

# Between History and Legend. Menachem Man Amelander as the Guard of Jewish Memory

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## Abstract

In the early modern period, Jewish historiography moved from the Hebrew domain into the Yiddish one. Jewish writers have succeeded to match the historical literature to the particular needs of their audience. The most popular Yiddish chronicle of this kind was written in Amsterdam in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Menachem Man Amelander, following both the Jewish and Christian genre. This paper briefly surveys the genre characteristics of this chronicle and the way it served the purpose of guarding Jewish memory and tradition.

## Zusammenfassung

In der Frühen Neuzeit verschob sich die jüdische Historiographie von einer hebräischsprachigen Geschichtsschreibung zu einer jiddischsprachigen. Jüdische Autoren gelang es, die historische Literatur an die besonderen Bedürfnisse ihres Publikums anzupassen. Die bekannteste jiddische Chronik dieser Art wurde im 18. Jahrhundert von Menachem Man Amelander in Amsterdam verfasst, der für sein Werk sowohl Elemente des jüdischen als auch des christlichen Genres entlehnte. Dieser Artikel umreißt zunächst die Genre-Merkmale dieser Chronik. Weiterhin wird der Frage nachgegangen, wie diese Schrift ihrem Zweck diene, jüdische Erinnerung und Tradition zu bewahren.

## Introduction

The popular view that modern Jewish historiography began in Germany about 1820 with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* seems to be well-established among scholars. However, various present scholarly discussions reveal that Jewish historiography was an ongoing phenomenon in the early modern period. Historians have generally focused on the 16<sup>th</sup> century and claimed in common that this century was an incidental or ultimate period, after which Jewish historical writing decays until the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*<sup>1</sup>. Yet, when

1 On the controversy of the emergence of the early modern Jewish historiography see: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Second Edition, vol. 9, (Jerusalem, 2007), p. 158; Y. H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, (Seattle/London, 1982); a German edition *Zachor: erinnere Dich! Jüdische Geschichte und jüdisches Gedächtnis*, (Berlin, 1988); S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 6, (New York, 1958); M. Rosman, *How Jewish is Jewish History?*, (Oxford, 2007); R. Bon-

discussing Jewish historiography in the early modern period, 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>-century chronicles, history books and historical poetry should also be taken into account<sup>2</sup>.

The terms ‘historiography’, ‘historical writing’ or ‘historical literature’ refer generally – in Jewish as well as non-Jewish scholarly discourse – to non-fiction accounts of historical events and the study of how historians themselves over time understood, recorded, approached, and conceptualized history. This broad and universal definition relies only in the context of cultural and historical factors. It does not classify the genre regarding its structure, its language or discourse management, thus opening historical literature to various text types and styles, especially that of early modern period.

In this paper, I will focus on Menachem Man Amelander's *Sberis Yisroel* as the most important Jewish history book from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, I will try to consider its literary genre, which obfuscates historical reality by applying fictional elements, such as myths, hagiographical legends, parables and tales. This work was primarily printed in Yiddish (Amsterdam 1743) as a second part to the 9<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew chronicle *Sefer Yosippon*<sup>3</sup>. It became very popular among Jewish readers in the Ashkenazic Diaspora, ran into several editions in Yiddish and was even translated into Hebrew and Dutch<sup>4</sup>. The editions were often updated to the date of republication by other Jewish historians, who are presented as successors of the earlier authors<sup>5</sup>.

This work was considered as a very interesting source for Jewish cultural and social life, introducing a history of individual local Jewish communities, separated from the predominantly Christian society, regarding various cultural and economic dependencies. The author described ancient and medieval Jewish history accurately, with both a rich and unusually interesting description of Ashkenazi communities – until the decline of individual centers of the Jewish

fil, ‘How Golden was the Age of the Renaissance in Jewish Historiography?’, in: A. Rapaport-Albert (ed.), *Essays in Jewish Historiography*, (Atlanta 1991), pp. 78-102; idem, ‘Jewish Attitudes Toward History and Historical Writing in Pre-Modern Times’ in: *Jewish History* 1 (1997), pp. 7-40; L. Hecht, ‘The beginning of modern Jewish historiography: Prague – A center on the periphery’ in: *Jewish History* 19 (2005), pp. 347-373.

2 B. Wallet, ‘Ongoing History: The Successor Tradition in Early Modern Jewish Historiography’, in: *Studia Rosenthaliana* 40 (2007-2008), p. 184.

3 L. Fuks, ‘Menachem Man ben Salomo Halevi und sein Yiddisch Geschitswerk *Scherit Jisrael*’, in: *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Philologie*, 100 (1981), p. 172.

4 See H. Hominer (ed. and tr.), *Sefer She'erit Yisrael ba-Sbalem*, (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 17-28.

5 For instance, such as Abraham Treibitsch with his *Korot ha-Ittim* and Abraham Braatbard with his *Ayn Naye Kornayk*, see: B. Wallet, ‘Ongoing History’, *passim*.

community prior to the Haskalah movement. Thus, his chronicle was discussed by non-literary researches, mainly historians, who used the information in it to broaden their knowledge and understanding of historical, geographical, anthropological, social, cultural and political issues of European and world Jewish life in that period<sup>6</sup>. However, they generally had negative attitudes towards Amelander's *opus magnum*, claiming that its value is rather poor, both from a methodological as well as from a linguistic point of view<sup>7</sup>. Yet, L. Fuks has highlighted the problem of its genre and its impact on Jewish historical writing in Netherlands<sup>8</sup>. Unfortunately, there is still a lack of wide and deep literary researches on this issue.

In what follows, I will examine the historical book written by Amelander, aiming to define the mutual components by which it can be regarded as a 'historiography'. The characteristics analyzed include language, style, narrative structure, and the role of the author as a reliable historian. The nature of these components could reveal the needs that brought about the writing of Jewish chronicles in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## Characteristics of Amelander's *Sheris Yisroel*

### 1. Language

As mentioned above, the chronicle was written in Yiddish (Western Yiddish), an outstanding feature, given the fact that it was the daily spoken language of Ashkenazi Jews all over Europe and no 'scholarly' language such as Hebrew<sup>9</sup>. Writing in Hebrew was preserved in principle for high and formal texts – such as rabbinical discussions, poetry and rhymed prose – and readers of this kind of literature used to be only well-educated Jewish men. Since the

6 For instance, see: S. Dubnov, *Weltgeschichte des jüdischen Volkes*, (Berlin, 1928); S. Baron Wittmayer, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, (New York 1952); H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart*, (Leipzig, 1900), reprint of the edition of last hand (1900): Berlin (1998).

7 Y. H. Yerushalmi, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

8 L. Fuks, 'Menachem Man' pp. 170-186; idem, 'Yiddish Historiography in the Time of the Dutch Republic', in: *Studia Rosenthaliana* 15 (1981), pp. 9-19; L. and R. Fuks, 'Jewish Historiography in Netherlands in the 17th and 18th centuries', in: *Saló Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume*, (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 433-466.

9 On Yiddish in the early modern period see, for example: M. Weinreich, *Geschichte fun der jidiszer szprach*, (New York, 1973); S. Berger, 'Functioning Within a Diasporic Third Space: The Case of Early Modern Yiddish', in: *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 15 (2008), pp. 68-86.

book printing revolution, Yiddish became a written language of women and uneducated men. Yiddish books printed in this period were aimed at a wider public and mainly dealt with popular devotion, ethics (*musar*) and practical life. Over time Jewish scholar also attempted to use Yiddish in their works in order to present their knowledge to a broader audience<sup>10</sup>.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the transfer process of Jewish knowledge, from the Hebrew domain into the Yiddish one, applied also to Jewish historiography. The origins and the growing popularity of historical writing in Yiddish could be explained by the development of publishing activity among Jews as well as by the growth of the audience of the so called vernacular literature for which it was the carried. Yiddish chronicles and historical works served partially as literature for the common people. Jacob ben Mattathias, publisher of Yiddish translation of *Tam ve-Yashar* in 1670 declared on its title page: “Because in this book are related the deeds that God, Blessed Be He, did from the creation of the world until Joshua brought the people of Israel into Palestine, we have translated it from Hebrew into Judeo-German, so that all may know the miracles and wonders.”<sup>11</sup> An anonymous author of a Yiddish translation of *Sbvet Yehudab* described his publishing intention in foreword in similar words: “Well translated in brief, for reading by common householders, men and women. One will find in it wonderful stories that happened to our ancestors in exile, and how many times they sanctified God’s name... With it man will awaken his heart to the fear of God. May God further preserve His People and send the redeemer, the Messiah, Son of David speedily, in our days. Amen.”<sup>12</sup>

Hence, the fact that Amelander wrote his chronicle in Yiddish indicates that he wanted to attract a large but unambitious target audience, and that he considered himself to be an agent in transmitting historical knowledge.

## 2. Style

The chronicle was written in prose. Amelander’s style of writing is living and colorful; the work presented as the second part of the Hebrew *Sefer Yosippon* received in Yiddish the character of an ‘ethical book’. It contained numerous

10 For more details see, Ch. Turniansky, ‘Yiddish and the Transmission of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe’, in: *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 15 (2008), pp. 5-18.

11 I. Zinberg, *Old Yiddish Literature from its Origin to the Haskalah period*, vol. 7, (New York, 1975), p. 232.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 230.

didactic excursions and hagiographic biographies of great Jewish scholars, martyrs, and heroes, as was common among the Ashkenazim. The author employed colloquial and spoken language, which is reached in content. "His talent as a writer makes his educational work read like an oriental story book."<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Narrative Structure

Amelander divided his chronicle into 34 chapters, which follow chronologically and geographically. Each chapter begins with a short abstract. The narrative structure of the book emulates the structure of historical events themselves and is characterized by linearity. The linearity is maintained, despite the incidental and disorderly nature of the collected data. The writer not only placed the information side by side, but also gave it the same significance. The names of places he described, and events happened there, were arranged in the same synoptic way.

### 4. The role of author as a reliable historian

Besides the preface written in Hebrew in the first person, where Amelander explained his role as a successor of medieval Jewish historiographers, *Sheris Yisroel* was written in the third person. He called himself an ordinary man, who cannot be compared with such important men as, for instance, Yoseph ben Gorion, mistakenly recognized by him as an author of *Sefer Yosippon*<sup>14</sup>. The prominent scholar, historian, translator, Hebrew grammarian and one of the most well-known Hebrew and Yiddish publishers in Holland, Menahem Man ben Salomon Halevi Amelander,<sup>15</sup> was born in Amsterdam to a rich Jewish family in about 1698 and studied for a few years in Prague. He translated numerous popular Hebrew books into Yiddish, including a bilingual edition of the Bible which was published in collaboration with his brother-in-law Eliezer Zussman Rodelsheim (Amsterdam, 1725-9).

He was therefore also familiar with the earlier Hebrew historical literature and could compare various Jewish chronicles and accounts in order to choose the most 'truly' version of Jewish history. The number of sources used by Am-

13 L. Fuks, 'The Yiddish Historiography', p. 14.

14 *Sheris Yisroel* (Amsterdam, 1743), introduction, without page numbers.

15 For more details about Amelander's life see, Z. Reizen, *Leksikon fun der yiddisher literatur un prese*, (Warszawa, 1914), p. 58-59; L. Fuks, 'Menachem Man', *passim*.

lander is quite impressive. Well known among his copied Hebrew sources are e.g. *Divre ha-yamim*, written by Yosef ha-Kohen, *Shevet Yehuda* by Shlomo ibn Verga and *Tzemach David* by David Gans. However, his most important source was written by Jacques Basnage<sup>16</sup>. This Huguenot pastor was the first to write a universal Jewish history since Flavius Josephus and presented his *Histoire des Juifs de Jésus-Christ jusqu'à présent as the successor to Josephus' oeuvre*. Amelander used the Dutch edition of this work (Rotterdam, 1706).

Although relying heavily on his sources, Amelander also developed a scientific method for the study of history and is therefore considered to be the founder of modern Jewish historiography. For the main part of the period he described that a research including archival materials has not been feasible, since the temporal and geographical distance was too large. Yet, the reliability of Amelander's work is stated clearly in its introduction. As he claimed, it should accept the truth from the one who says it. "Truth remains truth. You can mention from whom you received it."<sup>17</sup> And he attempted to do this best, by including in his narration Jewish legends as well, as for example about Emperor Irene or beginning of Sephardic settlement in Amsterdam, in the chronicle.

It is obvious, then, that the Christian genre was not taken by Amelander 'as is', but rather changed to suit the different, Jewish purposes of its writers and their readers. Beginnings and endings of paragraphs by Christian authors are a strategic point, where an exclamation of thanking the Lord or asking for his blessing immediately marks the author as a pious man, attributing all of his work to God and makes the work acceptable for Jews.

## Conclusion

Amelander employed various sources of both Jewish and Christian provenience in his writing. He used a comparatively rich critical apparatus presenting the wide political and cultural development of European Jewry. He was mainly influenced by the Jewish history of J. Basnage and the impact of the Dutch cultural environment which induced him to write in Yiddish, the language of

16 Although, the first Jewish author to address the issue of the legitimacy of using non-Jewish authors was the Hebrew writer Azariah de Rossi, who selected and translated this type of texts, after careful editing which might often be sheer manipulation.

17 Sheris Yisroel, introduction.

the common people<sup>18</sup>. He copied and developed Hebrew historical works in order to accomplish a very important task: giving common readers entertainment and ethical instruction. He brought knowledge from the Hebrew corpus of the religious establishment into the language of the whole Ashkenazi community. Furthermore, he imported knowledge from the Christian society into the Jewish community by using various Christian sources adapted to Jewish tradition. He can be considered as an agent or intermediary, who transmitted historical awareness from the Hebrew and from non-Jewish domains into the Yiddish. His chronicle contains various types of narrative, including historical writing *sensu stricte* as well as vernacular legends. For these reasons, his work constitutes an unusually valuable investigative material for scholars studying the history of Jewish 'collective memory'. Undoubtedly, Menachem Man created a significant work which can be solely situated in the genre of historical literature.

18 See L. Fuks, 'Menachem Man', p. 170.