

Martin Lövinson Recalls Jewish Emancipation and Enthusiasm for the German Wars of Unification (early 1870s)

Abstract

Dr. Martin Lövinson (1859–1930) was a judicial counselor [*Justizrat*] and the son of a well-to-do Danzig merchant, Siegfried Lövinson, who had founded a factory for carved-oak furniture in Berlin in 1858. In 1865, the family moved to the city's outlying suburb Charlottenburg, where they set up an orthodox synagogue in their home. In this excerpt from his memoirs (published in 1924), Martin Lövinson describes everyday religious observance in his boyhood and his reaction to national events from 1864 to 1871. Having joined the prosperous bourgeoisie, the family welcomed the legal emancipation of Jews in 1869 and German unification in 1871.

Source

My parents kept a strictly ritual Jewish household. Even if my father kept his business open on the Sabbath and did not avoid traveling, as long as I can remember he always said the prescribed prayers in the morning. It was only later that I noticed that he did not put on the *tefillin* (phylacteries). But he did wear the *arba kanfot* (small prayer shawl) beneath his undershirt, on his bare body.^[1] That there was cooking at our home on the Sabbath and the High Holy Days I heard explained to grandmother Hirschberg as a measure undertaken in consideration of the small children. She herself, however, observed the old ritual laws in this regard. Every Friday we took her *schalent*^[2] to the matzo oven on Heidereutergasse, opposite the old, so-called Great Synagogue, and picked it up again at noon on Saturday after the end of the main service, nicely baked and still warm. Even our freethinking Grandfather Lövinson did not refuse our dear grandmother's occasional invitation to the tasty meal. I did see him, too, in the synagogue on the High Holidays, when, even at a young age, I was brought along by my parents. Otherwise, however, he had completely freed himself from the old tradition.

The present-day system of renting seats did not yet exist at that time; whoever did not own a seat, took any empty place at the service without trouble, particularly since entry into the House of God was not restricted in any way but rather was encouraged. Thus, as soon as I could walk I was very often taken along to the Old Synagogue, to which my grandmother went regularly, my mother as often as taking care of the little ones permitted, and the men of the family on the main holy days. Even today the organ is still banned from this old House of God. But the festive singing of the choir, of the celebrated cantor Lichtenstein, and of the congregation, as well as the sermons of the very popular, warmhearted rabbi, Dr. Sachs, made an indelible impression on my young spirit, even if I understood neither the German nor the Hebrew recitation; I cannot imagine my life without them. The wish to understand these beautiful customs, which elevated one above everyday life, awakened within me very early (and that was surely my father's pedagogic aim). Of the welfare institutions of the Jewish community, on the other hand, at that time I only got to know the old-age home on Grosse Hamburgerstrasse. There, from time to time, bringing small gifts we visited an old miss, Emma Sachs, who must have been somehow related to grandmother and who, as I seem to vaguely remember, spent her last days and years there with an even older sister. So our parents placed value on awakening in us love for our ancestral religion and the thought that religion is lived and experienced, and not invented or contrived.

[...]

The year 1864 brought the German-Danish War, the victorious end of which we were privileged to experience from the window of our business, Unter den Linden, when as spectators we watched the festive entrance of the troops. Our father was filled with lofty patriotic enthusiasm by the splendid course the war had taken after so many years of peace. His enthusiasm manifested itself in the fact that he acquired the wood of seized enemy artillery mounts from the army administration and in his factory had all kinds of keepsakes carved from it, which were sold for the benefit of the war victims. Ashtrays, cigar cutters, and similar little things can still be found in the possession of family members.

The business had taken a real upturn at this time. Our house was frequented by well-known architects, such as Oppler, the designer of the synagogues in Breslau and Hannover. Employing Gothic motifs, he had designed a little table with two small benches, which was intended for the children's room and served all of us children as our first desk.

[...]

The literary needs of the family were served by the *Vossische Zeitung*, which was still coming out as a small-town weekly, and by the big illustrated magazines *Gartenlaube* and *Über Land und Meer*. But we probably did no more than look at the pictures, since we were still too small to stay up when mother read aloud every night. I know for sure, however, that it was still on Bellevuestrasse that we became acquainted with our later favorite Wilhelm Busch, whose *Münchener Bilderbogen* was a preferred birthday wish of ours.

I have probably told everything that I remember from my first six years, during which I did not leave my hometown, since the custom of summer trips was still restricted to the more prosperous circles, while we regarded ourselves as belonging to the middle class. At most, there was perhaps sometimes an "excursion to the country," the goal of which, however, was always grandfather's estate in Treptow. As far as I know, the annual factory outing was always to Pichelsberge. The workmen and clerks set out early in the morning in charabancs, and in the afternoon the bosses and their families followed after them in their landaus.

[...]

The High Jewish Holidays always brought about an enormous change in our daily schedule. I have mentioned the installation of the house synagogue, which our father had set up mainly to make it possible for our mother, who at that time would not have used a vehicle on the holidays at any price, to attend the services. The example for the children, who by all means were to be familiarized with a strictly religious life, was no doubt decisive in this undertaking. Of course, quite early there arose within us questions as to whether it was entirely consistent that our father unhesitatingly used the streetcar on the Sabbath and High Holidays, that we did write in school on the Sabbath, indeed, that we were allowed to participate in the Christian religious instruction until the first year of secondary school. But for all of these inconsistencies we were given an explanation in accordance with the prevailing enlightened views, especially, for example, that the fulfillment of civic duties had to go hand in hand with the recognition of complete equality of civil rights. Whoever was now admitted to the public schools, as we were, had to comply with the general school regulations; whoever opened a business in the German homeland also had to keep it open to customers on the generally accepted workdays and close it on the public day of rest.

Above all, however, it was pointed out that the many Christian laborers and employees were entitled to demand consideration of their religious feelings as well as their financial interests in all these matters. The concept of tolerance, which was to become a guiding principle throughout our lives, was thus placed at the center of our civic and religious philosophy of life. Just as we, as a religious minority, had to take the interests of the state into account, in the private sphere we also had to exercise absolute respect for

the reverence with which our fellow citizens of another faith were attached to their religion and its particular customs. I can only say that in those days, before the invention of social and racial antisemitism, the views of our Christian environment completely coincided with our own.

Thus, the others welcomed it almost with appreciation that we Jews, too, were to have a regular prayer service, and the few coreligionists living there did not mind at all that our father relieved them not only of the troubles but also completely of the costs of this institution. [...] By affixing a curtain, a wardrobe was transformed into the holy ark, and it happened that in the possession of the families there were two Torah scrolls, which were willingly made available for the good cause. As cantors, two dignified old men were found Herr Ebenstein and Herr Cohn; the former had previously been teacher, cantor, and *schochet* in Neuruppin and now lived in retirement in Berlin, while the other tried to make a modest living with a small business. Since they could not travel by any vehicle on holidays and, in addition, their duties kept them busy from morning until night, they came out to us early on the evening before the holidays and received board from our mother.

[...]

Today, one can hardly imagine how my mother, besides keeping up the household, also managed, with complete attentiveness, to receive our many guests. For the ones mentioned until now did not make up the entire flock. During the wars, the Jewish soldiers from the hospitals in Charlottenburg also came regularly. But that was still not all. Word soon got around about the beautiful prayer service, and whoever showed up for it and didn't have a place to stay or to take holiday meals, without much ado became a guest of our parents. Thus the large garden room, in which we dined at such times, was just as full of guests as in the days during the entry of the army in 1866. Of the acquaintanceships made at this time I will mention only two. Once, during his walks, Grandfather Lövinson discovered among the diggers who at that time were making a broad highway from the narrow pass at Spandau Hill a hardworking young man whom he recognized as a Jew and to whom he spoke thereof during a break. He turned out to be a bookbinder from Russia and was named Hermann Presakowicz, or perhaps Polakewicz. Like many Jews and Christians, he had fled from his inhospitable homeland to escape the unbearably long and hard military service, and had found work in his profession only temporarily. In order not to become a burden to the charity of his coreligionists, without hesitation he seized the first opportunity to work that came his way. Now, however, he received help, not only for the holidays, on which he naturally was a guest like all others at our table, but also in the long run. At first father took him into his factory as an unskilled worker. Later, when we had moved back to Berlin, he also did many repairs at our home. In a house that belonged to my father, he found rather primitive lodgings, which were all the cheaper for that, and soon, with my father's support, he was able to acquire his own tools and he became an independent master craftsman in his own trade.

[...]

The story of the Charlottenburg years so far has shown that our household had assumed the character of a quite well-to-do, even if not luxurious, middle-class home. Our father acquired the means for that from his visibly thriving business. The abolition of compulsory guild membership in its final ramifications had made it possible to adapt oneself freely in business matters to the desires of the public; thus, for example, besides furniture the factory also produced clocks and musical instruments, ivory carvings, and similar things. Our keen interest was aroused for a long time by an example of such small works of art, a little wooden egg in which a tiny chess set was enclosed, and by similar devices that gentlemen carried around with them as containers for the popular Bullrich digestant salts. With such novelties the firm made its first appearance at the Leipzig fair, and later at the world and national industrial exhibitions that were coming into being in that decade. Thus, the name of the firm can be found among the exhibitors in London in 1863, and especially, moreover, at the great World Fair of 1867 in Paris. On such occasions my father spent weeks, if not months, abroad and made valuable contacts in foreign countries.

There was even a branch established in London, which was managed by Julius Jacobi, a Danzig compatriot of my paternal family. At the Paris fair the firm was represented by young Siechen, the future head of the brewery of this same name, which was very famous in his day and probably still is. Many a friendly relationship resulted from the exhibitors working together during the preparations for such an undertaking and during its implementation. At such times, the men were together a lot, in foreign places and on the road, and their association often continued when they were back home.

Of course, even at that time my father was not spared serious difficulties. I will mention only the three wars, with the unavoidable interruptions of credit and sales, as well as a devastating fire, which, if I am not mistaken, in the night of the New Year (1868–1869) reduced the factory to ashes. Also, after the war, in 1870, there was a big strike by the workers in that whole line of business, which despite the owners' principles, known to be favorable to the workers and democratic, also spread to our factory. With his unusual flexibility, father was able to surmount all these grave misfortunes. When the sale of furniture faltered during the wars in 1866 and 1870, and at the same time cholera, with all its threat, came to Berlin and spread horror in the city, which was still without sewers, he invented a disinfectant, which, as I recall, consisted of peat litter and ferrous sulfate and was to be poured into the commodes that were in use in almost all living quarters. The components arrived by waterway, since the rear of the factory, where they were blended, bordered on the Spree. The disinfectant was sold in big paper bags, which bore the label "Antimiasmaticum." A large advertising company saw to the recommendation of this very timely remedy, which must have been quite practical, and delivery to the consumers was carried out by the factory workers, who were not sufficiently occupied with their actual tasks, by means of a few charabancs that father had gotten hold of for this purpose in Charlottenburg and whose owners, in such bad times for business, were glad to have found profitable earnings, during the week, too.

[...]

And so my story has reached the year 1871, my twelfth year, and now I must part from these most beautiful years in my memory. A fateful hour has arrived, not only for our small family circle but for political and social conditions throughout the fatherland. The victorious war ended in the glorious Peace of Frankfurt and the founding of the new German Reich. On the 15th and 16th of June the proud troops had marched into the new imperial city, and it made an indelible impression on me that once again I was able to observe the magnificent spectacle from the window of my father's business. The day before, we had watched the decoration of the triumphal route, which was done by the artists in a way never imagined possible. The route went from Kreuzberg by way of Belle-Alliance-Strasse and Königgrätzer Strasse, past Potsdam Gate, through Brandenburg Gate to Unter den Linden, which marked the highpoint of the decorations, and to the Lustgarten. The unveiling of the monument for Friedrich Wilhelm II, which had just been completed there, was the final act. I don't remember what the monuments, made of light materials and set up temporarily along the main points of this triumphal route, represented. They must have been embodiments of the victory, of the German and the more narrowly defined Prussian fatherland.

What made this unforgettable occasion superb was the elated mood, which no one could resist. Even if the captured guns that lined the entire route reminded one that the road to the unification of the fatherland had led through three bloody wars, the joy over the end of this time of great violence was still stronger than the pride in the victory gained. The entire world expected, above all, the end of the hard internal struggles among the parties and among the separate German lands and, as a result of peace, an upswing in trade and industry, from which, in turn, art and science would receive the best incentives. The likable figure of the over-seventy-year-old first emperor of the Hohenzollern dynasty, who, for his part, was so modest, seemed to secure the monarchic system for all time to come. The strong opposition that Bismarck had brought upon himself by his political conduct subsided, not only in the face of his successes but also because of the greatness that he showed when, disavowing his earlier Junker ideals, he had not hesitated to pay the price for the unification of Germany by granting the new Reich a

seemingly democratic-parliamentary constitution.

Old republicans joined in the jubilation, and Uncle Moritz recast an old 1848 freedom song into a German song of unity. It begins with the words:

Forward! Forward! Germany's sons,
With courage forward to the fight,
Let no one ever dare to mock,
Our freedom and our rights.

Wilhelm Taubert, the well-known composer, did not pass up the chance to set it to music. Let me add the second stanza here. It goes something like this:

For life's greatest goods,
For the German fatherland,
We stand as guardians and protectors,
With head, and heart, and hand.

The song, of which thousands of copies were sold at the beginning of the war for the benefit of the wounded, has impressed itself on my mind, as has the "Watch on the Rhine," which so accurately depicts the attitude of an entire people, although I do not mean to compare the two songs in their poetic power.

We Jews were also especially affected by the change in the internal situation. Due to the law of 1869 on the equality of religions in all of Germany, the barriers that had been erected before the Jews by the laws prohibiting their admission to office had now fallen. One did not expect that society and the practice of the authorities would maintain these barriers for a long time to come, and would erect new ones. There had been Jewish officers in the war of 1866; in the French war, numerous Jews achieved a similar recognition of their devotion to duty and their courage. Two cousins of my mother, Moritz and Albert Marcuse, sons of the oldest brother of my grandmother, returned from the field with the Iron Cross, the former as a captain in the medical corps, the latter as a lieutenant. Now there were Jewish judges and civil servants, whereas formerly even an appointment as a lawyer had scarcely been attainable for a Jewish civil servant even after years of unpaid civil service. Thus, in our circles, too, the joy and hope were almost beyond description. Not that every Jew now longed for a government position, but the fact that the feeling of a basic disfranchisement, of helotry, seemed to have been taken from us lifted our spirits and spurred us on to accomplishments in the service of our fatherland, from that time on also in the areas of peaceful development.

NOTES

[1] *Arba kanfot* is a garment worn under their clothing by orthodox Jews. It has four knotted cords (*tsitsit*) at its corners, as prescribed in Deuteronomy 22:12. [All footnotes are from Monika Richarz, ed., *Jewish Life in Germany: Memoirs from Three Centuries*, translated by Stella P. Rosenfeld and Sidney Rosenfeld.]

[2] *Schalent* (*schalet*, *cholent*): a Sabbath dish, which must be prepared on the day before since cooking, as a form of work, is forbidden on the Sabbath.

Source of English translation: Monika Richarz, ed., *Jewish Life in Germany: Memoirs from Three Centuries*, translated by Stella P. Rosenfeld and Sidney Rosenfeld. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 110–17. Published by Indiana University Press. Further reproduction is prohibited.

Source of original German text: Martin Lövinson, *Geschichte meines Lebens*, Part 1, *Die goldene Jugendzeit*. Berlin, 1924; reprinted in Monika Richarz, ed., *Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland. Selbstzeugnisse zur Sozialgeschichte 1780–1871*, 3 vols. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1976–1982, vol. 1, pp. 248–56.

Recommended Citation: Martin Lövinson Recalls Jewish Emancipation and Enthusiasm for the German Wars of Unification (early 1870s), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1795>> [April 30, 2025].