

**POLIN**  
STUDIES IN POLISH JEWRY

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VOLUME TWENTY-SEVEN  
*Jews in the Kingdom of Poland*  
1815–1918

Edited by  
GLENN DYNNER, ANTONY POLONSKY  
and  
MARCIN WODZIŃSKI

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*Published for*  
The Institute for Polish–Jewish Studies  
*and*  
The American Association for Polish–Jewish Studies

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Oxford · Portland, Oregon  
**The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization**  
2015

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*Published in the United States and Canada by*

*The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization*

*c/o ISBS, 920 NE 58th Avenue, Suite 300*

*Portland, Oregon 97213-3786*

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*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data applied for*

*ISSN 0268 1056*

*ISBN 978-1-906764-21-0 (cloth)*

*ISBN 978-1-906764-22-7 (pbk)*

*Publishing co-ordinator: Janet Moth*

*Copy-editing: George Tulloch*

*Proof-reading: Mark Newby and Joyce Rappaport*

*Index: Bonnie Blackburn*

*Design, typesetting and production: Pete Russell, Faringdon, Oxon.*

*Printed in Great Britain on acid-free paper by*

*TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall*

Articles appearing in this publication are abstracted and indexed in  
*Historical Abstracts* and *America: History and Life*

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# ‘Languishing from a Distance’

## *Louis Meyer and the Demise of the German Jewish Ideal*

FRANÇOIS GUESNET

FOR SEVERAL DECADES, the merchant Louis Meyer (1796–1869) lived and worked in Włocławek, a commercial centre on the Vistula near the border between Congress Poland and Prussia. Meyer was born in the small town of Służewo, likewise in the border area and near the city of Toruń.<sup>1</sup> He evidently received a traditional Jewish education in Hebrew and the Holy Scriptures. From the start, the aim of his education appears to have been a career in commerce or banking. In 1810 he was sent at the young age of 14 to serve as an apprentice in Berlin. We have no information about the specific circumstances of his life or training there, where he spent eight years. These years in Berlin had a major formative impact on him, creating the basis for his later professional activity and laying the foundation for his high level of proficiency in German, both spoken and written. In the decades after his return to Poland and down to his death, writing in German satisfied his apparently strong need to maintain some link with German culture. His collected works in German were published in 1871, two years after his death, edited by an anonymous group of friends.<sup>2</sup>

These texts by a Jewish merchant document in a unique way the complex cultural situation and intellectual and religious environment of the Jews living in the western regions of Congress Poland at the time. This area was situated in the broad transitional zone between German and Polish culture, extending from Pomerania across Wielkopolska to the western and northern reaches of Mazovia, a

The quotation in the title of this chapter is taken from the poem ‘Erinnerung an Berlin’ (1819), which is included in translation in the Appendix below, item 1.

<sup>1</sup> Służewo had little further claim to distinction aside from the fact that the well-known rabbinical family of Caro from Wielkopolska was long resident there. See N. Lippmann, *Biographie des David Caro* (Posen, 1840), 2.

<sup>2</sup> L. Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften eines polnischen Juden* (Berlin, 1871), and the new edition L. Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften eines polnischen Juden*, ed. F. Guesnet (Hildesheim, 2010). Unless otherwise noted, all references below are to the new edition.

zone that over centuries was characterized more by fluid cultural transitions than by solidly fixed borderlines.<sup>3</sup> The western boundary of Congress Poland near Włocławek had been established only a short time before by the partitioning of Poland. The fact that a Polish Jewish merchant, trained in Berlin, who spent his later life in Poland, nonetheless continued to write literature and letters in German, documents Louis Meyer's capacity and readiness to perceive and remain open to the culture beyond the border.<sup>4</sup> Building on the basis of his traditional Polish Jewish education, Meyer absorbed both German and German Jewish culture in an intense manner during his years in Berlin. The educational and cultural institutions of the young Prussian metropolis and the dynamic character of the German Jewish culture there in the era of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* exercised a strong attractive force on Meyer. His early writings, in particular, reflect his ambition to absorb the innovative potential of Berlin, a major centre of the spiritual and intellectual renewal of central European Jewry, to fuse it with the world of Polish Jewish tradition so familiar to him, and to disseminate this fusion of two powerful cultures. The impact of non-Jewish Polish culture—above all literature—is much weaker, even if Polish historical and political contexts are referred to constantly. His stance of mediation avoided the simplistic positive and negative excesses typical of many of the east European Jewish authors, especially of a later generation.<sup>5</sup> Meyer's later writings reflect a growing scepticism about the positive role of Prussia, resulting from its transformation from a beacon of the sciences and the Enlightenment to an overly militarized society striving for political hegemony. Although he continued to hold German Jewish culture in high esteem, his later writings express a growing concern for the coexistence of Poles and Jews and raise questions about the nature and the future of their relations. Perhaps Meyer's interweaving of German and Polish Jewish traditions, based on personal perception and avoiding simple stereotypes, is one reason why he has largely been forgotten as a writer.

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After his return to the Kingdom of Poland newly established after the Congress of Vienna, Meyer settled in 1818 as a businessman in the small commercial and

<sup>3</sup> This also led to less clearly delineated boundaries between the various central European Jewish communities. See I. Bartal, 'The Image of Germany and German Jewry in East European Jewish Society during the Nineteenth Century', in I. Twersky (ed.), *Danzig, between East and West: Aspects of Modern Jewish History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 4.

<sup>4</sup> On the programmatic introduction of a comparative consideration of border regions and their cultural and political dynamics, see M. Baud and W. van Schendel, 'Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands', *Journal of World History*, 8/2 (1997), 211–42. For an excellent example of a comparative historical perspective on border regions, see E. François, J. Seifarth, and B. Struck (eds.), *Die Grenze als Raum, Erfahrung und Konstruktion: Deutschland, Frankreich und Polen vom 17. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Compare, for example, the hymn of praise to Berlin by Yehudah Leib Gordon; see Bartal, 'Image of Germany and German Jewry', 8.

administrative town of Włocławek on the Vistula, where members of his family had lived since 1803. A list of Jewish families in the city in 1825 indicates that Meyer continued to reside in a part of the town outside that area specifically set aside for Jewish settlement; this fact points to his more elevated social standing.<sup>6</sup> Over the course of several decades, he earned 'a very respected position in the entire district' by dint of his personality and high degree of education.<sup>7</sup> He married, but there is no information about the name and background of his spouse in the *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*. His only child, Herman, was born in 1824. His wife died early, in 1834.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after that, in 1835, he moved to Warsaw, the capital of the Kingdom of Poland, and took up a position in the bank of Simon Rosen, a Jew from Prussia.<sup>9</sup> A number of noteworthy letters survive, written from Warsaw to his sister and son. They provide a remarkable window onto the social life of the Jewish elites in the Polish capital. After a few years in Warsaw, Meyer returned to Włocławek, where he seems to have led a peaceful life. There are no extant texts by him from the 1840s, suggesting that this was a period of intensive professional activity, which did not allow him sufficient time and leisure for writing in a foreign language. In the 1850s his writing resumes, both prose and poetry, and his creativity was heightened during the last decade of his life.<sup>10</sup> Meyer's writing in German focuses on special occasions, political events, or incidents noteworthy for some other reason, as well as the recurrent high points in the Jewish calendar of festivities and family life. In addition, it is clear that Meyer considered it important to practise and demonstrate his competence in German, and, as is evident from his letters to his son, to instruct and guide his own family.<sup>11</sup>

Meyer owed his 'respected position' not only to his education and activity as a merchant and businessman, about which unfortunately we know only very little. In addition, he distinguished himself by active participation in the political, religious, social, and cultural developments of his time. According to the preface to the

<sup>6</sup> M. Gruszczyńska, 'Początki osadnictwa żydowskiego we Włocławku', in *Zapiski Kujawsko-Dobrzyńskie*, 13: *Mniejszości narodowe na Kujawach wschodnich i w ziemi Dobrzyńskiej* (Włocławek, 1999), 327. Meyer's address is given in the list as 81 Szeroka Street at the house of a certain Przedwieski; his profession is given as merchant.

<sup>7</sup> 'Vorrede', in Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften* (1871), p. vi.

<sup>8</sup> In a letter dated 27 December 1835, Meyer wrote to his son from Warsaw that a year of mourning had now passed: Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 179.

<sup>9</sup> On the Rosen family, see my entry 'Rosen, Mathias', in G. D. Hundert (ed.), *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2 vols. (New Haven, 2008), ii, 1591.

<sup>10</sup> For the essential stages and events of Meyer's life, see *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols. (New York, 1901–16), viii, 526; *Evreiskaya entsiklopediya*, 16 vols. (St Petersburg, 1906–13), x, 811; *Polski słownik judaistyczny: Dzieje, kultura, religia, ludzie*, 2 vols. (Warsaw, 2003), ii, 145; J. Trunk, 'Toledot hayehudim bivelotsvavek', in *Velotslavek vehasevivah: sefer zikaron* (Jerusalem, 1967), 9–12; see further J. Shatzky, *Geshikhte fun yidn in varshe*, 3 vols. (New York, 1947–53), ii, 132.

<sup>11</sup> Diaries and private correspondence were obvious places for him to practise his knowledge of German. On this, see S. Lässig, *Jüdische Wege ins Bürgertum: Kulturelles Kapital und sozialer Aufstieg im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2004), 224–5.

original edition of his writings, he was an 'outstanding son of his fatherland', and his 'glowing enthusiasm for Judaism' was palpable everywhere.<sup>12</sup> His social engagement is reflected in the fact that in 1861, when the first municipal elections were held in the Kingdom of Poland, he was elected to the county assembly in Włocławek. However, after the uprising of 1863, these councils were dissolved by the Russian administration, and no traces survive of his activity as a member of this local diet.

Meyer clung for a long time to his image of Prussia as the homeland of an enlightened and liberal citizenry. Soon after his return to Poland, he began to idealize his years spent in the ambitious Prussian metropolis of Berlin, which he regarded as a stronghold of the arts, science, architecture, and hard work, as well as of bourgeois social intercourse in the best sense and of the simple enjoyment of life. That view is reflected in a concentrated form in the poem 'Erinnerung an Berlin' ('Memory of Berlin'), written a year after his return to Poland. Against the backdrop of the 'bare open fields' which the lyrical 'I' gazes upon, there unfolds the vision of 'your towers, your houses, magnificent in number', the 'hubbub of your brave and decent people', the 'visual arts and science', and 'the flock of Muses and the Graces'. These 'pleasures lost' fill his heart with longing, comparable only to 'love's ardour' in which, 'languishing from a distance', a youth 'longs for an embrace with his beloved'.<sup>13</sup> Meyer long cherished the hope for a 'favourable stroke of luck' that would allow him to return once again to the place where he had spent his youth. In 1838, in a letter to his sister from Warsaw, he reflected on his displeasure with the forms of social intercourse in Warsaw, and he wondered: 'Would it be the same for me with the social life of Berlin? I would like some day to be able to find a practical answer to that question.'<sup>14</sup> At this point in his life, he appeared to have a strong desire to move to Berlin. In a melancholy mood in 1839, he wrote:

Once again, for a time a dull quiet entered the chamber of my soul. Then an old pet idea stirred once more within me: the scene of my golden age, my unforgettable *Berlin*, re-emerged into view, like a shadow from a better world, and beckoned to me in a luring shape. It seemed to me as if my past was unveiling herself before my eyes and wished to invite me to wed my future onto her.<sup>15</sup>

His desire to return would not be fulfilled until some fifty years after his stay in the city. Suffering from a disease threatening his eyesight, Meyer decided in 1868 to have an operation in Berlin. He seemed impressed by the changes he discovered there: 'Yet we saw enough of this metropolis to find it colossal. I recognized my old Berlin again, but it's been joined by ten new ones.' Nonetheless, the city appeared to him to be a 'wasteland bustling with human life', one in which he did not now wish to live. 'Basically the Berliners are good people at heart. It's just that they don't have the time to *be so*.' Doubtless a must for the visitor was the New Synagogue on

<sup>12</sup> 'Vorrede' (1871), p. vi.

<sup>13</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 93–4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 172.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 179.

Oranienburger Strasse, which had been opened in 1866, and was considered the emblem of the metropolitan and dynamic Jewish community there: 'From among Berlin's new creations, we viewed the synagogue with its magical sabbath illumination, and heard the prayers. The effect of the new form is overpowering, and the religious service is exalted.' He cited the critical view of an acquaintance—'You don't know what religion this is unfolding before you'—commenting that 'a character that absorbs into itself the best parts of all characters is also a character'.<sup>16</sup>

Meyer educated his son fully in the sense of an Enlightenment attuned to the needs of civil society, and in the spirit of a religiosity conscious of tradition and aware of its responsibilities. Herman Meyer became a merchant like his father, dealt in grain, and after his relocation to Warsaw was active in the cotton trade and leather goods trade, items he exported to Austria and the German Reich. As the business partner of Leopold Kronenberg, one of the most successful entrepreneurs in the Kingdom of Poland, who had converted to Christianity as a young adult, Louis Meyer's son was involved in banking and commercial transactions, and became active as an industrialist. Herman Meyer was more outspoken than his father in support of Polish–Jewish rapprochement at the time of the January uprising. He served for an extended period on the board of the Reform-oriented Tłomackie Street synagogue, and was for a short time a board member of the Jewish community and on the executive board of the Jewish Home for the Poor and Aged maintained by the Warsaw Jewish community. In addition, Herman Meyer furthered the establishment of institutions for Jewish adult education.<sup>17</sup> He died in 1898.

#### WŁOCŁAWEK—A TYPICALLY ATYPICAL JEWISH URBAN COMMUNITY

What did Włocławek look like in the years immediately after the establishment of the Kingdom of Poland, or the Congress Kingdom, as it is also called? Meyer tells us little about that in his *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*. A certain picture is conveyed by an older contemporary of his, the well-known writer Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz (1758–1841), who visited the town while on a trip through Polish Prussia in 1817. His first-hand description makes clear just what activities a merchant might pursue in that town:

Włocławek is favourably located as a centre for commerce. It has quite an agreeable appearance as a town, although it lacks prominent buildings. It is clean and illuminated by street lights. It exhibits that traffic that can only be generated by commerce and industry. Thanks to its location on the Vistula, Włocławek has become a grain depot. It is first and foremost storehouses that are being constructed . . . In the spring, when many of these boats are being loaded with cargo and come and go, the numerous masts and sails give the town the character

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 202.

<sup>17</sup> 'Herman Meyer', in *Polski słownik judaistyczny*, ii. 145.

of a small port. The presence of the district superintendent and the court commissioner have been advantageous for the town, which now boasts four thousand inhabitants.<sup>18</sup>

Contrary to the widespread assumption that the lands of the former Polish crown were marked by a strong hasidic orientation in Orthodox observance, there were a whole series of medium-size and large towns where the local Jewish community showed a high degree of differentiation and diversity. In the western areas of the Kingdom of Poland, in particular, there were a number of towns where advocates of a Jewish enlightenment largely attuned to a Prussian paradigm undermine the image of an unrestricted triumphal march by hasidic communities. Such friends of the Enlightenment, and later of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, were present in all metropolitan areas of eastern Europe from the late eighteenth century, or at the latest from the first quarter of the nineteenth, in the form of socio-religious networks: in Warsaw as in Lviv (Lwów, Lemberg), in Odessa as in Moscow.<sup>19</sup> The closer we come to one of the centres of gravity of this Jewish enlightenment, such as Königsberg, Breslau, or Berlin, the smaller are the towns in which one finds advocates of a secular education for the younger generation, of a rapprochement (variously defined) with the surrounding culture, and of reform in Jewish religious practice. It is not surprising that such innovations were consequent on the mobility of Jewish merchants in particular. In parallel with the vicissitudes of their paths, concentrations of advocates of the Enlightenment emerged in new sites where commerce and traffic led them: for example, in Brody in Galicia, a free-trade town on the Austrian–Russian border, in Odessa, the heart of the international grain trade, or in Shklov, the residence of a wealthy and influential supporter of the Prussian Enlightenment, Nota Notkin.<sup>20</sup>

In Włocławek too there was a group of leading community members actively working for moderate reform in Jewish religious services and a rapprochement with the non-Jewish environment. Louis Meyer was one of them. What characterized the development of the Jewish community in this small town? There was not any appreciable Jewish settlement in Włocławek until the end of the eighteenth century. Among the first Jewish families to settle there were those from territory that had come under Prussian administration in the first Polish partition, areas from which

<sup>18</sup> J. U. Niemcewicz, 'Podróż do Prus Polskich i książęcych w roku 1817', quoted in *'Do ziemi naszej': Podróże romantyków*, ed. J. Kamionka-Straszakowa (Kraków, 1988), 260.

<sup>19</sup> An overview can be found in R. Mahler, *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment: Their Confrontation in Galicia and Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1985), and more recently M. Wodziński, *Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland: A History of Conflict*, trans. S. Cozens (Oxford, 2005). On Warsaw, see F. Guesnet, *Polnische Juden im 19. Jahrhundert: Lebensbedingungen, Rechtsnormen und Organisation im Wandel* (Cologne, 1998), 281–303. On Lviv, see T. Grill, 'Ein Märtyrer für Licht und Wahrheit? Das Wirken Rabbiner Abraham Kohns in Lemberg (1844–1848)', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 56/2 (2008), 178–220. On Odessa and Moscow, see S. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794–1881* (Stanford, Calif., 1985), and B. Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> D. Fishman, *Russia's First Modern Jews: The Jews of Shklov* (New York, 1995).



thousands of needy Jewish families were expelled.<sup>21</sup> From 1823, Jewish settlement was restricted to a designated district in the town.<sup>22</sup> As elsewhere in the Kingdom of Poland, with the granting of far-reaching civil equality in May 1862, restrictions on freedom of settlement in particular were abolished. The closeness to Prussia and commerce along the Vistula also facilitated intellectual exchange. In a development not typical in the circumstances of Congress Poland, Reform-oriented forces in Włocławek took over the leadership of the community at an early point; they did not allow adherents of traditional rabbinical observance (so-called *mitnagedim*) to assume honorary offices until the 1850s.<sup>23</sup> It is possible that this institutional opening-up of community leadership to these declared adversaries of hasidism was due to the conflict over the establishing of a private house of prayer, as recently described by Marcin Wodziński.<sup>24</sup>

An informative account of the history of the Jewish community in Włocławek appeared in Warsaw in the Reform-friendly, Polish-language journal *Jutrzenka*, a weekly edited by Daniel Neufeld.<sup>25</sup> The article was published anonymously in two instalments in the summer of 1861, during the brief period of Polish-Jewish 'fraternity', which ended with the January 1863 uprising and the subsequent political repression.<sup>26</sup> The fact that this article appeared reflects the special position of the Jewish community in Włocławek and the significant role played by individual members oriented to ideas of religious reform. The article stresses at the beginning that the community in Włocławek, which had been established only seventy years before, is the youngest in the country, but in regard to the level of its 'civilization'—meaning here a penchant towards Reform Judaism—it is in fact the community with the oldest such liberal tradition. The article recounts that ten families from a number of surrounding smaller localities, including Służewo, Louis Meyer's birthplace, decided to settle in Włocławek, among them four cloth merchants. It relates that an employee of the community stemming from Prussia fulfilled the multiple

<sup>21</sup> E. Bergman, *Nurt mauretański w architekturze synagog Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w XIX i na początku XX wieku* (Warsaw, 2004), 111. For an overview of the harsh measures taken by the new Prussian regime against the local Jewish population, see M. Jehle, "'Relocations" in South Prussia and New East Prussia: Prussia's Demographic Policy towards the Jews in Occupied Poland, 1772–1806', *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 52 (2007), 23–47.

<sup>22</sup> On the dynamics of settlement in Jewish neighbourhoods in Polish towns, see A. Eisenbach, 'Mobilność terytorialna ludności żydowskiej w Królestwie Polskim', in W. Kula (ed.), *Spoleczeństwo Królestwa Polskiego: Studia o umiarkowaniu i ruchliwości społecznej*, II (Warsaw, 1966), 212.

<sup>23</sup> Bergman, *Nurt mauretański*, 111.

<sup>24</sup> M. Wodziński, 'State Policy and Hasidic Expansion: The Case of Włocławek', *Jewish Studies at the CEU*, 5 (2006–7), 171–85. He posits the plausible thesis that the founders of the prayer house, despite their claim to the authorities that they were part of a hasidic association, were first and foremost concerned to avoid paying taxes to the Jewish community.

<sup>25</sup> On Neufeld, see Guesnet, *Polnische Juden*, 21–2.

<sup>26</sup> 'O zawiązanie się i wzrost Gminy Izraelskiej miasta Włocławek', *Jutrzenka*, 1861, no. 9, p. 68, and no. 11, p. 85. For an authoritative account of this period of Polish-Jewish brotherhood, see M. Opalski and I. Bartal, *Poles and Jews: A Failed Brotherhood* (Hanover, NH, 1992).

duties of teacher, cantor, and ritual slaughterer. He also introduced the young community to the Bible translation by Moses Mendelssohn, and their progeny were later educated in Leszno in Wielkopolska (Prussian Poland), Poznań (Posen), and Berlin (possibly a reference to Louis Meyer). The author contends that this early familiarity with the Prussian Jewish Enlightenment was the source of the moral advancement of this young community.<sup>27</sup> That had also been encouraged by the favourable geographical location of the town: its position on the commercial routes between Toruń, Danzig, Poznań, Stettin, Frankfurt an der Oder, Berlin, and Leipzig permitted a pronounced stimulation of the economy and an upturn, especially in banking, after difficult periods during the time of the Duchy of Warsaw, which was marked by a burden of high taxes and other hardships. The author notes that the Jews of Włocławek, through their involvement in international commerce, had ‘acquired European dress and customs, and adopted modern languages, including the language of this country’. The latter was ‘widespread in the more well-to-do, respectable families’. At the time, there were some 315 Jewish families living in the town, among them about seventy artisans and two owners of chicory factories. The author describes the construction of the synagogue, referring to the dedicatory address given in German by the Warsaw preacher Dr Abraham Goldschmidt, adding that he himself had on this occasion given a speech in Polish at another gathering. As a further important date in the history of this community, he mentions the appointment of Dr Joseph Caro as rabbi.<sup>28</sup> In keeping with the spirit of the times, the author notes the fact that on the initiative of the local bishop, Tadeusz Lubieński, in 1850 the district hospital was given its own ward for Jewish patients, after plans for a Jewish hospital had to be abandoned owing to a lack of support from the Jewish communities in the area. Finally, he discusses in detail the merger of the Jewish and Christian associations of merchants: the Jewish club Harmonia disbanded at the request of Christian merchants and merged with a Polish Jewish club called Konkordia.<sup>29</sup> The amicable relations between prominent Jewish and Polish figures were also reflected in the fact that one of the most important public construction initiatives in Włocławek at the time, the bridge over the Vistula that was opened in 1865, was supervised by a construction committee on which three Christians and four Jews worked together.<sup>30</sup> In the overview of institutions of Jewish welfare that closes the two-part article, the traditional fraternities are mentioned, including the burial fraternity, and its activity in the sphere of provision of medical care. One of the community’s leading members, Selig Neuman, who died in Warsaw in 1879, established the first Jewish cemetery in the town in 1832 on land he had purchased, and was also centrally active in establishing the Jewish ward at the hospital in 1850 and a Jewish elementary school in 1859.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> ‘O zawiązanie się i wzrost Gminy Izraelskiej miasta Włocławek’, 68.      <sup>28</sup> I return to this below.

<sup>29</sup> This event was also reported in the Russian-language Jewish press: see *Sion*, 1861, no. 12, p. 191.

<sup>30</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 186 (letter to his son, 18 Oct. 1865); see the Appendix below, item 6.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Wspomnienie pośmiertne’, *Izraelita*, 1879, no. 39, p. 324.

This picture of life in Włocławek, whose author was possibly Hirsz Osser, a teacher at the Jewish elementary school, is in accord with insights from other sources on the history of the Jewish community in Włocławek and its 'Western orientation'. Osser headed a school for Jewish boys and girls, which the author claims was founded in 1859.<sup>32</sup> In the late 1850s, leading members of the community were successful in seeking to appoint Joseph Caro (1800–95), then living in Wielkopolska, as rabbi, and this upset community members who were more tradition-minded. Towards the end of the 1850s, an opponent of the Prussian candidate for the rabbinate stated in a petition to the relevant ministry that in the town

there are between ten and twenty adherents of the Old Testament [a term then used for Jews], among them some Prussian subjects, who have adopted foreign civilization and customs—more with the aim of strengthening their position than strengthening religion—and who in co-operation with the synagogue sextons are appointing a foreign rabbi in keeping with these principles. By doing so they wish to alter the ancient principles of the adherents of the Mosaic faith, and to introduce their own new ones.<sup>33</sup>

To bolster his argument, Markus, the author of the petition, warned about the risks of engaging a rabbi trained abroad and not knowledgeable about the local law, who would one-sidedly represent the interests of the wealthy Jewish families, and whose appointment in the community would inevitably lead to conflicts 'the likes of which have never been seen here or anywhere'.<sup>34</sup> Despite this initial resistance, Joseph Caro served as rabbi in Włocławek for some thirty-five years. He enjoyed great respect as a scholar and judge, but at the same time showed clear sympathies for the Polish independence movement. In that he resembled his friend Dov Ber Meisels (1798–1870), one of the outstanding figures of Polish Jewish history.<sup>35</sup> Joseph Caro took great care in arranging the education of his two sons. The older, Jacob (1836–1904), initially became a teacher, but later studied history and took a doctorate in 1860 at the University of Leipzig. One of the most prominent experts on Polish medieval history, he was appointed to a chair in history at the University of Breslau.<sup>36</sup> Joseph's younger son, Yehezkel (1844–1915), received a doctorate in theology and philosophy at the University of Heidelberg in 1866, and after several positions as a rabbi was appointed chief rabbi in Lviv.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> 'Kronika', *Israëlika*, 1875, no. 39, p. 314. In its first few years, some four dozen pupils attended the school, which had its own association of friends and supporters, and by the mid-1870s the number of pupils had soared to more than 250. <sup>33</sup> Bergman, *Nurt mauretański*, 111 n. 35. <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> F. Guesnet, 'Meisels, Dov Berush', in Hundert (ed.), *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, i. 1148.

<sup>36</sup> G. Rhode, 'Jüdische Historiker als Geschichtsschreiber Osteuropas: Jacob Caro, Adolf Warschauer, Ezechiël Zivier', in id. (ed.), *Juden in Ostmitteleuropa: Von der Emanzipation bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg* (Marburg, 1989), 100–5.

<sup>37</sup> M. Brocke and J. Carlebach (eds.), *Biographisches Handbuch der Rabbiner*, Teil 1: *Die Rabbiner der Emanzipationszeit in den deutschen, böhmischen und großpolnischen Ländern, 1781–1871*, Bd. i, rev. C. Wilcke (Munich, 2004), 223–4.

The way in which leading members of the community in Włocławek sought early on to identify with the broader sphere of a European Jewish culture oriented to Enlightenment was reflected in the ambitious project to build a new synagogue. The blueprint for this synagogue was drafted by Franciszek Tournelle, the officially appointed architect of the Warsaw province. The building, with a basilica ground-plan, reflected the Moorish style, especially in the design of its façade.<sup>38</sup> It was built in accordance with these plans in the years 1848–54.<sup>39</sup> The form and interior of the new synagogue were in strong contrast with the Polish traditions of synagogue construction. Four small decorative towers framed the structure at the corners of the square ground-plan, and the *bimah*, centrally placed beneath a high dome, had no covering. It was spacious, with seating for nearly a thousand, including accommodation for three hundred in the women's gallery. Both the Jewish and the non-Jewish press praised its beauty and perfection.<sup>40</sup> The festivities on the occasion of the opening of the synagogue reflect the specific religious orientation closely bound up with its construction. Dr Abraham Goldschmidt, a Warsaw-based preacher of Prussian origin, led the religious service.<sup>41</sup> Along with Goldschmidt, the cantor from his Warsaw congregation and its choir also participated in the opening of the new synagogue: this was indeed a notably strong presence of Reform-minded Jews from Warsaw, which suggests a considerable religious and cultural affinity between this Warsaw congregation and those responsible for the construction of the new synagogue in Włocławek. Later comments by Meyer are instructive, such as those made in a letter to his son in June 1867 on the occasion of a thanksgiving service.<sup>42</sup> He called the synagogue a 'temple', a common term among adherents of Reform Judaism.<sup>43</sup> As is clear from another letter to his son, Meyer identified closely with this tradition of progress. Referring to an evening of drama organized for the celebration of Purim, he noted in March 1865: 'The most pleasant thing is that our little town, after a period of decline, has resumed its former position in the

<sup>38</sup> An illustration can be found in Bergman, *Nurt mauretański*, 270–1. On the Moorish style quite popular in synagogue architecture in the nineteenth century, see I. D. Kalmar, 'Moorish Style: Orientalism, the Jews, and Synagogue Architecture', *Jewish Social Studies*, 7/3 (2001), 68–100.

<sup>39</sup> For details of the construction process, see Bergman, *Nurt mauretański*, 112–16. The writings of Louis Meyer contain no reference to the construction of the synagogue in Włocławek.

<sup>40</sup> Bergman, *Nurt mauretański*, 114.

<sup>41</sup> On Goldschmidt, who lost his post in Warsaw in 1859 and became rabbi in Leipzig, and on the so-called 'German synagogue', see J. Hensel, 'Wie "deutsch" war die "fortschrittliche" jüdische Bourgeoisie im Königreich Polen?', in H. Hecker and W. Engel (eds.), *Symbiose und Traditionsbruch: Deutsch-jüdische Wechselbeziehungen in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa (19. und 20. Jahrhundert)* (Essen, 2004), 135–72.

<sup>42</sup> On 6 June 1867, a young supporter of the Polish independence movement attempted to assassinate Tsar Alexander II in Paris. Neither the tsar nor Napoleon III, who was accompanying him, were injured in the incident. The following weekend, across the entire Russian empire, including Włocławek, thanksgiving services were held in churches and synagogues. The London *Times* reported that the angry mob wanted to hang the assassin on the spot: 'Attempt to Assassinate the Czar in Paris', *Times*, 6 June 1867, p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 199.

vanguard of progress.<sup>44</sup> His robust call for the abolition of the *shofar*, a ram's horn blown on various occasions in the synagogue, was also part of that religious approach: 'It is high time we abolished this disgusting music, and replaced the bizarre horn-blowers with competent oboists.'<sup>45</sup> In the later course of the nineteenth century, visitors to the town complained that this very promising tradition of progress had lost influence and the construction of the synagogue had also failed to achieve the effect hoped for: 'None of these expectations have been realized,' wrote Maxymilian Cohn in 1876; 'right down to the present, the service is full of disorder and shouting, just as in the good old days, while the chanting of the cantors defies description.'<sup>46</sup>

#### A POLISH JEWISH AUTHOR AND HIS POSTHUMOUSLY PUBLISHED WRITINGS IN GERMAN

Meyer's *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften* constitute a noteworthy monument to Jewish religious self-assurance in a phase of extensive shifts in self-perception and identity among Jews. They document reflections by the author on religion, the place of the Jewish religious community in its non-Jewish surroundings, and the internal character of the community. Włocławek lay in a region that was clearly classifiable both geographically and culturally as part of the traditional Polish Jewish world. On the other hand, there were distinct external influences discernible here, coming especially from Prussia, not least for the geographical reasons discussed earlier. In substantial measure, Meyer's great longing for what he recalled as happy years spent in Berlin provides a reason for his strong inclination to identify with religious attitudes that—to simplify crudely—could be considered part of a German Jewish current that had strong sympathies with Reform Judaism. Meyer's statements on the Jewish community, religion, and Orthodoxy in a number of texts in the *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften* provide a rich ensemble of references pointing to this.

Not untypically for a member of the numerically small number of adherents of reform in religious services and other aspects of Jewish religious life, Meyer did not champion drastic change. He responded to the staunch enlighteners of his time: 'If you run too fast with a lantern, it doesn't shine. Moderator lamps ensure that oil flows only in small drops to the light, not in large quantities; such lamps provide the best light.'<sup>47</sup> His attitude towards formal institutions of religious practice is

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 184 (letter to his son, 14 Mar. 1865). The tradition of amateur theatrical evenings continued in Włocławek in subsequent decades too, as is evident from regular reports; see e.g. A. W-n, 'Korrespondencja', *Izraelita*, 1900, no. 7, p. 80.

<sup>45</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 185 (letter to his son, 20 Sept. 1865 / 29 Elul 5625).

<sup>46</sup> Max. Cohn, 'Korrespondencja', *Izraelita*, 1876, no. 17, p. 134.

<sup>47</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 161. Moderator oil lamps, which controlled the flow of oil, were an innovation in lighting in the mid-nineteenth century.

strikingly distant, if not downright sceptical. In his view, a religiosity grounded on trust in God and observance of the religious commandments was more important than traditional authorities and those installed in office. In one observation that Meyer made on his times, he notes that ‘an excess of religion from the pulpit, in synagogues, leads to a passion that is destructive’.<sup>48</sup> As early as 1819, in a letter to the Berlin journalist Isaak Lewin Auerbach, from whom he had hoped to obtain some support in publishing his poems, he expressed himself to be among those who ‘have not uttered a herem against reason, and wish to conduct their devotions with sincerity, with spirit and sense’, in so doing erecting an obstacle to the ‘self-empowering rabbinical guild’:

Who could remain indifferent to what we have to put up with today, when a tiny group of isolated pietists, living in a self-created world of fantasy filled with their own empty illusions, with no idea whatsoever of the real world—when these dreamers, who only in their ignorance believe themselves full of knowledge, dare to claim for themselves sole authority over our entire people, and to toss about *authoritative rulings* almost akin to thunderbolts of anathema?<sup>49</sup>

Rather, in Meyer’s view, an inward concern for the needy and a charity and benevolence towards them are the real expression of an attitude pleasing to God. In a letter from Warsaw, Meyer told his son to mark the anniversary of his mother’s death in the following way:

Celebrate it with prayers of devotion in the Lord’s house and pious vows at *her* grave, where you can distribute alms directly to the needy, paid for by the funds I have given you. May this action of yours, undertaken in a sense of piety, stand as a worthy monument for your mother, as solid as one made of stone and metal, because benevolence was your mother’s dearest activity.<sup>50</sup>

In addition, we see in these instructions a continuing familiarity with traditional customs observed in a Jewish cemetery at the time. Meyer assumed that his son would meet people in need at his mother’s grave-site, who on this occasion could expect to receive by tradition some gift of alms, and indeed did receive this. This was a custom that more resolute representatives of reform in Jewish religious customs had begun to struggle against systematically at this time.<sup>51</sup> Unlike these reformers, Meyer sees the core of Judaism in a community recreated ever anew. His poem ‘Die Weihe durch Kinder’ (‘Consecration by Children’), the first of the poems grouped under the programmatic heading ‘Jüdisches’ (‘Jewish Matters’),

<sup>48</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 132.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 208 (letter from Włocławek to I. L. Auerbach in Berlin, 31 July 1819). With his remarks critical of the rabbinate, Meyer espoused a key line of argumentation of the Reform-oriented Wissenschaft des Judentums, which—as for example in the person of the Prussian Jewish writer Eduard Gans (1798–1839)—welcomed legislative measures to reduce traditional rabbinical judicial powers in Poland too. See Guesnet, *Polnische Juden*, 90.

<sup>50</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 180 (letter to his son, 27 Dec. 1835).

<sup>51</sup> Guesnet, *Polnische Juden*, 303–25.

provides us with an idyllic picture in this connection: the newborn infant is welcomed by the schoolchildren of the locality with song and prayer immediately after its birth, and is accepted into the Jewish community even before circumcision, which for Jewish males marks the religious entry into the Jewish covenant with God.<sup>52</sup>

For Meyer, a vital community is grounded on religious practice and overcomes differences of class and wealth by means of ritual. This becomes clear in the poem 'Die Peßach-Feier' ('Celebrating Passover'), with its hints of the Biedermeier period, which describes in warm colours the family celebration at the beginning of this holiday, in which the needy whom the father brings home from the synagogue, as also the domestic servants, all take part.<sup>53</sup> The drama of 'Der Vorabend des Versöhnungstages' ('The Evening before the Day of Atonement') equally invokes the nexus between religion and community: a wealthy man, a member (*parnas*) of the board of the community, has insulted the rabbi, and is lying alone at home, sick, on the evening before Yom Kippur. He is thus excluded from the ritual of this solemn day, where in the synagogue transgressions are confessed, penance is done, and reconciliation with God is sought. Yet in keeping with the lofty character of this cycle of poems, this sinner also is able to relieve his soul, because the rabbi visits the sick man at home and allows him to atone.<sup>54</sup> The cycle follows the annual calendar of holidays, repeatedly invoking the covenant and community of the Jews. In the poem 'Das Laubhütten- oder Freudenfest' ('The Festival of Tabernacles or Festival of Joy'), Meyer describes how the congregation disperses after the service, proceeding to the *sukot* or booths constructed all around the synagogue:

Wie im Gotteshause die Gemeinde  
Sich vereint zum großen weiten Bund,  
Bilden Bundes-Ringe hier die Freunde  
In den Hütten, an der Tafel Rund.

(As in the house of God the congregation  
unites in a great broad covenant,  
the friends here form rings of bonding  
in the booths, around the table.)

Here too the theme of the equalizing effect of ritual appears: 'Arme reih'n an Reiche sich als Gäste | Bei dem festlich schönen Freudenmahl' ('The poor sit down with the rich as guests at the festive, beautiful meal of joy'). This poem, didactic in tone, is marked by the description of a world that is indisputably whole. One can clearly discern here Meyer's desire to acquaint his readers with key features of the Jewish religion, and to convey a positive image of Jewish community.<sup>55</sup> This raises the question: for what audience was this and similar poems intended?

<sup>52</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 218–19.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 222–6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 219–20.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 227–9.

A quite different mood prevails in the literary reworking of the biblical legend 'Die Mutter mit den sieben Söhnen' ('The Mother with Seven Sons').<sup>56</sup> It is not surprising that the reworking of this theme of martyrdom stems from the time of the so-called Hep-Hep riots (1819), and it is likely that Meyer seized on the story of the martyrdom described in 2 Maccabees 7 as a reaction to those events.<sup>57</sup> Meyer also worked with the figure of the martyr in 'Palästinische Elegie' ('Palestinian Elegy'), which has a number of striking similarities to the early Zionist hymn of the 1880s by Isaak Feld, 'Dort, wo die Zedern' ('There Where the Cedars'), so that it is possible to argue that Feld may have used this text as a template.<sup>58</sup> Meyer links the traditional motif of the sanctification of God's name (Hebrew *kidush hashem*, i.e. martyrdom) with a patriotic perspective: both the historical tragedy of the decline of Israel ('Judäas Ruhm und Fall': 'Judah's fame and fall') and the contemporary misery of dispersion ('dumpf'ger Kerker . . . wo Juda's Helden schmachten': 'musty dungeon . . . where Judah's heroes languish') appear here to be awaiting their dissolution, made void by a new generation of 'heroes'. Salvation will be the consequence on the one hand of the deeds of the martyrs, and on the other of the actions of the 'new rulers of the world', those who administer 'eternal justice'.

The texts contained in the short cycle 'Gebete und Lieder' ('Prayers and Songs') heighten further the high tone of the previous poems, bringing them to a new level in a series of declamatory festive religious texts circling around the themes of prayer, loyalty to the Law, faith in God, and religious community.<sup>59</sup> Among these texts, the poem 'Höre, Israel!' ('Hear, O Israel!'), seeking to make comprehensible the importance of this prayer (the Shema) as a Jewish confession of faith, harks back to the didactic character of the previous poems. It was published in 1861 in the periodical *Hamagid*, a Hebrew weekly for the east European Jewish public issued in the small East Prussian town of Lyck (Elk), rendered in a literal Hebrew translation; Meyer is named as author with his Jewish first and middle name, Yehudah Leib. The poem appeared not much later in a translation into Polish in the Warsaw periodical *Jutrzenka*.<sup>60</sup> The Polish version of 'Hear, O Israel!' is, like its original, an

<sup>56</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 229–33.

<sup>57</sup> On the anti-Jewish riots that began in Würzburg and surged into a wave of bloody violence against Jews across a wide region of southern Germany and in some northern German cities, see R. Erb and W. Bergmann, *Die Nachtseite der Judenemanzipation: Der Widerstand gegen die Integration der Juden in Deutschland, 1780–1860* (Berlin, 1989).

<sup>58</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 233–5. See F. Guesnet, 'Chanukah and its Function in the Invention of a Jewish-Heroic Tradition in Early Zionism, 1880–1900', in M. Berkowitz (ed.), *Nationalism, Zionism and Ethnic Mobilization of the Jews in 1900 and Beyond* (Leiden, 2004), 227–45.

<sup>59</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 236–44.

<sup>60</sup> Y. L. Meyer, 'Shema yisra'el', *Hamagid*, 14 May 1861, p. 101, and *Jutrzenka*, 1863, no. 1, pp. 1–2. As in the later German edition, in *Jutrzenka* the title is given in Hebrew first ('Shema yisra'el'), followed by the Polish translation. The name of the translator appears only in initials, as Al. K. A likely candidate would be Aleksander Kraushar, whom Meyer appreciated as an author (see n. 86 below), and with whom he may have been in contact.



almost literal translation of the Hebrew of the Shema.<sup>61</sup> This cycle, which concludes the section 'Jüdisches', ends with a poem in German and Hebrew versions. This solemn poem, 'An die heilige Bruderschaft!' ('To the Holy Fraternity!'), is addressed to members of the burial society (see the Appendix below, item 4). According to the editors of the first edition of Meyer's writings, it was written at the beginning of Meyer's last year of life, and deals with the work of the members of the burial society (*hevra kadisha*), who traditionally care for the dead in the community.<sup>62</sup> The familiar tone in which Meyer addresses the members of the burial society suggests that he may well have been one of them himself. In a series of images, the German version mentions the actual activities performed by the members of the *hevra kadisha*: cleaning and preparing the body (*tohorah* or purification), closing the eyes, enclosing the corpse in a simple linen shroud, prayers and chants, and the preparation of the burial site. Meyer even added an assumed year of death to the poem: 'ca. 1870'. The Hebrew version is more connected with the spiritual-religious bond between the lyrical 'I' and the brothers in the *hevra kadisha*, and chants, prayers, and the wake are evoked here too. In both versions the tribulation and joy of a long life lead to a similar longing for eternal rest. The comrades in the burial society function as guarantors of this transition to the realm of rest.<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, the community of the *hevra kadisha* embodies the certainty of salvation, the highest expression, also manifest in other poems, of the extremely great importance that Meyer attached to the Jewish community (*kehilah*) in his religious-spiritual world view.

Beyond treatment of these directly religious topics, Louis Meyer's *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften* contain a broad spectrum of literary and occasional texts, observations on events of personal and general importance, commentaries, letters, carefully composed poems, dramatic works, and philosophical and religious reflections. Some of these works have a distinctly amateurish character. A studied and often pretentious manner is conspicuous, and many of his texts are indisputably imitative. Yet precisely this desire to emulate sheds light on the broad spectrum of the *musée sentimental* of a Jew living in Poland in the mid-nineteenth century, which appears unique in its totality.

<sup>61</sup> In the last verse, the neutral German expression 'vom Anbeginne bis zur heut'gen Stunde', i.e. from the beginning of Jewish history until today, is enriched with a more patriotic formula, 'gdý już ojczyste stracił ołtarze' ('when [the Jews] had already lost their fatherland's altars'), very much in tune with the Polish patriotic fervour of the period. Also, the German words 'Israelit' and 'Israel', in lines 3 and 6 of the last stanza, are translated as 'Żyd'.

<sup>62</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 243–4. On the role of the burial societies in Poland, see Guesnet, *Polnische Juden*, 357–86. A general interpretation and description of the *hevra kadisha* can be found in S. A. Goldberg, *Crossing the Jabbok: Illness and Death in Ashkenazi Judaism in Sixteenth-through Nineteenth-Century Prague* (Berkeley, 1997).

<sup>63</sup> As in the conceptions of death and the world beyond in other cultures, Jewish legend also knows a river, the Yabok, which divides the living from the dead, and death is seen as a crossing of this river. Correspondingly, the manual of the burial societies is called *Ma'avar yabok*, 'the one who crosses the river of death'.

The first part of his *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften* offers a broad array of poetic, humorous, dramatic, and didactic works. It begins with a section ‘Landmanns- und Handwerkerlieder’ (‘Songs of Farmers and Artisans’). They are marked by a post-Romantic longing for nature, an enthusiasm for simple village life distant from civilization and religion, and by an effort to achieve an energetic yet at the same time sensuous tone. Instead of Christian or Jewish philosophical views of the world, there is a naive earthiness and joy in living, whose rhythms are those of planting and harvest, desire and dying. This world of imagery is exemplified in the bucolic hymn ‘Beim Mähen’ (‘Reaping’): the ‘true sons of the earth’ are the farmers who at ‘an early morning hour’ harvest the ‘luxuriant bursting fields’.<sup>64</sup> Concrete references to a real-life world remain stereotypical, such as a verse about ‘the crazy dance of the Poles’ in the poem ‘Beim Ernte-Fest’ (‘Harvest Festival’). The basic current running through this group of poems is a desire to harmonize, and it does not hesitate to overstep the boundary into kitsch, ending up on occasion in the realm of what is involuntarily funny—as in ‘Beim Ernte-Fest’:

Jetzo räumt für die Alten  
Einen hohen Ehrensitz;  
Denn, wo Ordnungssinn soll walten,  
Muß das Alter an die Spitz.<sup>65</sup>

(Now clear the way for the old  
to sit on a high seat of honour;  
because where a sense of order should prevail,  
Age must lead the way.)

The romanticizing references to rural life are in obvious contrast to the realities of traditional Jewish life, whether in Germany or in Poland, as are those to the life of artisans, celebrated for their ‘spirit of freedom’. In the ‘Maurer-Lied’ (‘Song of the Mason’), industriousness, cheerfulness, and fraternity in artisan life underpin social peace and political freedom: ‘So wird der Arbeits-Kreis zum schönen Bund, | Der Geist der Freiheit thut in ihm sich kund’ (‘Thus the fellowship of work becomes a beautiful alliance, the spirit of freedom makes itself known there’). And it goes on: ‘Der Ordnungsgeist gleicht selbst Ungleichheit aus, | Er baut die Staaten wie er baut ein Haus’ (‘The spirit of order evens out inequality by itself; it builds states just as it builds a house’).<sup>66</sup> While most of the ‘Handwerker-Lieder’ (‘Songs of Artisans’) contain the ideal of a traditional social order external to history, whose members are bound together by simple piety and co-operative egalitarian solidarity, giving the poems in this section an unusually conservative undertone, in the ‘Buchdrucker-Lied’ (‘Printer’s Song’) Meyer takes a far clearer and more unambiguous position in favour of press freedom and enlightenment, calling its enemies the ‘black, bleak priests of Baal’, doubtless a reference to the Roman Catholic clergy. The comparatively simple juxtaposing of night, darkness, and

<sup>64</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 46.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 49–50.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 54.

religious fanaticism to day, light, and enlightenment, as the saviour of which Gutenberg is lauded, is especially instructive for understanding Meyer's basic position on the relation between religion, knowledge, and society. It was the invention of printing as an 'intellectual spear' that made possible the spread of the 'general light' of the Enlightenment, whose adversaries are the (above all Catholic) clergy.<sup>67</sup>

The cycle 'Geschichtliche Lieder' ('Historical Songs') begins with two poems that Meyer, then just turned 21, most certainly composed while still in Berlin. Napoleon's final defeat is interpreted by Meyer in his 'Nach dem Pariser Frieden (1815)' ('After the Peace of Paris, 1815') as an end in particular to armed hostilities and war. War is termed 'humanity's demon', which 'separates peoples from peoples'. It is evident that Meyer cannot and does not want to interpret the victory over Napoleon's France in patriotic terms and does not idealize military confrontation. He appeals to the 'German bosom' to welcome once again the Graces and the Muses, and thus to return to intellectual heroic deeds—instead of seeking to prove oneself on the field of battle. A 'comely girl' promises to be waiting for the 'brave horseman' and to reward him with 'faithful love' for proven valour in the field. The faster the German nation of culture so revered by Meyer can disarm, the better.<sup>68</sup> A comparable empathetic and observant stance also marks the second early song, 'Die Weichsel und die Pleiße' ('The Vistula and the Pleisse'), in which the death by drowning of Prince Józef Poniatowski (1763–1813), a Polish statesman and military leader of the Napoleonic era, is structured as an antiphony between two rivers: the Polish Vistula and the Saxonian Pleisse. The song celebrates the hero as such, whose death is worthy of regret in both Poland and Germany.<sup>69</sup> The two songs 'Auf dem Rhein (1850)' ('On the Rhine, 1850') and 'Auf der Elbe (1850)' ('On the Elbe, 1850'), river poems with their date of composition in the title, suggest how large rivers in Europe can shape identity.<sup>70</sup> Whereas the Rhine stands for the—comprehensible—longing of the Germans for unity, the Elbe reflects rather the diversity of peoples, languages, trades, and religions on its banks. It ends with a hymnal praise for the city of Hamburg, which stands 'in Pracht und wunderbarer | Tausend-jähr'ger Blüthe prangt' ('resplendent in its magnificence and wondrous florescence of a thousand years').<sup>71</sup> The poem 'Der Pariser Congreß (1856)' ('The Paris Congress, 1856') is more a satirical commentary on political developments of the day, and on a congress at which, after the Crimean War, the western European great powers tried to arrange a balance of interests among themselves, seeking a lasting control of Russia and the Ottoman empire and a weakening of their power.<sup>72</sup>

In his noteworthy synopsis 'Wettgesang der Hauptflüsse Europa's (1855)' ('Singing Match between Europe's Main Rivers, 1855'), Meyer commented on the

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 59.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 64.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 65. It is interesting that Meyer distances himself here from his possible paradigm Heinrich Heine, in particular Heine's *Deutschland: Ein Wintermärchen*. In contrast with Heine, Meyer finds a longing for the unity of the Reich comprehensible.

<sup>71</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 66–9.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 70.

tension between aspiration and reality, between the potentials of European culture and the sobering realities of his time. It is not difficult to see, despite the lightly encrypted formulation, that he regards Roman Catholicism as one of the main impediments to the development of the European potential for peace and culture. Thus, the Tiber complains that ‘gift’ge Schlangenarten um den Lebensbaum [nisten]’ (‘poisonous snakes lurk round the Tree of Life’) and it issues the call: ‘Auf, Ihr Gärtner, treibet sie heraus | Treibt die Schlangen aus Italia’s Haus!’ (‘Arise, ye gardeners, drive them out, drive the snakes from Italia’s house!’). In Spain, the ‘spirits of the night’ rule, and in France ‘streben noch auch hier die Dunkeln zu tödten | Jeglichen Geist’ (‘here too dark powers strive to extinguish any and all intellect’). By contrast, the English Thames flows in a land that respects human dignity. But there is a reservation: ‘Denn es heget engherzig der Britte | Stets nur die Freiheit in eigener Mitte’ (‘Because the petty Briton cherishes always and only freedom in his own setting’). The greatest German cultural achievement was the Reformation, the ‘Sieg gegen röm’schen Lug und Geisteszwang’ (‘victory over Roman mendacity and intellectual coercion’) of which the Elbe sings, and ‘Höher glänzen Deutschlands kühne Denker | Als die Helden, als die Schlachtenlenker’ (‘Germany’s bold thinkers sparkle more than all the heroes, the leaders of battles’). Meyer sees Poland too as part of Europe, and he has high regard for the fact that Poland ‘nicht mit anderen Mächten kämpfte, | Um Völker unter sich zu knechten’ (‘did not fight against other powers in order to subjugate other peoples under its yoke’). Rather, ‘brach der Strom asiatischer Barbaren | An dem Schutzdamm seiner Heldenschaaren’ (‘the river of Asiatic barbarians broke against the protective dam of its hordes of heroes’). But Europe by contrast proved ungrateful for this: ‘Doch Europa — welche Schmach und Schande! | Dankte ihm durch Theilung seiner Lande’ (‘Yet Europe—what shame and disgrace!—thanked Poland by partitioning its lands’).<sup>73</sup>

Political undertones are even clearer in his ‘Wiegenlied (1856)’ (‘Lullaby, 1856’), where he bitterly complains about the prevailing censorship and police control, in surprisingly clear and unambiguous terms: ‘Was man heißt, das *thue*; | Widerstand der frommt dir nicht’ (‘What they say, *obey*; resistance is of no use’). Resigned to the situation, he goes on: ‘Freiheit ist nur Grille. | Auf die Freiheit thu’ Verzicht, | Ruhe ist die *schönste* Pflicht’ (‘Freedom is but a whim. Renounce freedom, *peace and quiet* is the duty *most beautiful*’).<sup>74</sup>

In heavily encoded verse, Meyer comments on the massive and violent suppression of the Polish independence movement in his poem ‘Der Winter im Frühling (1861)’ (‘Winter in the Spring, 1861’). The connection with political events of the time is evident only from the indication of month (in the first stanza) and year (in the title): in March 1861, five demonstrators were shot down in Warsaw, slain by Russian police. Among them were two Jewish students, and these

<sup>73</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 72–7. Several other texts express his critical view of Roman Catholicism, such as ‘Drei Isabela’s’, *ibid.* 135. <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 77; see the Appendix below, item 2.

victims and the 'shared blood shed', often voiced as a slogan in the subsequent period, are considered the myth of origin of a short-lived period of Polish–Jewish solidarity and fraternity.<sup>75</sup> Again making a political comment, Meyer looks back in his 'Das neue Jahr (1867)' ('New Year, 1867') to the Austro–Prussian war of 1866. He notes that every year starts peacefully, but soon 'begins to hum songs of war', and then degenerates into a 'wild brawl'.<sup>76</sup> Meyer's humanistic attitude is clear here, rejecting war as a means for solving political, social, or religious conflicts. Rather, he viewed war as the principal evil of his era, destructive of intellectual greatness and creativity.

A group of poems under the label 'Lyrisches' ('Lyrical') stems partly from Meyer's Berlin years, and partly from the 1850s and 1860s. Rapture, a deep feeling for nature, euphoria, and melancholy mark these lyrical pieces. Meyer also preserved this elevated tone in the poems he wrote in the final years of his life, in which he elaborates on feelings of loss and sorrow: in 'Zur Ruhe' ('To Sleep') he takes a lullaby for a little child and places it in parallel with the preparations of an old man for death, and in 'Am Sterbetage meiner Schwester Blümchen (1867)' ('On the Day of the Death of my Sister Blümchen, 1867') Meyer expresses his sorrow at the loss of his sister.<sup>77</sup> Even decades after returning to Poland, Meyer still writes with a quite smooth and supple diction. The extent of his awareness that his time in Berlin was a unique and limited period in his life emerges clearly, and nowhere more so than in his poem 'Erinnerung an Berlin' ('Memory of Berlin'), written a year after his return to Włocławek.<sup>78</sup> The leitmotif of this poem is Meyer's admiration for the magnificence of Berlin and Prussia, and for the urbanity, quality of life, fine arts, education, and science there. Finally, noteworthy are two poems from his Berlin years that are strongly charged with eroticism.<sup>79</sup>

Many of Meyer's songs, poems, and texts are addressed to members of his family, but alongside the family man a picture emerges of him as the host, or at least an organizer, of social events of a cultural nature. Some of the works were evidently the occasional products of cultural life in a small town, such as a quite large number of short prose texts, perhaps best described as *causerie*: brilliant observations, but largely devoid of substantial content.<sup>80</sup> Precisely when commenting on serious topics, Meyer adopted an imaginative, almost burlesque, tone. His 'Selbstbiographie eines Flohes' ('Autobiography of a Flea') targets religious fanaticism in general and the excesses of the Catholic religion in particular. The flea leaves Eastern Pomerania with its parents, when the 'despised progressive economy

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 79; see also Opalski and Bartal, *Poles and Jews*, 44–8.

<sup>76</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 81.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 101, 102.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 93–4; see the Appendix below, item 1.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 90, 'An einen erwarteten Abend' ('To an Awaited Evening'); 94–5, 'Symptome' ('Symptoms').

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 116, 'Apologie des Auges' ('Apology of the Eye'); 119, 'Der Kuckuck und der Baum' ('The Cuckoo and the Tree'); 121, 'Der Aufstand der Flüsse' ('Revolt of the Rivers'); or 136, 'Die Hand' ('The Hand').

begins to expand there', and in its wanderings arrives in Rome. Here the flea listens to the Pope, subsequently biting the pontiff as he delivers a sermon directed, amongst others, 'against the Jews, who dare to demand the return of their infants, taken by pious wet nurses into the bosom of the Church'. This evident allusion to the Mortara affair, triggered by the secret baptism and abduction of a Jewish child in Bologna, suggests that the poem can be dated to sometime after 1858.<sup>81</sup> In 'Messias' ('Messiah') Meyer bemoans the general decay of morals, manifested in war, brutality, and violence. A murder in Włocławek, apparently the occasion for writing the text, leads to a conversation with a Polish 'gentleman', who attributes the violent act to a lack of religion. Meyer quotes his interlocutor as saying in Polish: 'Przez brak religii' ('through a lack of religion'), to whom he retorts, also in Polish: 'Owszem przez zbytek religii' ('on the contrary, through an excess of religion'). He goes on: 'In actual fact, there is too much religion in the world and too little morality. Religion has its synagogues, churches, mosques, and pagodas everywhere—but where are the temples to morality?'<sup>82</sup> In other texts, Meyer's thoughts are marked by efforts to argue convincingly over and beyond religious boundaries. The topics and viewpoints that he chose and the events that inspired him to write show clearly just how broad his horizon was, and how great were his efforts to integrate a multitude of religious and philosophical views into his understanding of a diverse society more friendly to human interests and sentiments.<sup>83</sup>

Meyer's dramatic works contained in his *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften* are of very uneven quality. They may have been written for reading or use at home or in some local framework. On 14 March 1865, Meyer described in a letter a local theatrical performance in the course of which 'a cloverleaf of three comedies' was staged, and he added: 'The actors and actresses were our relatives and friends.'<sup>84</sup> Deserving of special mention among his plays is *Die Schöpfung* ('Creation'), a humoresque about the creation of the world. The rather nonchalant and somewhat bored proclamation by God of the creation of the earth and man leads to intensive discussions between Satan, the archangels, and the Creator. Satan says: 'I am opposed as a matter of principle to the annexation and integration of new bodies. It will be much too much work for us, and to organize these recalcitrant new parts will create much ill will.' This assessment, not least a reflection of Meyer's thinking about the injustice of the partition of Poland, is echoed by the archangels, who think that 'this time, Satan is right', while the Creator contends: 'I, the Eternal and Everlasting One, must know better what I am doing, since *l'Empire, c'est Moi!*' At the conclusion of the successful creation of the world, Adam and Eve welcome the sabbath together with the other dramatis personae.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Further allusions to this cause célèbre can be found in Meyer's letters to his son, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 180 (15 Sept. 1860) and 182 (30 Sept. 1864), as well as in a letter to an anonymous Warsaw acquaintance, *ibid.* 214 (24 Dec. 1858).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 131–3.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 120–1, 'Andacht' ('Devotion'); 134–5, 'Religion' ('Religion'); 135, 'Religion der Zukunft' ('Religion of the Future').

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 184.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 140–7.

More clearly and pointedly than in the songs and poems, his attentive and critical view of his times is contained in a great number of sayings and short commentaries that were gathered together under the heading 'Allerlei Kleinigkeiten' ('Assorted Trifles') in the first edition of *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*. Among them are numerous reflections on Jewish history, Jewish religion, and the Jewish present, and he was inspired here by both the German Jewish and Polish Jewish historiography of his time.<sup>86</sup> Thus, he regularly reflects on the similarities and differences between Poles and Jews. Even though his remarks are generalizing and aphoristic in nature, Meyer sought to avoid any negative stereotype. Rather, he tried to recognize the one in the other, and bring out their shared features. In reference to the Jewish patriarchs Shem, Ham, and Japheth, he noted: 'These three principal races of humankind appear to be strongly represented in Poland. The Polish nobleman is the true type of one descended from the refined Japheth. He calls the farmer literally "Cham",<sup>87</sup> and this class really does have something of its scruffy progenitor. The Polish Jew is the incarnate bench-warmer Shem, as described in the Talmud.'<sup>88</sup> He has similar comments on the January uprising: 'The Poles are Jews with sabres, the Jews are Poles without sabres. Two tough nationalities, amongst whom sublimity walks side by side with insanity. Thus, today's Polish movement (1863) is a sublime insanity.'<sup>89</sup> In these observations on his times, Meyer did not limit himself to just the Polish horizon. He very attentively followed developments in Prussia and Austria. To an appreciable degree, it was sympathy for the Polish independence movement, which sought to undo the consequences of the partitioning of Poland, that made the two great powers Prussia and Austria look similar to him: 'The Austrian saying "divide et impera!" is similar in sense to the Prussian dictum "suum quique"—both love to *divide things up*.'<sup>90</sup> He repeats this assessment in the context of the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, when he weighs the historical burdens of the two states one against the other. Gradually, his initially boundless admiration for Prussia receded, to be replaced by a more sober evaluation: 'In Prussia, Germany is now rising *up*—and going *under*', was his comment on the situation after the Austro-Prussian war.<sup>91</sup>

Meyer's songs, poems, and prose texts provide a differentiated impression of his literary, religious, and cultural horizon. In addition, his *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften* contain a large number of letters in German, in which he reports to his sister and son about everyday life in Warsaw or in Włocławek. The letters from

<sup>86</sup> Apart from references in passing to the Jewish press of his day, Meyer only rarely mentions authors he has read. Among those noted are the author of the 'magnificent twelve lectures on Jewish history', whom he does not name (it was Abraham Geiger, 1810–74), and Aleksander Kraushar (1843–1931) and his book on Jewish history in the Polish medieval period, *Historia Żydów w Polsce*: Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 189–90 (letters to his son, 15 May 1866).

<sup>87</sup> In Polish, *cham* is a derogatory word for a boorish, uncouth man.

<sup>88</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 150.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* 160.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* 151.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* 154; and 194–6 (letter to his son, 22 June 1866).

Warsaw were written mainly to his sister in Włocławek during the period 1835–9. They describe life in the Polish capital in vivid colours and with a richness of detail. In the second group of letters, in the main composed at a later date, Louis Meyer wrote from Włocławek to his son Herman, describing life in the provincial town. There are three longer letters, to Isaak Lewin Auerbach in Berlin,<sup>92</sup> to a Russian military doctor probably stationed in Włocławek, and to an unidentified acquaintance in Warsaw. It is clear from the letters to his sister that when Meyer was working in the Warsaw bank of Simon Rosen, he often stayed on in Warsaw during the Jewish high holidays, although not always. He liked to compose letters on the occasion of such holidays, and combined them with wishes and pious admonitions. His everyday life emerges in the proud description of new garments he has acquired: ‘Just take a look at my long, sky-blue greatcoat—the colour is divine, the tailoring English. And now behold this broad, dark blue overcoat, with its black velvet collar and green lining.’<sup>93</sup> Among the accounts of everyday life, there is also Meyer’s witty description of his employer, the banker Simon Rosen: ‘Despot to the highest degree, he is nonetheless no tyrant in his own field of activity, and when he does radiate a beam of friendliness, he appeases those around him.’ Of his influential son, Mathias Rosen, he wrote: ‘On the railway track of my life, Mathias by himself would be enough to reconcile me with human society. I don’t know anyone else who is so full of sheer goodness.’<sup>94</sup> He did not much like, as he revealed in his letters, what he found in the social life of the capital, in which he participated as a senior bank official. Since people were evidently trying to find a new spouse for him, it is clear that he was perceived as part of this society.<sup>95</sup> He describes in some detail outstanding social events in Warsaw, such as a soirée given in 1836 to introduce the Breslau-born husband-to-be of a daughter of one of the leading Warsaw families. Meyer regretted that the evening meal was not served until after card games and dancing, in the small hours of the morning, and not seated at a table, but rather as a cold buffet:

Alas, fresh misfortune! People did not sit down in an orderly fashion around a table, as our good fathers used to. No, instead people rushed like mad things to a table full of all sorts of food, grabbed a plate and a fork, piled the plate high with their choice, and made off to a corner. And then they devoured the stuff they’d managed to grab, rather in the way that Venetian *merchants’ wives* consume their lunch at the shop. In the sophisticated world, this is called dining ‘à la fourchette’, in German—‘fork-dinner’!<sup>96</sup>

Just as graphically, Meyer describes the wedding festivities in one of the prominent Jewish families in Warsaw:

<sup>92</sup> Isaak Lewin Auerbach (1791–1853) was one of the pioneers of the German Jewish Reform movement and a founding member of the Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft des Judentums (Association for the Culture and Science of Judaism).

<sup>93</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 166 (letter to his sister, 7 Nov. [1835]).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 174–5 (letter to his sister, 27 May 1838).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 178 (letter to his sister, 23 Dec. 1839).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 168 (letter to his sister, 4 Jan. 1836); see the Appendix below, item 5.



We enter the first room. The resplendence of a multitude of candelabra glitters to welcome us. We greet people with a slight nod of the head right and left, shake the hands of acquaintances as we pass, and congratulate the feted couple. We proceed further. In the room to the right, the good old days seem to tarry. Sable coats and long beards are a vivid reminder that here a wedding of 'our people' is being celebrated. In the room to the left it's all quite different. No trace of Judaism is to be seen here. A Babylonian confusion of languages predominates: Polish, French, and German intermingle.<sup>97</sup>

By contrast, his sister in Włocławek learned very little about the life of the broader circles of the Jewish community in Warsaw, then growing very rapidly. Meyer does not mention anywhere that he himself enjoyed a prominent place among the adherents of Enlightenment and Jewish reform in Warsaw, as Jacob Shatzky, the chronicler of the Warsaw Jewish community, reports.<sup>98</sup> The lower status of Jewish residents in the Polish capital is barely touched upon. The 'wretched head tax' ('erbärmlicher Tag-Zettel') demanded from Jews to permit entry to the capital, which people regarded as a great affront and one of the worst forms of discrimination, is mentioned only once by Meyer.<sup>99</sup> He did not comment on conflicts between Jews and non-Jews, aside once from several remarks regarding the lack of proper recognition for a rising Jewish actor:

The Jewish actor *Davidsohn*, whom you find so interesting, did a good job of playing his third inaugural role, and is already active in the theatre. There is no doubt he's one of the best local actors, and maybe some day will become the best of all. But he still faces difficult challenges, and people still cannot stomach the idea that a son of Israel should be a hero on the stage.<sup>100</sup>

Meyer's letters to his son follow the rhythms of the Jewish holidays and describe the quiet, comfortable life in the province, but are no less informative for that. For example, it becomes clear how the railway had significantly changed small-town life, and had itself become a metaphor for cultural innovation. Thus, Meyer commented on the Mortara affair as it developed that it was a 'Nemesis now riding the rails', and at Jewish New Year 1864 he summarized the year after the January 1863 uprising and its suppression in a vivid formulation:

The railway cars rolling by in opposite directions can indeed provide us with a graphic image of the turn of the year: the long, dark train of coaches of the past year, we know what it contains. We know the heavy cargo of bitterness it brought to the country in general and to each person in particular. May this funeral train of sorrow roll off into time's abyss, into the gorge of the past. And may the mire it brought with it never again appear!<sup>101</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 170 (letter to his sister, 1836), 170.

<sup>98</sup> Shatzky, *Geshikhte fun yidn in varshe*, ii. 132.

<sup>99</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 173 (letter to his sister, 27 May 1838).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 172 (letter to his sister, undated). While Meyer was still alive, a similar case of insufficient recognition of artistic performance was to develop into a scandal that kept the public in suspense for many weeks, the so-called 'Jewish war' of 1859. On this, see *Der Fremde als Nachbar: Polnische Positionen zur jüdischen Präsenz: Texte seit 1800*, ed. F. Guesnet (Frankfurt am Main, 2009), 120–57.

<sup>101</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 181–2 (letter to his son, 30 Sept. 1864).

And in this same letter, he notes with alarm that the members of the hasidic community of the Gerer Rebbe are also using the railway in order to travel at New Year to their leader:

During these days we have experienced the sight of something totally new for our rational part of the world: the open coaches of the fourth class filled with those physically and morally wretched figures who call themselves hasidim, and who go on pilgrimage in groups to their Rebbe on the holy Mount Calvary. Whence do these children of the steppes of the spirit come to us? Did Hell spit them out and hurl them in our direction? They came from the other side . . . of the Vistula, from out of the caves of backwardness, in order to use the railway here, the pathway of progress, for their pilgrimages.<sup>102</sup>

In the period after the quashing of the January uprising, Meyer often turned to look towards the West, interested in observing and commenting in some detail on Prussia's bid for predominance in Germany. There is no doubt that the Prussian victory over Catholic Austria in 1866 gave him a certain satisfaction ('no sympathies for the great divider of the races, with the slogan on its banner: divide and rule!').<sup>103</sup> Yet Bismarck's politics had little in common with the cultural radiance of the Prussia of his youth that he admired so much. In the approach to the 1866 war, he bemoaned the 'disgusting German sabre-rattling',<sup>104</sup> and two years later he wrote: 'a spirit of conquest of blood and iron has sprung from the moral conquests'.<sup>105</sup> Meyer did not wish to overlook, nor could he, that nationalism and militarism were increasingly overshadowing the Prussian achievements he admired in the realm of enlightenment, education, culture, and science.

In his final years, Meyer's correspondence dealt mainly with comments on political developments that he followed from afar, various Jewish holidays, the death of his sister (for whom he wrote a moving obituary), and a trip by his son to western Europe to visit Paris and London. In the summer of 1868, his dream for many decades to return to Berlin was finally realized. Full of love for the city, he observed the profound changes that had taken place there since the time of his youth. The New Synagogue on Oranienburger Strasse was a source of great fascination for Meyer. In his eyes, it was the realization of his desire for a Jewish religious community solidly attached to its religious principles, while also strongly integrated into the city in aesthetic, cultural, and social terms. While Prussia as a state was growing ever more distant from his ideals, he thought that Berlin Jewry had succeeded in finding a good balance between independence and integration. His confrontation with hasidic Jews back home appeared in significant measure to strengthen that perception. In a letter to a Warsaw acquaintance written in 1858, he developed a vision of the expulsion of the hasidim:

First, we should send off the whole blooming tribe of the hasidim, the Kotzker dynasty, the Zychliner hasidim, the Lutomiensker hasidim, and all that bunch, along with their matrons,

<sup>102</sup> Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften*, 182.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* 192 (letter to his son, 4 June 1866).

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* 205 (letter to his son, 30 Dec. 1868).

who wear half-bonnets à la mode, covering their *empty skulls* with dirty rags instead of hair. We shall place these people in the steppes and forests of the Caucasus, where they can unite their wild *Sehmers* with those of the Chechens.<sup>106</sup>

In this caricature, Meyer expresses his deep sense of unease. In the same letter, he formulated his view as an 'assertion that the material and intellectual wellbeing of the Jews can only prosper where they do not form a compact mass among themselves but mingle more with the Christians'. In a tone of slight resignation, Meyer saw his own place as being in Poland: 'We shall remain in this country, and intend to get along with our Poles, because "Co się kłóci, to się kocha" (teasing is a sign of affection) and Polak and Jew have a certain soft spot for one another, despite all the feuding of the insipid journalists.'<sup>107</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In a unique way, Meyer's *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften* document the intellectual, aesthetic, and religious *musée sentimental* of a Jewish businessman from provincial Poland. Although he felt a deep bond with Polish Jewish tradition, he had great admiration for the world of European modernity that he had come to know as a young man in Berlin. His texts in German are an expression of his attempt to harmonize these two shaping elements in his life. They also stand symbolically for his wish not to let his ties to Berlin and to everything this metropolis signified for him be sundered in Polish provincial life. Among the lasting influences of his years spent in the Prussian capital was a powerful affinity for the German language and literature, and for education, science, and middle-class bourgeois culture. Meyer retained a loyal affection for the German language all his life, as eloquently attested by his numerous literary texts. In addition, his letters to his family document Jewish life in both Warsaw and the provinces. There are numerous observations on the relationship between Poles and Jews. Their life together over centuries was in his eyes the guarantee of resilient and lasting Polish-Jewish relations based less on mutual affection and more on the recognition of difference. He regarded the partitioning of Poland by Prussia, Austria, and Russia as an ever-present injustice, and he harboured undisguised sympathies for the struggle against partition. It is noticeable that Meyer's enthusiastic identification with Prussia as an ideal embodiment of German culture receded in the last decade of his life, overshadowed by his growing scepticism regarding Prussian ambitions for political and military hegemony. He did not regard war as politics by other means, but rather as the very epitome of the failure of human community, the raw defeat of Reason. The 'soft spot' Poles and Jews had for one another because of centuries of cohabitation seems to have offered only limited solace to Louis Meyer, this orphan of the Enlightenment.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 213 (letter from Włocławek to Mr H. K. in Warsaw, 24 Dec. 1858). *Sehmers* are musicians.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

## APPENDIX

## (I) MEMORY OF BERLIN (1819)

I think of You, Berlin, O Princess of the Cities,  
 when my eye, roaming o'er bare open fields,  
     longs for the environs of cities delightful;

then am I reminded of your towers, your houses,  
 magnificent in number, rising up in rows well formed,  
     rich in artistic creation.

When in the solitude of lonely hours  
 my heart melancholic sighs in vain for pleasures lost,  
     I see You in my mind's eye,  
     Crown of the Cities!

I see the busy hubbub of your brave and decent people,  
 blessed in number and grandeur,  
     a pleasant feast for the eye,  
     joyful in motion.

Of You I think when my spirits, cast down here,  
 far from the visual arts and science, lie languishing,  
     dying of thirst at the fountain of life;

then I recall with respectful remembrance  
 your consecrated place, O splendid royal city!  
     where in hallowed sites and temples

industry and art and science bear golden fruit;  
 —where the flock of Muses and the Graces gathered,  
     familiar in a beautiful bond  
     are eternally united.

I send greetings to You from afar, O Princess of the Cities!  
 As a youth, languishing from a distance and burning with love's ardour,  
     longs for an embrace with his beloved;

so do I bear your image wrapped in my heart.  
 Here on the Vistula, I pay no heed to its noisy roar,  
     I hearken to the silver beat  
     of a more distant river.

And when some day, with a favourable stroke of luck,  
Fortune shall lead me again to your level plain,  
then will I sing with highest rapture once more  
a song to You!

ERINNERUNG AN BERLIN (1819)

Dein gedenk' ich Berlin, o Fürstin der Städte,  
Wenn mein Auge, schweifend auf nackte Fluren, sich  
Sehnt nach ergötzender  
Städte Umgebung;

Dann gedenk' ich der Thürme und deiner Häuser  
Prächtige Anzahl, die sich in wohlgebildeten  
Reihen mit künstlicher  
Schöpfung erheben.

Wenn in einsamen bangen Stunden die Brust voll  
Wehmuth nach den verlornen Genüssen vergeblich seufzt,  
Seh' ich im Bilde dich,  
Krone der Städte!

Sehe das rege Getümmel deines wackern  
Volkes, das gesegnet an Anzahl und Herrlichkeit,  
Lieblich zur Augenweid',  
Froh sich bewegt.

Dein gedenk' ich, wenn niedergedrückt mein Geist hier,  
In der Entfernung von bildender Kunst und Wissenschaft,  
Schmachtend verdürstet am  
Brunnen des Lebens;

Dann gedenk' ich mit ehrfurchtsvoller Erinner'ung  
Deines geweihten Platzes, o herrliche Königsstadt!  
Wo in geheiligten  
Sitzen und Tempeln

Fleiß und Kunst und Wissenschaft goldene Früchte  
Tragen; — wo der Musen Schaar und der Grazien  
Traulich im schönen Bund  
Ewig vereint sind.

Sei mir begrüßt in der Entfernung, o Fürstin der Städte!  
Wie sich der Jüngling, ferne schmachtend vor Liebesgluth,  
Nach der Umarmung sehnt  
Seiner Geliebten;

So auch trag' ich dein Bild im Herzen verwahret.  
 Hier am Wechsel-Strom acht' ich sein lärmendes Rauschen nicht  
 Horch' ich dem Silberschlag  
 Ferneren Stromes.

Und wenn einst in günstiger Schickung das Glück mich  
 Wieder führet zu deinen Eb'nen, dann sing' ich mit  
 Höh'rer Begeisterung  
 Wieder ein Lied dir!

(2) LULLABY (1856)

Quiet! Quiet! Quiet!  
 Sleep in your cradle;  
 Even if you are lacking much—  
 Rest is the citizen's solemn duty.  
 Close your eyes;  
 Sleep in quiet peace!

Quiet! Quiet! Quiet!  
 If your shoes are tight,  
 Don't wear a sour frown;  
 Rest is the first duty.  
 Close your eyes;  
 Sleep in quiet peace!

Quiet! Quiet! Quiet!  
 What they say, *obey*;  
 Resistance is of no use.  
 Rest is the greatest duty.  
 Close your eyes;  
 Sleep in quiet peace!

Hush! Hush! Hush!  
 Just don't shout;  
 Even if some scoundrel upsets you—  
 Rest is the highest duty.  
 Close your eyes;  
 Sleep in quiet peace!

Hush! Hush! Hush!  
 Do your *duty*!  
 As the wise proverb says:  
 Rest is the first duty.  
 Close your eyes;

Hush! Hush! Hush!  
Freedom is but a whim.  
Renounce freedom,  
*Peace and quiet is the duty most beautiful.*  
Close your tiny eyes,  
Sleep in sweet peace!

WIEGENLIED (1856)

Ruhe! Ruhe! Ruhe!  
Schlaf in deiner Truhe;  
Wenn dir manches auch gebricht,  
Ruhe ist des Bürgers Pflicht.  
Drück' die Augen zu;  
Schlaf' in guter Ruh'!

Ruhe! Ruhe! Ruhe!  
Drücken dich die Schuhe,  
Mach' dazu kein sau'r Gesicht;  
Ruhe ist die erste Pflicht.  
Drück' die Augen zu;  
Schlaf in guter Ruh!

Ruhe! Ruhe! Ruhe!  
Was man heißt, das *thue*;  
Widerstand der frommt dir nicht,  
Ruhe ist die größte Pflicht.  
Drück' die Augen zu,  
Schlaf in guter Ruh!

Stille! Stille! Stille!  
Mach nur kein Gebrülle;  
Kränkt dich auch so mancher Wicht,  
Ruhe ist die höchste Pflicht.  
Drück' die Augen zu,  
Schlaf' in guter Ruh'!

Stille! Stille! Stille!  
Deine *Pflicht* erfülle!  
Wie das weise Sprichwort spricht:  
Ruhe ist die erste Pflicht.  
Drück' die Augen zu,  
Schlaf in guter Ruh'!

Stille! Stille! Stille!  
 Freiheit ist nur Grille.  
 Auf die Freiheit thu' Verzicht,  
*Ruhe* ist die *schönste* Pflicht.  
 Drück' die Aeuglein zu,  
 Schlaf in süßer Ruh!

(3) FROM 'ALLERLEI KLEINIGKEITEN'  
 ('ASSORTED TRIFLES')

Page references are to L. Meyer, *Hinterlassene deutsche Schriften eines polnischen Juden*, ed. F. Guesnet (Hildesheim, 2010).

Whoever despises his religion or denies his nationality, or does not love or even hates his fatherland, because of its many defects, is like a person who rejects his father and mother because they are deformed, old, or frail. (p. 150)

*Shem, Ham, and Japheth*

These three principal races of humankind appear to be strongly represented in Poland. The Polish nobleman is the true type of one descended from the refined Japheth. He calls the farmer literally 'Cham', and this class really does have something of its scruffy progenitor. The Polish Jew is the incarnate bench-warmer Shem, as described in the Talmud. (p. 150)

The Prussian 'suum cuique', one might think, articulates a *universal* law, but 'to each his own' is depicted in the Prussian coat of arms by two *wild animals*, the representatives of raw strength, who appear to be *dividing* their prey. (p. 151)

The word 'overstrung' should be recorded in the yellow book of the Polish nation as the principal debt and guilt. But the main debtors are its wives, whose exaltation causes calamity in every area, yet most especially in connection with their devotion to the priests. (p. 153)

In Prussia, Germany is now rising *up*—and going *under*. (p. 154)

It is the disastrous fate of the Poles to be disunited at the wrong time, and united at the wrong time. (p. 158)

The Jewish nation in its dual form of baseness and sublimity is the embodiment of the divine idea that a human being, climbing from the lowest standpoint, can ascend to the highest.

In the image of Jacob's ladder, to this patriarch was revealed the entire future of his descendants: *ascent* and *descent*. (p. 159)



Enlightenment without religiosity is like a light without a protective lantern on the open road. (p. 159)

The Poles are Jews with sabres, the Jews are Poles without sabres. Two tough nationalities, amongst whom sublimity walks side by side with insanity. Thus, today's Polish movement (1863) is a sublime insanity. (p. 160)

*For those who spread light*

If you run too fast with a lantern, it doesn't shine. Moderator lamps ensure that oil flows only in small drops to the light, not in large quantities; such lamps provide the best light. (p. 161)

(4) TO THE HOLY FRATERNITY!

Gather round about me, dear brothers!  
My limbs sink wearily.  
Sing to me the lullaby;  
I'm exhausted—I'm so, so tired.

I felt so well, I felt so terrible,  
Sometimes cheerful, sometimes sad;  
Now I just long for quiet rest—  
Oh, close my eyes!

Much that I did was crowned with success,  
Much pain entered my heart;  
Weary of joys and pains,  
I'm so very tired, so exhausted and weary.

Lots of light, I always wished for that,  
So don't be stingy with the sacred candles;  
Undress me, remove any trumpery,  
And clothe me in a gown of light.

Make my bed fine,  
So that I can sleep for many a night;  
Until that great day dawns,  
And I awake in eternal light.

Farewell, farewell, my holy brethren!  
Some day we will all see each other once again—  
Oh, sing me the lullaby;  
I'm so, so tired, very tired!

*c.1870*

## AN DIE HEILIGE BRÜDERSCHAFT!

Versammelt Euch um mich, Ihr Brüder!  
 Ermattet sinken meine Glieder.  
 O singet mir das Wiegenlied;  
 Ich bin erschöpft, — ich bin so müd'.

Mir war so wohl, mir war so schaurig,  
 Ich war bald heiter und bald traurig;  
 Nun sehn' ich mich nach stiller Ruh, —  
 O drücket mir die Augen zu!

So manches Thun ist mir gelungen,  
 So mancher Schmerz in's Herz gedrungen;  
 Der Freuden und der Leiden satt,  
 Bin ich so müd', — so müd' und matt.

Viel Licht, — das lag mir stets am Herzen,  
 Drum sparet nicht die heil'gen Kerzen;  
 Entkleidet mich von jedem Tand,  
 Und hüllet mich in Licht-Gewand.

Und macht das Lager mir zurechte,  
 Daß ich durchschlumm're viele Nächte;  
 Bis einst der große Tag anbricht,  
 Und ich erwach' im ew'gen Licht.

Lebt wohl, lebt wohl, Ihr heil'gen Brüder!  
 Einst sehen wir uns Alle wieder. —  
 O singet mir das Wiegen-Lied;  
 Ich bin so müd', — so müd', — so müd'!

*ca. 1870*

## LETTERS

## (5) WARSAW

Thursday, 4 January 1836, evening

My dearest sister!

I didn't write to you with today's mail. So you'll have to spend the coming sabbath without me. But to have visited you on Friday evening, I would have had to make my toilet on Wednesday evening, i.e. I would have had to write yesterday evening, and that was impossible. Why? Because I was already very sleepy by 7 o'clock. Why?

Because I hadn't slept the night before. Why? Because I spent that night at a *soirée*. What's a '*soirée*'? That's an evening party. What? Stretch an *evening* over the *entire night*? Yes, in the fashionable world, which may ordinarily set itself apart from the ordinary, it doesn't become real night until dawn. If only you could just sleep all day! But I cursed the *soirée* into the night of nights after I spent an eight-hour evening wide awake and had to go to work the next day. And I didn't even accept the invitation because I wanted to go, but rather just for the experience of having been at such an event. It was in the respectable residence of Mr L. He hosted the evening in honour of his sister, whose husband-to-be was a guest from Breslau. Those with pretensions to grandeur usually don't arrive till between 9 and 10 o'clock; those who cannot rise to such high-flown ambitions have already come by about 7. I gravitated to the 'happy medium', and arrived at 8 o'clock. I was dressed pretty much as was required, because making my toilet and preparations had taken four times as long as usual, i.e. a whole ten minutes. But to my horror, I noticed afterwards that almost all the gentlemen were wearing white gloves. And I, just imagine, was wearing a pair of yellow ones! Unfortunate wretch that I am, I knew that yellow gloves were the done thing during the day, but I didn't know that *white* ones were expected at night. What inexcusable ignorance! In the meanwhile, to my consolation I noticed that several new arrivals had also clumsily violated the same rule of etiquette. At that point I enjoyed the rapturous delight of the hunchback when he sees a fellow sufferer. I'd already spent an hour slowly sipping a glass of tea, paying compliments to acquaintances, and hiding an occasional yawn, when suddenly war was declared on boredom. The signal was given: dance music struck up in the hall; a solid, respectable polonaise was soon followed by a graceful contredanse, an animated waltz, and a lively mazurka. In the adjoining room, game tables were set up, pipes were stuffed with tobacco. But as for me, poor defeated soul, a man who doesn't dance, gamble, or smoke, what was I to do?! I looked around for a fellow sufferer to find some company, and noticed to my delight that, among others, the very king of the festive evening, the bridegroom himself, was not participating in any of these marvels either. Since he is a comely young man, I confessed to him my astonishment that he was not paying due homage to Terpsichore. He said he had no knowledge and experience when it came to Polish dances. Probably they seem to him, as a German, too wild, because the Germans tend to dance and gyrate in a manner refined and slow, always piano. But I took a fancy to the merry dancing girls, and feasted my eyes on their beautiful movements. Midnight had passed. The hands of the card-players and the feet of the dancers were still in motion, as if by clockwork. Lemonade and similar refreshments were repeatedly offered—but I searched in vain for what is commonly called 'dinner'. It was 2 o'clock, and dancing and card games were still going strong, for good or for ill. I was already preparing myself to leave the so-called 'evening' without an evening meal, when a friend whispered to me that I should wait until *after dinner*. To wait at 2 o'clock in the morning until *after dinner*! It sounded to me more than a little odd. Finally, at 3 o'clock the guests were summoned to the dining

hall. Alas, fresh misfortune! People did not sit down in an orderly fashion around a table, as our good fathers used to. No, instead people rushed like mad things to a table full of all sorts of food, grabbed a plate and a fork, piled the plate high with their choice, and made off to a corner. And then they devoured the stuff they'd managed to grab, rather in the way that V—nese *merchants' wives* consume their lunch at the shop. In the sophisticated world, this is called dining 'à la fourchette', in German—'fork-dinner'!

Now it was time for the champagne. And the Lord saw that it was good, and he divided the Russian tea from the French wine, and it was evening, and it was morning.

End of the chapter on the soirée.

## (6) WŁOCŁAWEK

18 October 1865

My dearest son!

As of yesterday our town can be called *Dreibrücken* [Three Bridges]. Up to now it has been possible to call it *Zweibrücken* [Two Bridges], because of the two bridges over the Głowiaczka [Zgłowiączka].

The bridge over the Vistula was opened yesterday without an actual ceremony, which has been postponed until later, when the governor will be paying a visit. It was striking that there was not the least element of festivity in yesterday's act of formal opening. By 2 o'clock the expanse near the castle was already crowded with members of the public. Members of the local nominal Bridge Committee, consisting of three Christians and four Jews, had taken up their positions in front of the garlanded turnpike. Soon members of the Warsaw Construction Committee arrived, transported in several carriages. They got out in front of the bridge, and General *Szuberski* then literally handed over the bridge to the president and the municipal committee, after which these gentlemen expressed their thanks for the important achievement, speaking in German. Then the General, speaking in his best German, replied: 'I cannot formally accept your words of gratitude, because these are properly meant for the governor, who will later inspect the work he has created.' Then, at a signal from the chief of police, the assembled military bands struck up the melody of the national anthem, for which all bared their heads. At another signal, there was a drum roll—and the garlanded turnpike shot up in the air. The gentlemen of the two committees then crossed over the bridge on foot or in carriage, after which a few of us lay people, including yours truly, also smuggled ourselves across—for the riff-raff, in other words the general public, was still not allowed to cross the bridge. Only after we had returned was permission granted. The police chief gave yet another nod, and the Polish national march 'Poszły panny' sounded out. Now from all points on the higher ground a great throng descended

onto the bridge, and a huge crowd gushed across the majestic Vistula, which was a grand sight to behold.

Walking across the bridge is truly a delight; the view in all directions is indescribably beautiful. Before there was a bridge there, all of that could only be seen in a fragmentary way.

(Continuation)

As extremely important as yesterday's event was for us, it was nonetheless received coolly and with a certain passivity. Or rather just accepted; it lacked the patriotic character that stamps every achievement of progress as an occasion for a popular festival. How different it was here when the steamer *Włocławek* was commissioned! Then dignitaries came from far and wide to our fair town, which for two days took on a festive mien. Nothing like that now. These days are simply a time of passivity.

29 October 1865

(Continuation)

The conqueror of the revolutionary hydra, the royal governor, was royally received in the metropolis of Kujavia. Triumphal arches at every turn, garlands and tapestries hanging from all balconies and windows, deputations at various points, bells a-ringing, bishops, pastors, Capuchins, and rabbis.

It was a grand funeral reception for the revolution.

Because I did not feel too well, I only observed the spectacle from a distance, looking from our windows. At the same time, I served as a stenographer for several petitions from widows and orphans, whose relatives were languishing in exile. A speech and toasts also flowed from my pen; but they were somewhat modified.

Włocławek had never experienced so many dignitaries gathered together—all the top people from Warsaw. The gentlemen were charmed by all they saw, heard, and enjoyed. The words spoken had a great effect, and several transcripts were taken of what was said. The toast to the governor was roughly as follows:

A bridge can justifiably represent the symbol of transition. May the founder of our beautiful material bridge also be the creator of a spiritual bridge spanning the heart of the country and the heart of the sovereign. May he establish the transition from a sad past to a consoling future!

That was the basic idea; naturally it has been much abbreviated.

It was H. who proposed this toast, and on the whole he was the only one who put forward anything decent, and with whom the count and the other gentlemen conversed the most. At the bridge, the rabbi presented the latter with a song in Hebrew and German, which, like everything else, was very well received.

The governor formed a great impression of our little hamlet. Who knows what good that will do . . .

*Translated from the German by Bill Templer*