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JEWISH AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING. MEMOIRS OF MOSES VASERTSUG* (c. 1760–1832)

Abstract

The article discusses the memoirs of Moses Vasertsug (c. 1760–1832) – an extremely interesting historical source, brilliantly demonstrating processes and phenomena in Jewish society at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Vasertsug received a traditional religious education and performed related functions in Jewish communities, first in Pomerania (Karlino, Gryfino), and later in Greater Poland (Kórnik) and Mazovia (Płock). He continued to do so in the post-partition period, but the functions he performed took on a new, quasi-official character. The memoirs show the transformation of the previous occupations performed by the Jews, as well as the new opportunities for settlement and economic activity that opened up for them during the post-partition period. The memoirs also show that Jewish autobiographical writing is not necessarily the result of acculturation and departure from Jewish tradition.

Keywords: Moses Vasertsug, turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jewish communities, Jewish autobiographical writing

There are few Jewish memoirs from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the pre-partition period. They have an exceptional value for researchers, stemming not only from the fact that they are rare but also from the fact that the information they contain is unique and not

* In primary sources and secondary literature, we encounter various forms of writing this surname. In non-Jewish sources we most often encounter the forms Wasserzug and Wassercug (both also with one letter s), but also Wassertzug or Waserkuk. I consistently use a spelling that is a transcription of the Yiddish surname appearing in the memoirs, rendering it in Polish as ‘Wasercug’, and in English – according to the transliteration rules adopted by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research – as ‘Vasertsug’.

found in other sources from the period. In the early modern era – due to the lack of permanent names – the vast majority of Jews remain virtually anonymous to researchers. The exceptions may be authors of religious works or Jews who constantly collaborated with non-Jewish institutions (e.g., held positions in magnate estates) and thus were recorded in non-Jewish sources. Memoirs, on the other hand, provide an opportunity not only to trace the fates and careers of the authors but also to learn about the mechanisms of their decision-making or even their way of thinking and perceiving reality.¹ The motives and method of writing down the text could also interest researchers.

One of the three significant autobiographical texts from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, along with the memoirs of Ber of Bolechow and the memoirs of Solomon Maimon, is the memoirs of Moses Vasertsug (c. 1760–1832). The text of these latest memoirs is known from an edition by Heinrich Loewe (1869–1951) – a publicist, researcher of Jewish folklore, librarian, and Zionist activist, married to Vasertsug’s great-great-granddaughter, Johanna Auerbach. Loewe published the Hebrew text of memoirs in 1910.² The memoirs were twice translated into German. The first translation by Heinrich Loewe was never published,³ while a translation by Johann Maier, edited and introduced by Jacob Goldberg, was published in 2001.⁴ Recently, the text of the memoir was republished with an

¹ The extent to which early modern memoirs reflect the individuality and mentality of their authors remains debatable. Kaspar von Greyerz notes that autobiographical texts from the early modern period speak more about groups rather than individuals, documenting not the individuality of the authors but their social relationships, *id.*, ‘Ego-Documents: The Last Word?’, *German History*, xxviii, 3 (2010), 277, 281.

² ‘Memoiren eines polnischen Juden’, ed. by Heinrich Loewe, *Jahrbuch der Jüdisch-Literarischen Gesellschaft*, 8 (1910), 87–114 and 440–6. The text was also published as a separate booklet: *Memoiren eines polnischen Juden. Lebenserinnerungen von Mosche Wasserzug. Nach der Originalhandschrift herausgegeben von Heinrich Loewe* (Berlin, 1911).

³ A handwritten translation of the memoirs is in the legacy of Elias Auerbach, Vasertsug’s great-great-grandson. The title page bears the title ‘Lebensgeschichte von Mosche Wasserzug, und die edle Gesinnung seines Vaters R. Isserl. Ins Deutsche übertragen von Heinrich Loewe’, as well as a second variant of the title ‘Wasserzug, Mosche: Lebenserinnerungen’ (Zentralarchiv zur Erforschung der Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland [Heidelberg], Bestand B. 2/28 Nr. 11).

⁴ *Die Memoiren des Moses Wasserzug*, ed. by Jakob Goldberg, transl. Johann Maier (Leipzig, 2001).

accompanying Polish translation and an extensive introduction by Anna Michałowska-Mycielska.⁵

The value of Vasertsug's memoirs as an extremely interesting historical source was pointed out a long time ago by Jakub Goldberg.⁶ He emphasised that it is a unique monument of Hebrew writing from the time of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, much less known than the memoirs of Solomon Maimon and Ber of Bolechow, which were written at a similar time. "They have been ignored by historians and researchers of Hebrew literature", he wrote, "both groups having disregarded the possibility of expanding the source base of research into the history of Polish Jews and their culture and aspects of the Polish Commonwealth's history linked with Jewish questions".⁷ Indeed, the story of Moses Vasertsug is not only interesting in its own right but also brilliantly illustrates broader processes and phenomena characteristic of Jewish society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

STORY OF THE MEMOIRIST'S LIFE

Moses Vasertsug came from Greater Poland [Wielkopolska], from the town of Skoki, located about 40 kilometers northeast of Poznań. A census taken in 1765 recorded 372 Jews in Skoki,⁸ which accounted for about 40 per cent of the town's population. The date of Vasertsug's birth is difficult to establish unequivocally. It is not given in the memoir itself, but compiling the chronology of the events described, the age of the memoirist's children, as well as information from the Płock vital records (although they are also imprecise), it seems most accurate to place the date of his birth around 1760.

⁵ *Mojżesz Wasercug (ok. 1760–1832) i jego pamiętnik*, ed. by Anna Michałowska-Mycielska, transl. Aleksandra Czarnecka (Warszawa, 2022).

⁶ Jakub Goldberg, 'Wokół pamiętników Żydów polskich z XVIII wieku. Pamiętnik Mojżesza Wasercuga z Wielkopolski', in Łukasz Kądziela, Wojciech Kriegseisen, and Zofia Zielińska (eds), *Trudne stulecia. Studia z dziejów XVII i XVIII wieku ofiarowane Profesorowi Jerzemu Michalskiemu w siedemdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin* (Warszawa, 1994), 206–14. This text was also published in English as '18th Century Memoirs of Polish Jews. Memoirs of Mojżesz Wasercug from Great Poland', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 76 (1997), 19–29.

⁷ Goldberg, '18th Century Memoirs', 21.

⁸ Józef Kleczyński and Franciszek Kluczycki (eds), *Liczba głów żydowskich w Koronie z taryfy roku 1765* (Kraków, 1898), 7.

Moses came from a merchant family, and so did his wife Keyla. The economic character of Greater Poland was the reason that local Jews were commonly engaged in trade. Compared to other regions, Greater Poland was much more urbanised, and the towns here were not as distinctly agricultural as in the eastern areas of the Commonwealth. In Greater Poland, Jews primarily resided in cities and engaged in typical urban occupations: trade and crafts, while 'typical' Jewish occupations such as innkeeper and arendator had a small share in the occupational structure of Jews in Greater Poland.⁹ It was also a region with a very dense network of fairs, unparalleled in other regions of the Commonwealth. According to Barbara Grochulska's calculations, in the second half of the eighteenth century, out of a total of 390 fairs in the entire Commonwealth, Silesia, and the Prussian borderland, 102 were in Greater Poland, and were of national importance. Significantly, the dates of fairs in Greater Poland – unlike those held in the eastern territories of the Commonwealth – were evenly distributed throughout the year.¹⁰ In addition, in many centres local markets played an important role.

Moses' father, Iserl (Israel), traded at fairs, as he could not find a sufficient outlet for his goods in a small town like Skoki. Such journeys undertaken by merchants meant that fathers and husbands were absent from their homes for days or even weeks at a time, which, as one might assume, seriously disrupted family life. Vasertsug describes how they waited with a meal for their father to return from the fair. By the way, he also notes the character of his parents – he emphasises that the custom in his family home was to eat meals together with the servants, with everyone eating the same food. Emphasising this may indicate that this was not a common custom.

Describing his parents, the memoirist particularly exposes their charitable activities. Moses' father never refused the needy; even though he was not very rich, he belonged to the middle-income class. Vasertsug also writes that his mother, Tsipra (Tsipora), was

⁹ Jerzy Topolski, 'Uwagi o strukturze gospodarczo-społecznej Wielkopolski w XVIII wieku, czyli dlaczego na jej terenie nie było żydowskich karczmarzy', in Jerzy Topolski and Krzysztof Modelski (eds), *Żydzi w Wielkopolsce na przestrzeni dziejów* (Poznań, 1995), 71–82.

¹⁰ Barbara Grochulska, 'Jarmarki w handlu polskim w drugiej połowie XVIII wieku', *Przegląd Historyczny*, lxiv, 4 (1973), 802–7.

also sensitive to the needs of the poor. It was on her initiative that Yehuda Leib, a poor young man from Wronki, her hometown, was taken in. Living together under one roof created a quasi-fraternal bond between the two boys, which lasted throughout their lives. When, after many years, Moses settled in Płock, he entrusted his young son-in-law Barukh Mendel for education to Yehuda Leib, who at that time became rabbi in Sierpc and later in Gąbin.

Moses received a traditional Jewish education. His parents sent him to cheder, and after his marriage supported him in Torah study under the guidance of a local rabbi. Considering that Moses married at a not-so-young age (18) and that his father died shortly thereafter, we can assume that in this case, the period of maintenance of the young couple by the parents [Yid. *kest*] did not last very long.

A new stage in Vasertsug's life began after the death of his father. The orphaned young man took up various casual or more permanent means of earning a living to support his family. He moved around and lived in communities in Greater Poland and Pomerania, leaving his wife and children in his hometown of Skoki. This stage of the memoirist's life seems to have lasted about 10 years until he took a position in Kórnik in 1791.

Initially, following in his father's footsteps and probably taking advantage of his business contacts, he tried his hand at the wool and clothing trade. However, he had no merchant skills and quickly lost all his wealth. This degradation must have been shaming since he decided to go to another country where no one knew him and to engage in ritual slaughter and teaching children. He prepared for his departure by learning the profession of ritual slaughterer [Heb. *shohet*] for nine months in Poznań, where he enjoyed the hospitality of his relative, a native of Skoki, during that time. After completing his education, he travelled to Frankfurt on the Oder River, where the famous fairs were held three times a year, drawing merchants from all over Europe. Vasertsug described in his memoirs the specific labour market that operated at the Frankfurt fair in the month of Tamuz, the one that began on the Monday after St Margaret's day (20 July). At that time, envoys of German Jewish communities looking for personnel, primarily teachers, ritual slaughterers, and cantors, as well as those interested in finding such a position themselves, were drawn to Frankfurt. This practice, unknown in the Polish territories, was due to a shortage of suitable candidates in the respective German

communities.¹¹ On the other hand, in the central and eastern territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, an 'overproduction' of educated people, including yeshiva graduates, made it much more difficult to find a position, especially permanent and well-paid ones.

Vasertsug obtained a position in Gryfino (Germ. Greifenhagen) in West Pomerania. According to the memoirist's account, fifteen Jewish families lived there, which was still a large number compared to the many towns in the region, which had two or three Jewish families.¹² Vasertsug served as a teacher [Heb. *melamed*] and ritual slaughterer, drawing a fixed salary for this and receiving fees from family ceremonies such as weddings and circumcisions. The memoirs show not only the aggregate of many communal functions but also the taking up of various other means of earning income by those employed to augment insufficient wages. In Gryfino, such an opportunity for additional earning was provided by Vasertsug's lending money at interest to non-Jews, with the custom being that the money needed to start the teachers' lending business was received from the residents as an interest-free loan, which they returned once they became rich. Vasertsug's memoirs also show how many problems were associated with ritual slaughter and the production of kosher meat, which caused conflicts with residents and, above all, with local butchers.

Vasertsug stayed in Gryfino for about two and a half years while his wife remained with their children in Skoki. Unfortunately, he lost all the money he earned during this time by running a loan business. However, when he returned to his hometown after the end of his contract, his friends turned to him with requests for a loan, which was due to the apparently widespread belief that he could accumulate wealth after working in German communities. Nevertheless, his stay in Gryfino enabled him to learn about the realities of Jewish life in Prussia, which proved decisive in obtaining a position in subsequent communities – in Kórnik and Płock.

Vasertsug came to Kórnik in 1791, this time taking his wife and children with him. At that time, there was a prosperous Jewish

¹¹ According to Daniel Stone, in the mid-eighteenth century, 500 Polish-born teachers worked in Prussia, *id.*, 'Knowledge of Foreign Languages among Eighteenth-Century Polish Jews', *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*, 10 [1997], 207.

¹² In 1782, Gryfino (Ger. Greifenhagen) had a population of 2,762, including 83 Jews, Goldberg, 'Wokół pamiętników', 211.

community in the town. According to the Prussian census of 1793, the town had 336 Jewish residents, who made up about 20 per cent of the total population.¹³ Vasertsug came to Kórnik with virtually no money. The memoirs show the practice of not paying communal officials in Kórnik, where a newly admitted person did not receive a salary from the communal coffers. Vasertsug survived this period with the help of his friend Tsvi Hirsh, thanks to whom he ended up in Kórnik, and who supplied him with all the necessary products.

In Kórnik, Vasertsug performed various functions. He was a cantor, secretary, and tax collector. When Kórnik, along with the territory seized in the second partition of Poland, came under Prussian rule (1793), he became even more valuable to the Kórnik community because of his knowledge of the German language and familiarity with the functioning of the Prussian administration. In turn, for Prussian officials just beginning their activities in the newly occupied territories, he played an important role as a translator and a guide to local realities.

Vasertsug was also a ritual slaughterer in Kórnik. This function was the most troublesome for him, as it not only involved the collection of fees but also exposed him to conflicts with butchers. Quarrels and brawls with butchers were also the cause of the memoirist's severe illness, and reflections during his illness made him decide to leave Kórnik and look for a place where he would not be burdened with slaughtering obligations.

Vasertsug decided to move to Płock, where, as he heard while in Poznań, they were looking for a man familiar with the customs of Prussia. This probably happened in 1795 or early 1796, shortly after the Third Partition (1795), when Płock became the capital of New East Prussia province [Neuostpreußen]. A Prussian census compiled in 1793–94, that is, shortly before Vasertsug's arrival, described Płock as a medium-sized town with 348 houses, including only 30 brick ones. The town was home to 862 Jews, comprising 44 per cent of the total population.¹⁴

In the memoirs, we find information that Vasertsug was to serve in Płock as a syndic [Heb. *shtadlan*] and trustee. On the other hand,

¹³ *Opisy miast polskich z lat 1793–1794*, ed. Jan Wąsicki, parts i–ii (Poznań, 1962), i, 178.

¹⁴ *Opisy miast polskich*, ii, 1049–54.

a letter from the authorities [Kriegs- und Domänenkammer] of New East Prussia Province to the king from 1796 contains a request to approve Moses Israel of Kórnik near Poznań for the position of beadle [Heb. *shames*] of the Jewish community in Płock. This beadle was to hold the position of public notary of the Jewish community, and his duties were to write all agreements and contracts between Jews and collect certain Jewish taxes.¹⁵ This shows that the Prussian authorities – although Jews were not allowed to hold public offices – created quasi-official positions to enable administrative and judicial actions against the Jewish population.

Vasertsug himself, describing his activities in the memoirs, stresses – probably exaggerating his role – that the management of the Płock community was based on him, and that the communal leaders had complete trust in him and greatly valued his work. He also writes that Prussian officials turned to him whenever they needed something written or translated into German. Gaining the goodwill and appreciation of the people of the Płock community was crowned by social stability and the proper delivery of daughters in marriage. Of particular importance was the marriage of his daughter Eydel to an orphan, Barukh Mendel Auerbach, related to Yitshak Yitsik Cohen, who was a friend of the memoirist. The marriage tightened the existing bonds of friendship and also had a charitable dimension when, instead of a son-in-law from a wealthy family, the father-in-law took a poor young man under his roof.

After several years, Vasertsug's harmonious cooperation with the leaders of the Płock community ended. One of the reasons for the conflict was that Vasertsug was ordered to replace an ailing ritual slaughterer and perform slaughtering – work that had suffered him in his previous position in Kórnik and from which he wanted to free himself by moving to Płock. The memoirist also mentions the accusations of fraud levelled against him and the scrutiny of the accounts he kept, which eventually prompted him to go into business for himself, providing a livelihood for himself and his household.

New opportunities were opened to Vasertsug by the rebuilding of Płock begun by the Prussian authorities. Plans for the regulation and extension of the town were drawn up by Prussian builders, and in 1799 the demolition of the fortification walls began, starting with

¹⁵ *Mojżesz Wasercug (ok. 1760–1832)*, 97–8 (Appendix 1).

those that surrounded the castle hill with the cathedral.¹⁶ Vasertsug decided to build an inn and, in 1803, purchased land behind the town walls for this purpose, where, according to the plans, a large street was to be built. We can wonder here to what extent information about the town's development plans was widely known to residents, and to what extent it was the result of the memoirist's quasi-official contacts with Prussian officials. The new street was created on the site of the former moat, which had been filled in, and in time was called Ulica Nowa [New Street], and became an important artery of the city and the main street of the Jewish quarter, connecting the old town part with the new district. In the 1830s, the name 'Szeroka Street' [Broad Street] began to be used, which reflected its character.¹⁷

In 1804, Vasertsug completed the construction of a house intended as an inn. According to the description in the memoirs, it was a two-story brick building, that had 12 apartments and a basement. However, Vasertsug and his household members lived in a small house that stood next door. The property also included wine cellars, a distillery and brewery, a well, a ritual bath [*mikveh*], a sukkah,¹⁸ stables, a wagon shed and rooms for storing feed and straw for the horses, as well as two latrines. The buildings suffered damage in a fire in 1808 but were soon rebuilt.¹⁹

Vasertsug, building the inn, counted on favourable terms offered by the Prussian government. As he recorded in his memoirs, all those who would build a two-story brick house – Jews and non-Jews alike – were promised reimbursement of 1/3 of their costs. However, due to the large number of applicants, the payment was postponed first to 1805 and then to 1806, when the political situation changed fundamentally. Hoping to get the money quickly, Vasertsug took out a loan to complete the construction from the Royal Bank in Berlin,

¹⁶ Maria Kieffer-Kostanecka, 'Płock w okresie od zaboru pruskiego do Królestwa Kongresowego', in Aleksander Gieysztor (ed.), *Dzieje Płocka* (Płock, 1973), 218.

¹⁷ In 1935, the street was named after Józef Kwiatek (1874–1910), a distinguished socialist activist and journalist, a name it still bears today. Gabriela Nowak-Dąbrowska, *Okno na Kwiatka. Ulica Józefa Kwiatka w Płocku od początku XIX wieku do 1939 roku – ludzie i zabudowa* (Płock, 2019), 4–5.

¹⁸ A hut constructed for use during the week-long festival of Sukkot.

¹⁹ A detailed description of Vasertsug's property, showing its condition after the reconstruction, can be found in the 1825 cession document, see *Mojżesz Wasercug (ok. 1760–1832)*, 99–105 (Appendix 2).

which he recorded on the mortgage of his house.²⁰ He later spent years litigating these debts, first in the court of first instance, the Civil Tribunal in Płock, and later in the Court of Appeals in Warsaw.²¹

In addition to the inn, an important source of Vasertsug's income was the leasing of kosher tax and consumption tax.²² In doing so, he acted as a tenant or sub-tenant, either acting alone or together with partners, interestingly both Jewish and non-Jewish. In the case of the kosher tax, Vasertsug subleased this tax from the lessee general, first in the department and then in the province of Płock, who was Yitsek Yakov Mławski or Mławer (1789–1854), a Warsaw merchant and banker, one of the main military liverants supplying the Modlin fortress.²³ Problems with the settlement and payment of the kosher tax culminated in Vasertsug's lawsuit with Mławski before the Civil Tribunal in Płock, which recognised the validity of the claims and referred the case to the Court of Appeals in Warsaw.

Vasertsug went to Warsaw on this matter in 1818 and spent a whole year in the city. As he writes in his memoirs, he owed a great deal to the kindness and assistance of lawyers he knew from their earlier activities in Płock. Here he mentions Michał Józef Tokarski, who in 1818 was an attorney at the Supreme Court in Warsaw, Jan Mioduski, who at the time served as a judge of the Court of Appeals, and an unidentified lawyer named Szarski. The description in the memoirs shows that Vasertsug not only knew the abovementioned judges at the time they held their offices in Płock, but could also count on their help after they were promoted and moved to Warsaw. It can be assumed that such intimacy was the result of Vasertsug's functions

²⁰ These claims became part of the so-called 'Bayonne sums' – claims of Prussian institutions that were seized by Napoleon as a war capture, then passed to the treasury of the Duchy of Warsaw, and after 1815 returned to Prussian creditors; see Tadeusz Mencil, 'Sumy bajońskie', *Roczniki Historyczne*, xix (1950), 133–65.

²¹ Archiwum Państwowe w Płocku [State Archives in Płock] (hereinafter: APP), Hipoteka Płocka [Płock Mortgage Register] 131, fols 27–36, 52–93v, 100–11v, 113–17v, 118–22v, 124–9.

²² Consumption tax – a tax on slaughter (in place of the former obligation to surrender hides) and on alcoholic beverages (in place of the former *czopowe* or *szeleżne* taxes). Consumption revenues were levied by the treasury ministry; Henryk Radziszewski, *Skarb i organizacja władz skarbowych w Królestwie Polskim*, i: 1815–1830 (Warszawa, 1907), 81–3.

²³ Jan Kosim, *Losy pewnej fortuny. Z dziejów burżuazji warszawskiej w latach 1807–1830* (Wrocław–Warszawa, 1972), 66–7, 79, 84.

in Płock courts and offices, starting in Prussian times through the period of the Duchy of Warsaw and the Kingdom of Poland.²⁴

This quasi-official status is very evident in the case of Vasertsug, who – despite performing various functions and earning his living in different ways – ultimately appears as a “Hebrew translator”, and this term has come to be seen as most characteristic of him. This is how he describes himself when reporting the death of his wife (1829), and this is also how he is described three years later by neighbours testifying about his death (1832).²⁵

MEMOIRS

Moses Vasertsug, as one of the few Jews of his era, left behind written memoirs. The original manuscript has not survived. My search into the archives of Heinrich Loewe, who took his library and his manuscripts when he emigrated from Berlin in 1933, stored in Tel Aviv’s Beit Ariela Library, yielded no results.²⁶ The manuscript is also absent from the archives of Loewe’s brother-in-law, Elias Auerbach (1882–1971), Vasertsug’s great-great-grandson, which ended up in the Zentralarchiv zur Erforschung der Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland

²⁴ As Aleksandra Oniszczyk writes, in the Duchy of Warsaw, individual members of the Jewish communities were engaged by the local authorities in auxiliary activities supporting the operation of the local administration and thus achieved a status similar to that of officials. This happened even though Jews did not have civil rights, which deprived them of the opportunity to hold office. Oniszczyk notes that the same was true of Jewish kosher tax leaseholders, who functioned to some extent like state officials; *ead.*, *Pod presją nowoczesności. Władze Księstwa Warszawskiego wobec Żydów* (Warszawa, 2021), 374–6, 378–9.

²⁵ APP, Akta stanu cywilnego [Civil Registration Records], file no. 175, no. 4, 220; file no. 175, no. 7, 237. Gershon David Hundert writes about language skills as a criterion for the modernisation of Jews, using the example of another memoirist, Dov of Bolechów. ‘Language Acquisition as a Criterion of Modernization among East Central European Jews. The Case of Dov Ber Birkenthal of Bolechów’, in Brian Smollett and Christian Wiese (eds), *Reappraisals and New Studies of the Modern Jewish Experience. Essays in Honor of Robert M. Selzer* (Leiden–Boston, 2015), 13–28.

²⁶ The Papers of Heinrich Loewe (Sha’ar Zion Beit Ariela Public Library, Ahad Ha’am Special Library, Tel Aviv). About this collection, see Judith Siepmann, ‘Ein Mikrokosmos der deutschsprachigen Emigration: Heinrich Loewe und die Sammlung des Beit Ariela’, *Naharaim: Zeitschrift für Deutsch-Jüdische Literatur und Kulturgeschichte*, vii, 1–2 (2013), 217–38.

in Heidelberg.²⁷ It can be assumed that Loewe, after the text was published in print, returned the manuscript to his father-in-law, Barukh Mendel (Menakhem) Auerbach (1844–1920), who made it available to him, and that the manuscript remained and later got lost somewhere in Europe.

Thus, all that is known about the manuscript is what the publisher wrote in the introduction to his edition. Loewe described it as a small octavo format notebook of 32 pages, and referred to the writing as “very beautiful cursive handwriting”, which was certainly very clear at first, but has suffered due to the passage of time, primarily because the author wrote in extremely small letters.²⁸ From the publisher comes the Hebrew title of the memoir, *The History of Moses Vasertsug and His Generous Father, the Late Reb Iserl of Blessed Memory*, which reflects well the nature of the text.

Vasertsug wrote his memoirs in Hebrew, the “holy language”, the knowledge of which he considered appropriate for educated people, among other ritual slaughterers. The Yiddish vernacular was not appropriate for this. It is also significant that he chose not to write in German or Polish, although he certainly knew both languages well, and signed his name in beautiful calligraphic script in the Latin alphabet. The language of the memoirs, however, contains a number of borrowed words derived from German, Polish, and Latin, and refers primarily to the activities of courts and offices or taxes (e.g., *pozew*, *komornik*, *akcyza*). In turn, the author’s traditional Jewish background may be indicated by the biblical and Talmudic quotations and paraphrases he included in the text.

The memoirs cover the period from the author’s childhood, with the first memory described being childhood games at the river in Skoki, during which a few-year-old Moses fell into the water and nearly drowned. This dramatic event was perhaps the author’s earliest childhood memory, all the more significant because it justified his later adoption of the surname Vasertsug. The text breaks off on the memoirist’s departure in 1818 for Warsaw and a year’s stay there.

²⁷ In October 2010, the archive acquired a suitcase containing the papers left behind by Elias Auerbach, which until then had been in the possession of his granddaughter, who lived in Tel Aviv. Zentralarchiv zur Erforschung der Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland (Heidelberg), Bestand B. 2/21.

²⁸ ‘Memoiren eines polnischen Juden’, 445–6.

We can assume that Vasertsug began writing his memoirs late in life. The earliest it could have been written is in 1829, as indicated by the phrase “of blessed memory” next to the name of his wife Keyla, who died in May of that year. One can also speculate that the memoirist’s death in August 1832, or perhaps his preceding illness caused cessation of writing.

Regardless of the accepted date of birth of the memoirist, we are dealing with the notes of an aged man, at least 70 years old. This means that in the text, we can see the regularities associated with writing an autobiography in old age, notably the phenomenon of reminiscence. It consists of the fact that memories are not distributed proportionally over time. The first memories are from the age of 3–4 years old, then the curve rises sharply and reaches its peak at about 20 years of age and remains high until about 30 years of age, and then it falls and runs evenly, while it rises only in the last period, i.e., for the immediate past, when memories are most recent. This “reminiscence bump” effect can be explained biologically: during adolescence and young adulthood when the brain matures, cognition and memory abilities are at their highest. Another explanation is social: the period of youth brings the fastest and most significant changes and is associated with starting a family, earning heavily, travelling, etc., which in turn entails a high intensity of reminiscence. Another factor is that the transmission of memories or information by older people focuses on earlier times, those that the listeners do not know and cannot hear about from others, e.g., grandparents tell their grandchildren what they will not hear from their parents.²⁹

This regularity also applies to the written memoirs and can be seen in the uneven volume of text falling into successive periods of the author’s life. In the case of Vasertsug’s memoirs, which are 32 pages long, the first 20 relate to the period until he settled in Płock in the autumn of 1796. A much smaller portion is related to the memoirist’s residence in the town, which – even bearing in mind that the text was probably not completed – represented the longest period in his life.

²⁹ Douwe Draaisma, *De heimweefabriek: geheugen, tijd & ouderdom* (Groningen, 2008), quoted after: *id.*, *Fabryka nostalgii. O fenomenie pamięci wieku dojrzałego*, transl. Ewa Jusewicz-Kalter (Wołowiec, 2010), 79–88; Tomasz Maruszewski, *Pamięć autobiograficzna* (Gdańsk, 2005), 160–5; Douwe Draaisma, *Waarom het leven sneller gaat als je ouder woedt. Over het autobiografische geheugen* (Groningen, 2001), quoted after: *id.*, *Dlaczego życie płynie szybciej, gdy się starzejemy. O pamięci autobiograficznej*, transl. Ewa Jusewicz-Kalter (Warszawa, 2006), 216–9.

Verification of the information contained in the memoirs with archival sources provides interesting observations. This is only possible for the period of Vasertsug's stay in Płock, for which rich source material has been preserved, including town, mortgage, and vital records, among others.

Surprising at times is the precision of the memoirist in noting details, such as figures, names, totals, or circumstances of events. He provides information on the transactions he made and the debts he owed. He accurately describes the rooms in the house he built and the outbuildings and gives the dimensions of the yard and even the width of the passage between the buildings.³⁰ He gives precise details of the loan he took from the Royal Bank in Berlin to complete the house and notes that his property was then valued at 9,000 thalers, which is consistent with the information in the mortgage records.³¹ He also writes that his buildings, before he had time to rebuild them after the 1808 fire, were seized by the army for six years, which also more or less corresponds to reality.³² This shows that Vasertsug relied on the documents and records in his possession when writing about business matters. It can also be assumed that he may have kept an account book in which he recorded transactions and payments (just as, during his stay at Kórnik, he equipped each of the residents there with a book to record dues paid, although in this case, it was to control the taxpayers).

The memoirist was already much less precise when it came to dating the events he described, especially the earlier ones, which can usually only be linked to particular periods of his life. The initial, more precise date is only the date of his move to Płock in the autumn of 1796; the earlier stages of his life we can only date approximately. Interestingly, the events related to the acquisition of real estate, the construction of the house, and the lawsuits have a double dating, both according to the Jewish calendar and the Christian calendar.

³⁰ See fn. 19 above.

³¹ In 1805, the value of the building Vasertsug erected was valued at 8,998 thalers and 4 silver (good) grosz; APP, Hipoteka Płocka 131, fol. 1v.

³² The claims of Moses Vasertsug are included in the statement of claims to the government of the former Duchy of Warsaw for the period from 1 June 1809 to 1 February 1813. The quartering and occupation of his stables for a period of 5 years, 2 months and 9 days were valued at 9,345 zlotys; APP, Akta miasta Płocka, file no. 415, 147v–8).

ORAL CHARACTER OF THE NARRATIVE

Vasertsug's memoirs are composed of two types of narrative. The first are descriptions of events, presenting them simply and concisely, without providing additional information or excessive detail. The second, much more interesting type of narrative consists of passages that are separate stories. They are much more extensive, containing many details about the place and circumstances of events, characteristics of the individuals described, dialogues between characters, or thoughts of the author.

More than a dozen such stories can be identified in the text. The first is a story about a child's game, a fall into the water and a lucky rescue, which later, when the Prussian authorities in 1797 ordered Jews to adopt permanent names, was memorialised by the author by adopting the surname Vasertsug:

I took the name Vasertsug for two reasons explained here. First, when I was five or six years old I played with my peers. [...] Each of the playing boys climbed to the crown of the tree to break off a stick to play with. I, too, like them, climbed high onto one tree where I saw a stick that seemed suitable. However, the tree I climbed had its roots on the [very] bank of the river. Its branches leaned, and the crown of the tree was in the middle of the river, while the branch I was standing on broke off the stick beneath me and I fell into the river. [...] The Jews began to shout: "A man is floating in the water!" and their voice was heard by a lot of people who were there. [...] Several of them took to the water in a small boat to look for [...] They found me near the millstones by the dam and pulled me out of the water [...] in their mercy and blessed be the man who saved me from death! That is why I took the name of Vasertsug.

Secondly, it is known that Moses was a shepherd of cattle and that his name [means] "for I brought him out of the water". One day it happened that the King of Prussia commanded that every Jewish male must choose for himself a name other than the one given to him at the time of his circumcision. I chose the above name for myself as a reminder of God's favour – [the favour] that God did to me by rescuing me from the great water, and for the second reason, which is the origin of the name Moses. In this way, I satisfied the king's orders and did not transgress the words of the Torah, which commands that one should not change one's name, for this is one of the laws of our holy fathers who came out of slavery to deliverance. May God, in His mercy, deliver us soon in our days! Amen! Selah!³³

³³ *Mojżesz Waserug (ok. 1760–1832)*, 53–4.

The next two stories are about Yehuda Leib – how, as a poor but promising young man, he was accepted into the memoirist’s home and how, much later, he applied for a position as a preacher in Płock. Much is made of the story of the charity work of the memoirist’s father, Israel, how he supported the poor, especially the newlyweds who were counting on him for support as they waited for their nuptial ceremony, and how he worried that impoverishment would prevent him from continuing to help the poor, giving his life meaning.

The beginnings of the memoirist’s independent activity are covered in a story about obtaining certificates authorising him to perform slaughtering, and a story about a forged bond he recklessly undertook to exchange while in Frankfurt at the time:

I was ignorant at the time and did not know the nature of such documents, especially since [this one] came off the printing press and was decorated with wonderful drawings. I took the document from him and went to one merchant from England, whose name was Beke, because my blessed father, of blessed memory, had conducted [with him] business transactions [worth] several thousand. This merchant met me and asked what I was doing here at the fair. I answered him that the owner of my town had commissioned me to buy many kinds of goods for him [and] bring them to his house, and as collateral for the road, he gave me a bond to exchange. “If you would like to redeem it, I will sell it”, he said. The merchant replied to me that he was unable to redeem it alone, as it was a sizable amount, but he would look around to enter into an agreement with the other English merchants to purchase it. He asked me to entrust him with the document until two o’clock in the afternoon that day, and I complied with his request and handed him the document. [...]

After several hours had passed, I went to the merchant Beke to see what had happened regarding the exchange. He replied to me, “The merit of your righteous father was watching over you that it was to me that you came with this document. I don’t think you are involved in such business either, but if you had gone to a man who doesn’t know you, you would have been locked up in jail without listening to any excuse. I believe you, however, that the owner of your city gave you this document, so be careful not to let it out of your hands, as it is forged”. The man who caused this nasty affair stood watching at the entrance to my inn to see why the arrival of his envoy was being delayed. When I saw him, I threw the document at his feet and said to him: “Take what you brought and go to all the devils!”³⁴

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

The journey from Karlin to Gryfino was covered in two stories, showing not only the realities of travel at the time but also the author's storytelling skills and his sense of humour and self-distance. The first story is about a journey by postal cart when Vasertsug paid only half of the route, and for the other half, he "made a deal" with the postman, paying him a lesser amount than the official rate, but the overturning of one of the carts thwarted his plans:

It was raining that night, and darkness and gloom covered the entire land. We heard a loud and desperate scream on the second cart from the first cart. The coachman who was on the first cart in a loud voice ordered the second postman to hurry and to come quickly, leaving his activities on the first cart to pick it up, as it had overturned [along with] the people who [were] on it. The darkness grew very thick, and the people could not see each other.

As this cart was being lifted, I heard the coachman tell the postman to bring the [people] riding with him to place the cart. In turn, he himself went to the other cart to see if the cargo loaded on it was still in order. Out of fear lest the coachman see me – as he knew nothing about me – I got down from the cart and lay down under it. The coachman approached that cart under which I had taken refuge, groped for everything on it, as well as the ropes with which the loads were tied [to it]. After all this checking, he stood by the cart where I was and began to urinate on me, as if the rains of a flood were falling. I was soaked from head to toe, and I couldn't get up and run away, lest he suspect me of being a thief. I said to myself in spirit: "This, too, is a futility and affliction of the spirit, which are insignificant. I'd better go on foot where my legs will carry me". I sat on that cart until we reached the station and got off there.³⁵

The second story is about an overnight stay at a roadside inn, where a goat was kept in the attic. There, the mischievous innkeeper directed Jews coming from Polish lands to sleep there, which also happened to Vasertsug:

[When] I entered that attic, there was such a powerful stench that the air around me stank, and from the stench, I couldn't open my mouth. I didn't know what it was or where [the smell came from]. Despite this, I wanted to sleep and get some rest after the hardships of the road. I took my clothes and laid them for myself on the headboard, my outer clothes served as

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 66–7.

a cover, while I arranged my anklet like a spouse. Before I started to fall asleep and I was still awake, I felt the covering being pulled from me. I woke up and didn't know what was going on, nor was I able to sleep anymore. The stench got very bad, and I couldn't open my mouth.

After about half an hour, I sensed for the second time that [in the attic] there was someone who had taken off my clothes. I then raised my voice and called out: "Who is it? Who is it?" I rose from the bed, spread my hands in two directions, and while I was exploring with my hands, I encountered a beard, [which] retreated and hid. I imagined that among the guests, there might have also been a Jew from a Polish country, [which] I had not noticed in the crowd of people, and [it was] he who wanted to steal [my] clothes. I didn't sleep until morning, then I got up from my bed and told the whole incident to the Jews. They said: "The owner of the inn is a very bad man, and the stench [comes] from his goat. He directs all guests who are not from his country to this attic. Also, not long ago, one Jew from the Polish country came, and he placed him in this attic, and the goat did the same thing to this guest as to Your Dignity. [The man] fell ill and had to be treated".³⁶

In turn, there is a story connected with his stay in Gryfino about raising money to erect a synagogue, for which charges were levied on kosher meat, on the occasion of which the diarist discovered illegal slaughtering. Another story was about the illegal trade carried out by one of Gryfino's merchants, Zelig, and the clever solution Vasertsug came up with to rescue him from his predicament. Yet another story was about the chance meeting many years later of another Gryfino resident, Josef, a debtor to the memoirist.

In the memoirs, we also find a long story about Vasertsug leaving the Kórnik community and moving to Płock. The memoirist describes how, while in Poznań, he accidentally learned that the Płock community needed a competent official, how, using a ruse, he went to Płock to discuss the post, how he settled and ended his cooperation with the Kórnik community, emphasising the onerous duties related to ritual slaughter, and adding the story of the pressure the butchers put on the ritual slaughterer in the Poznań community:

In response, I said: "I will no longer be able to stay here for these reasons. First, as long as I had the upper hand over the butchers, and they were subject to me, [everything] was fine. However, after I got up after my

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67–8.

illness, [it is] they who rule me, and it is not befitting for a ritual slaughterer to fear a butcher. My master knows what happened in Poznań, when a certain butcher took an axe in his hand and stood behind the ritual slaughterer. When [he] wanted to check the lungs to see if they were kosher or treif, he felt [the axe blade] and said: “Kosher, kosher!”, while when he stepped outside, he shouted loudly: “Non-kosher, non-kosher!” When [this] was heard by the butcher, he let loose in pursuit of the ritual slaughterer, but the ritual slaughterer got away from him. Until a separate room was made in the slaughterhouse for the ritual slaughterer to check the lungs and a separate room for the butcher, and in the wall between the two rooms, there was a hole to [through it] feed the distraught butcher the trachea from the lungs. And the second reason is [that] in my illness, I promised myself that I would not be a ritual slaughterer again if God gave me a position, that I would not be forced to be one. My main reason is the second one, so I ask my master not to press me again on this matter”.³⁷

Then Vasertsug vividly describes his farewell and departure for Płock, and also how he rode ahead to the town and discovered what meagre housing had been prepared for him and his family:

When I arrived in Płock, I said: “I will go, I will see the apartment that the people of Płock have prepared for me”. I was shown a shelter – a shelter for wanderers. The poor lived in [one] half of the house, the other half was prepared for my apartment. I raised my eyes to look at the house from the outside. It looked like a tent set up in a field for a cattle herder to spend the night. I was terrified, and when I went inside and into the chamber that had been set aside for me, I almost had apoplexy. The chamber was small and low, and I was unable to stand up to the ceiling. There were holes in the floor full of water, which [stood] there to water the poultry of the owner of the shelter. The walls were holey [like] a net to the point where you could see the stars through them, the windows were shattered, and I found the entrance without a door or bolt. I said to myself in my soul: “What will I answer to my spouse when I am asked about this smelly apartment, while in Kórnik the woodshed was more elegant?” I went around all the places to rent myself another apartment, but I found nothing. According to the residents of Płock, the apartment was nice and very good, as they also had no better ones. Out of anxiety, despair, and grief, I almost lost my human mind.³⁸

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

Associated with the stay in Płock is a story about a visit to the theatre, which will be discussed further. In turn, connected with the stay in Warsaw is a story about a lawsuit and assistance from legal friends, as well as winning the lottery.

All these stories are in the category of oral histories, which, it can be assumed, the memoirist told his family or friends many times before finally writing them down. These fragments are much more extensive and detailed and have a clear beginning and end. They are mostly stories with a moral or happy ending, where justice prevails, and hardship and honesty are rewarded. We can see in them the skill of the storyteller, creating vivid descriptions and vivid dialogues, building tension, and making the listener interested or laughing, even – as in the case of the story about hiding under a cart and being peed on by a postman – at the expense of the person of the memoirist.

This oral nature of the memoirs is one of their most interesting features – indirectly, the text gives us access to the oral story. This shows that oral transmission – reflexively associated with pre-literate times and with communities with underdeveloped literacy – functioned in the early modern period, even in such a literate society as the Jewish one.³⁹

A similar phenomenon of including fragments having the character of an oral story in an autobiographical text is found in the well-known memoirs of Glikl of Hameln (1645?–1724), a Jewish woman merchant from Hamburg. She includes in her memoirs, various historical accounts [Yid. *geshikhtn*] and stories and tales [Yid. *mayses*] having the character of ethical instructions, which constitute the fifth part of the text. The researcher of Glikl's memoirs, Chava Turniansky, identifies 25 such stories and also establishes their origins and how they infiltrated the text.⁴⁰ In Glikl's memoirs, both the 'proper'

³⁹ The very high literacy rate of Jews, studied on the basis of signatures in court records, is indicated by Waław Urban, 'Sztuka pisania w województwie krakowskim w XVII i XVIII wieku', *Przegląd Historyczny*, lxxv, 1 (1984), 1, 53 ff. According to the author's estimates, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the percentage of literate Jews in the Cracow voivodeship was 70 per cent, and that of Jewish women was 30 per cent (*ibid.*, 79).

⁴⁰ Anna Rutkowski, 'Introduction', in Glikl, *Siedem ksiąg. Pamiętniki z lat 1691–1719*, introd. and transl. from Yiddish by Anna Rutkowski (Warszawa, 2021), 35. The memoirs have been published in English as *Glikl Memoirs, 1691–1719*,

memoirs' narrative and the above stories are written in Yiddish. In the case of Vasertsug's memoirs, on the other hand, we are dealing with the recording in Hebrew of stories that the memoirist must have told in Yiddish.

FUNCTION OF THE MEMOIRS

Vasertsug's motives for writing down the memoirs are not stated anywhere, nor are the addressees, while in a few places, the author addresses an unspecified "kind" or "dear" reader. At the time of writing down the memoirs, the author's three daughters were alive, as well as their children, so one might expect them to be the readers of the text.⁴¹

The memoirs are not strictly understood as autobiographies, depicting successive events in the author's life. The events, although generally presented in chronological order, are not dated; the memoirist's birthday or the birth dates of his children, for example, are not given.

Nor is the text a family chronicle (family scroll). This genre – alluding by its name to the Book of Esther – was a record of events related to a single person or family. Most often, these were events with negative overtones: exiles, wars, fires, pestilences, pogroms, accusations of ritual murder, or profanation of the host. The writing down of the

ed. by Chava Turniansky, transl. Sara Friedman (Waltham, MA, 2019). See also Chava Turniansky, 'Gliks Werk und die zeitgenössische jiddische Literatur', in Monika Richarz (ed.), *Die Hamburger Kauffrau Glikl. Jüdische Existenz in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Hamburg, 2001), 68–90. Gabriele Jancke also writes about the 'mixed' nature of the Glikl text, 'Die זכרונות (Sichronot, Memoiren) der jüdischen Kauffrau Glückel von Hameln zwischen Autobiographie, Geschichtsschreibung und religiösem Lehrtext. Geschlecht, Religion und Ich in der Frühen Neuzeit', in Magdalene Heuser (ed.), *Autobiographien von Frauen. Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte* (Tübingen, 1996), 93–134.

⁴¹ As Kaspar von Greyerz writes, early modern self-narratives may be considered to represent a social act, and the authors practically never wrote for themselves only; id., 'Observations on the Historiographical Status of Research on Self-Writing', in Claudia Ulbrich, Kaspar von Greyerz, and Lorenz Heiligensetzer (ed.), *Mapping the 'I'. Research on Self-Narratives in Germany and Switzerland* (Leiden–Boston, 2015), 34. Gabriele Jancke thinks similarly, noting that authors of autobiographical texts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries depicted themselves in a network of social relations. One of the texts analysed by the author is the Hebrew memoir of Josel of Rosheim (c. 1478–1554): *Autobiographie als soziale Praxis. Beziehungskonzepte in Selbstzeugnissen des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts im deutschsprachigen Raum* (Köln–Weimar–Wien, 2002), 32–43.

scroll was related to the custom, which functioned in Jewish families in Eastern Europe, of fasting on the day of family misfortune and celebrating annually on the day of deliverance “family Purim”, during which they feasted and read the ‘family scroll’.⁴² Examples of such scrolls, the authors of which were associated with Polish lands, are texts by Yom Tov Lippman Heller, Meir ben Yeḥiel Kadosh of Brod,⁴³ as well as the much later, but kept in the traditional convention, memoirs of Ya’akov ha-Levi Levin.⁴⁴

Undoubtedly, family ties played a very important role in Moses’ life and largely determined his network of professional and social contacts. The memoirist devotes the most space to his parents, Israel Iserl and Tsipra, although we don’t learn much about his mother’s second marriage, for example. On the other hand, he mentions nothing about his siblings, although he certainly had a sister, since it was his brother-in-law who informed him by letter about the activities involved in rebuilding the houses after the 1793 fire in Skoki. He also writes little about his wife Keyla, and of his children, he mentions only two daughters – one whose name he does not give, and Eydel, wife of Barukh Mendel Auerbach. In contrast, it is known from archival sources⁴⁵ that the memoirist had three daughters (Sheyna, Tsipra Bluma, and Eydel) and a son, Israel (c. 1780–1813), whose name indicates that he was the eldest son, named after his late grandfather. It is puzzling that Vasertsug does not mention the son at all, who, although he was no longer alive at the time the memoirs were written, had previously conducted various businesses with his father. One would have expected that the memoirs would have

⁴² Marcus Moseley, ‘Autobiography and Memoir’, in Gershon David Hundert (ed.), *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (New Haven–London, 2008), i, 89–90.

⁴³ Both scrolls have recently been published in Polish translation: *Najstarsze pamiętniki Żydów krakowskich*. Meir ben Jechiel Kadosz z Brodu, *Zwój pana Meira*, transl. and ed. by Leszek Kwiatkowski; Jom Tow Lipmann Heller, *Zwój nienawiści*, transl. and ed. by Agata Paluch (Warszawa, 2019). Translators, in their introduction (pp. vii–xvi), discuss the genre of the family scroll and its significance in the Ashkenazi tradition.

⁴⁴ Jaakow ha-Lewi Lewin, *Wspomnienia z dni polskiego buntu, 1830–1831*, transl. and ed. by Jagoda Budzik (Warszawa, 2022).

⁴⁵ APB, Akta stanu cywilnego, Hipoteka Płocka, Kancelaria Pisarzy Aktowych. For details see *Mojżesz Wasercug (ok. 1760–1832)*, 41–3.

included some form of memorialisation of the son, as is the case with the father.

Vasertsug's memoirs are primarily a record of the author's experiences. The axis of the text is the story of the author's life – he wrote about himself and about daily life in the communities where he was currently living, while he included political events or economic changes only when they influenced his fate to some extent. For example, when describing the etymology of the surname Vasertsug, we find information about the Prussian king's decree ordering Jews to adopt surnames. On the other hand, Vasertsug mentions the emergence of Hasidism in central Poland and the conflicts between its adherents and traditional Jewish communities only in passing, describing his son-in-law. Interestingly, however, he writes nothing about the nature of the new movement, and it is otherwise known that from about 1808, a Hasidic house of prayer functioned in Płock,⁴⁶ not a very large town, where it must have been noticed.

In his memoirs, Vasertsug primarily describes those people who significantly influenced his fate. These were, of course, his parents, especially his father, who raised him and were his role models. His father's good name and integrity in business protected the memoirist even when he was already an orphan. Another character that runs throughout the memoirs is Yehuda Leib, a peer and companion of his youth, whom Vasertsug later entrusted with his son-in-law's education. Also appearing on the pages of the memoirs are relatives or friends who provided support to the author by helping him achieve his goals: a relative, Tsvi or Hirsh Skok, who hosted him while he was studying to become a ritual slaughterer in Poznań, Tsvi Hirsh from Kórnik, who facilitated his obtaining a position in that community and later supported him financially, and Yitshak Cohen, a protector from Płock, thanks to whom Vasertsug survived the first period of his stay in the town and with whom he was later linked by various business interests and later – as a result of his daughter's marriage – also by family ties. An important place is occupied by the memoirist's son-in-law,

⁴⁶ Investigation records from 1818 include a request from Płock Hasidim for permission to operate a Hasidic house of prayer, which, it is recorded, has been operating in the city for 10 years; *Źródła do dziejów chasydyzmu w Królestwie Polskim, 1815–1867, w zasobach polskich archiwów państwowych*, ed. by Marcin Wodziński (Kraków–Budapeszt, 2011), 32.

Barukh Mendel, who lived with his father-in-law in the same house and – as one might guess, after the death of Vasertsug's son – did business with him. Other characters who also had an impact on the memoirist's fate appear episodically, such as Levi Sobernheim, who served as the town doctor in Poznań, who came to see him in Kórnik and cured him of a serious illness.

The text of the memoirs also contains specific self-promotion by the author, who exposes and even exaggerates his achievements and successes. Vasertsug points out a couple of times that the functioning of the Jewish communities where he was employed was based on him, at Gryfino he was to contribute to the introduction of transparent tax accounting and to the construction of a synagogue, also at Kórnik he was to introduce previously unknown accounting books. In addition, in Kórnik and Płock, he was to be particularly valuable due to his knowledge of the German language and the realities of the functioning of the Prussian administration, not only for the Jewish community but also for Prussian officials.

On the other hand, the memoirist writes about the setbacks very vaguely, and we learn little about the accusations of fraud made against him in Kórnik and Płock, which led to conflicts and his departure from communal posts. In both cases, the memoirist emphasises that the audit conducted proved his integrity and the suspicions proved unfounded. Although Vasertsug does not provide further details of the accusations, we can surmise that the reason was suspicion of wrongdoing, typical in such a situation, facilitated by closer relations with non-Jews and non-Jewish authorities.

The text of the memoirs is a kind of morality tale, probably intended for family members. It contains the message that it is worthwhile to be active, honest and not to give up in the face of adversity. For this reason, Vasertsug's memoir is closest to the current of traditional Jewish autobiographical writing called ethical will. The author presents his own attitudes and actions as models for subsequent generations, providing encouragement to lead an upright Jewish life.

One may wonder what was the impetus that prompted Vasertsug to write down the text, probably much of it previously told orally. One might suspect that old age or the death of his wife contributed. While it was certainly facilitated by the author's great literacy and his freedom to wield the pen, in several languages, but probably a personal creative need was the decisive factor here.

CONCLUSIONS

Moses Vasertsug's memoirs are a very interesting example of a Jewish autobiographical text, first and foremost, showing how memoir-writing fits into the tradition of Jewish writing. Researchers of non-Jewish autobiographical literature, such as Georges Gusdorf in his classic essay on autobiography, focus on Western culture and consider St Augustine's *Confessions* as the first autobiographical text that shaped the genre. Gusdorf emphasises the fundamental role of Christian thought as the decisive factor prompting autobiographical reflection, of which only 'civilised' man is capable, while in primitive man, this metaphorical 'reflection in a mirror' is meant to frighten.⁴⁷ Another text that imposed the dominance of Western European patterns in autobiographical literature was the *Confessions* of Rousseau, who himself had the sense to undertake a completely pioneering task, and whose work became a model example of this genre.⁴⁸

The above opinion, in a way, is aligned with the opinion of those scholars of Jewish culture who point to the alleged lack of autobiographical writing among Jews. Alan Mintz writes of a rich and unbroken tradition of autobiography in classical and Christian Europe, completely – according to him – different from the Hebrew literary tradition. There are no Jewish autobiographies until the Renaissance, he writes, and even those written during this period remain in manuscripts and are for family use only. He explains this by saying that in the Jewish tradition, the individual is part of community structures, and his individual fate is subordinated to the collective and the common ideology. Analysing the autobiographies of authors associated with the Haskalah movement, Mintz sees their departure from religion as decisive and notes this in the subtitle

⁴⁷ Georges Gusdorf, 'Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie', in Günter Reichenkron and Erich Haase (eds), *Formen der Selbstdarstellung. Analekten zu einer Geschichte des literarischen Selbstportraits. Festgabe für Fritz Neubert* (Berlin, 1956), 105–23, quoted after: Georges Gusdorf, 'Warunki i ograniczenia autobiografii', transl. Janusz Barczyński, in *Autobiografia*, ed. by Małgorzata Czermińska (Gdańsk, 2009), 19–20, 25–8. This optics of Gusdorf is criticised by Joanna Lisek, who describes it as a manifestation of attitudes formed on the basis of European colonialism, see *ead.*, 'W lustrze pamięci – problemy żydowskiej literatury autobiograficznej', *Autobiografia. Literatura, Kultura, Media*, i, 8 (2017), 8.

⁴⁸ Lisek, 'W lustrze pamięci', 9.

of his book.⁴⁹ We can also encounter the perception of religious studies as limiting autobiographical reflection in other scholars.

Michael Stanislawski argues against this, pointing to the rich tradition of autobiographical writing among Jews and assuming that the first classical autobiography was written by Josephus Flavius in the first century CE, although his work was written in Greek. Stanislawski also does not see religious studies as a limiting factor in memorialising individual experiences, pointing out examples of religious authorities (Maimonides, Yehuda Halevi, Vilna Gaon, Baal Shem Tov) who were no strangers to expressing their individuality, not only in relation to God and Torah.⁵⁰

In turn, another researcher, Marcus Moseley, gives a variety of examples of Jewish autobiographies of the traditional type, starting with biblical passages, through the autobiography of Josephus Flavius, fragments of Maimonides' correspondence, autobiographies from Renaissance Italy (Yehuda Arie Modena, Abraham Jagel, Yitzhak the grandson of Modena), seventeenth-century memoir literature from Eastern Europe arising from personal or communal misfortunes (Yom Tov Lipman Heller, Nathan Hanover), the seventeenth-century Yiddish memoir by Glikl of Hameln, and eighteenth-century autobiographies of Jews who stood on the threshold of modern Jewish history (Jacob Emden and Solomon Maimon).⁵¹ In doing so, he mentions a comprehensive anthology of traditional Jewish autobiographical literature by Leo Schwarz.⁵² But at the same time, Moseley believes that Rousseau's text was decisive in shaping perceptions of the pre-modern tradition of Jewish autobiographical writing, pointing to Salomon Maimon's *Lebensgeschichte* as the first Jewish autobiography modelled on *Confessions*, laying the groundwork for later Haskalah Hebrew and Yiddish literature in this genre.⁵³

Vasertsug's memoirs do not show that writing memoirs is the result of leaving or loosening ties with religion or tradition. The first

⁴⁹ Alan Mintz, "Banished from Their Father's Table". *Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington-Indianapolis, 1989), 6–7.

⁵⁰ Michael Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews. Essays in Jewish Self-Fashioning* (Seattle-London, 2004), 12–3.

⁵¹ Marcus Moseley, *Being for Myself Alone. Origins of Jewish Autobiography* (Stanford, 2006), 67–8.

⁵² Leo W. Schwarz (ed.), *Memoirs of My People Through a Thousand Years* (Philadelphia, 1945).

⁵³ Moseley, *Being for Myself Alone*, 13, 80.

traditional element here is language. The author wrote his memoirs in Hebrew, which he considered appropriate for an educated Jew, rather than in German or Polish. In addition, the memoirist repeatedly emphasises his allegiance to Jewish law. Writing about his adoption of the surname Vasertsug, he points out that thanks to the coincidence with the name Moses, there was no violation of the prohibition by doing so; he greatly exposes his parents' philanthropic activities, traditionally placed high in the traditional hierarchy of values; he emphasises that the doctor who visited him on the Sabbath obtained the appropriate permission in advance; he points out that when building the house he equipped it with a mikvah and sukkah for the household members. The memoirist also shied away from going to the theatre, believing that it was unbecoming of a Jew, especially a respected and elderly one. There is no doubt, then, that we are dealing with a Jew who, while functioning efficiently in the surrounding non-Jewish world, lives according to the requirements of Jewish law and custom.

The memoirs of Moses Vasertsug are a unique historical source, showing the life of an 'average' Jew and the realities of his epoch, covering the period from the end of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to the time of the Kingdom of Poland. The text also shows that Jewish autobiographical writing does not necessarily result from acculturation and departure from Jewish tradition.

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