig, Mandelblüh and some of the other converts as Jews, but also as “Sabbateans.”

In the end, my modification of Scholem’s thesis about the nexus between Sabbateanism and Haskalah/Reform remains speculative. It is striking, however, that Jews and former Jews in Prossnitz took similar paths in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but these paths were two or three generation apart. As Christians, the Mandelzweigs and Mandelblühs could settle in Olmütz, and they did so already in the 1780s. There, they engaged in commerce and became pillars of Olmütz’s German-speaking economic and political elite. For Prossnitz’s Jews, settlement in Olmütz remained off-limits until the Revolution of 1848, but once they were allowed to settle there as Jews, they did so in large numbers, and they quickly becoming the pillars of

¹⁸ Walter Haage, *Olmütz und die Juden* (Olmütz: L. Kullil, 1944).

Olmütz's German-speaking economic, cultural and political elite. Indeed, it was in Olmütz, first and foremost, where the descendants of the Prossnitz converts mingled with the descendants of their relatives who had remained Jewish. In retrospect, one could even argue that the cohort of Prossnitz converts blazed the trail for their former coreligionists. The former were "emancipated" when they adopted Catholicism, the latter when they were granted equal rights in 1849, but both groups were united in their wholehearted embrace of German culture and German liberalism in the second half of the nineteenth century.