

# Butchers, Cattle-Traders, and Jews in Mainz

## Abstract

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Due to legal restrictions and prejudice, trade had been a traditional source of income for Jews in Germany for centuries, and this was true even after Jewish emancipation in 1869. In rural areas, Jews were heavily engaged in the cattle trade. The agricultural crisis that occurred from the 1870s to the 1890s resulted in bankruptcy for many German farmers. Some blamed their failure on the allegedly “usurious” interest rates charged by “rapacious” Jews from whom the farmers had acquired loans, even though agricultural credit was often impossible to come by from other sources. The accusation that most Jews were “usurers” was a mainstay of antisemitic propaganda. This account from the memoirs of a German butcher in Mainz depicts conflicts between Jewish cattle-traders and non-Jewish farmers. It serves to remind us why we must not take antisemitic accounts about social conflict in the countryside at face value. Although cattle-trading was hard work, the parties involved often enjoyed good relations based on mutual trust and satisfactory rates of return on investments.

## Source

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In the past, the trade and procurement of livestock (except hogs) in all rural areas was the exclusive province of Jews, who were usually butchers themselves or traded in native produce. They were called brokers. In those days, Jews were very fond of helping to sell produce and livestock in the countryside. Because of their knowledge of both the goods and the local geography, and their cleverness, too, they were much in demand. Generally, transactions were carried out more easily when a neutral person helped arrange them. At a time when rural areas still had neither newspapers nor farmers’ associations, almost every sizeable estate had its own so-called estate Jew, who organized all purchases and managed the buying and selling of livestock. The great confidence that these estate Jews enjoyed [among farmers] was often passed down for generations. When a deal took place, both parties paid a brokerage fee. Only in the Hunsrück region was the brokerage fee paid solely by the seller. The fee was usually 1 thaler per head of horse or cattle. In this sector, the brokers earned a modest living. Only gradually did the younger generations begin to broker deals themselves. As with everything else, however, only the odd few managed to achieve noteworthy success. The dealers’ own livestock trade could have become more lucrative in those days as well, had it not been for the mounting competition created by proliferation within their own ranks. As a result, farmers were overrun by an excess of dealers. I repeatedly heard the following from an old dealer: “Even back then, my father used to say that every Jewish dealer should have his own five-hour radius, as that would make for a decent living.”

How often the dealers struggled to bring their goods to the market in proper order. Simply consider that in the old days, before railways, when dealers from Bretzenheim and Hechtsheim went to Kreuznach or to the Hunsrück Mountains, they drove their cattle home themselves, a journey that some of the animals could not complete. Frequently, dealers from Trebur loaded their cattle onto small boats at one o’clock in the morning to sail on the Schwarzbach to the Rhine, in order to make it to Mainz by six o’clock for the opening of the livestock yard. They did this even under the most adverse weather conditions, and the income that resulted was often rather paltry to boot. Time and again, dealers from Ingelheim had to turn back with their loads of calves after being caught by the authorities for driving on the country road before 3 a.m., which was strictly forbidden. Indeed, dealers in those days were not to be envied. Usually, circumstances have an influence on character. Not surprisingly, the dealers were extraordinarily thrifty and hard-working. Moreover, they were filled with an untiring enthusiasm for business and were very keen on monetary gain. They were also very grateful for any favor they received and never forgot it.

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These are the qualities with which one gets ahead. This becomes most noticeable during times of upward economic development and confusion. The family life of the dealers could be generally described as congenial. In those days, they avoided lawsuits to the greatest possible extent. People often said the following to anyone brave enough to dare a lawsuit: “Everyone knows who’s right, but anyone who wants to know who’s right under the law should sue.” I always liked it when these same people said of conflicts: “Make *beschore*,” i.e. just split the difference, or when someone got really testy and these people said: “*Roches*<sup>[1]</sup> won’t help.” Their comments were always reasonable and correct. At a time when there were still no credit unions, nor anything comparable, Jews in the countryside were often approached for loans, particularly in the context of livestock trading. In this capacity, Jews were usually judged one-sidedly and sometimes unfairly by the public at large. For instance, if the creditor had a farmer’s possessions auctioned off because he failed to get back both the principal and the interest despite a long wait, people generally said: “The wicked Jew has forced the poor man to lie on straw.” Or, if someone with no credit was charged more than five percent interest, then the Jew was publicly branded as a usurer. When the large banks did exactly the same thing, however, people were much milder in their judgment. Back then, when it came to borrowing and paying back debts, farmers were generally the most dilatory. The years with poor yields may have contributed substantially to this, especially since protective tariffs had not yet been legislated. Livestock dealers in particular suffered the most from farmers’ natural inclination toward borrowing. There were also dealers who enticed farmers to borrow money in order to gain better control over them.

After the recent opening of savings and credit unions, local farmers in some communities started outdoing each other with their deposits, whereas livestock dealers and craftsmen often had to wait years—and with much fuss at that—to get back their rightful principal without interest. How often did moneylenders hear the following: “If you can’t lend money, then just close your business.” Here, one example is worth mentioning: A farmer owed several hundred marks to a livestock dealer for livestock delivered. One day, outside that same dealer’s house, the same farmer asked the dealer to make change for a twenty-mark piece. The dealer could only come up with 18 marks in change and asked the farmer to go to his house and request the remaining two marks. The farmer did not do so, however. Instead, a few days later, amidst a flurry of traffic and activity, he publicly demanded the return of his balance, asserting that “A man just can’t ever get his money back from you wicked Jews.”

With respect to business transactions involving livestock, I probably had more dealings with Jews in the Palatinate than the rest of my colleagues. I was usually given preferential treatment, since I was the best at evaluating their goods. I was always very keen on obtaining Palatinate stock. For instance, for nearly 25 years, until I closed my business, I dealt with the brothers Hayum in Erbach and Hayum in Ockelheim almost on a weekly basis, without ever so much as an inappropriate word being said on either side, despite the fact that trading could be very tough when the business cycle experienced abrupt changes. We had mutual respect, and we were both content with what we earned.

## NOTES

[1] *Roches*: getting furiously upset—trans.

Source: Bernhard Gottron, *Erlaubtes und Erlaubtes aus dem Mainzer Metzgergewerbe im 19. Jahrhundert*, Mainz, 1926, pp. 32ff.; reprinted in Werner Pöls, ed., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1815–1870. Ein historisches Lesebuch*, 4th ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1988, pp. 70–73.

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