

Glückel of Hameln (18th century)

Abstract

Born in Hamburg, Glückel of Hameln (1646-1724) was a Jewish businesswoman who wrote in Yiddish of her experiences as a mother, a widow, a businesswoman, and Jewish woman with deep familial and communal ties. Her diary offers a rich journey through her life, including her education, her experiences as a jewelry tradeswoman, her family life, and her travels across Europe. This selection offers a snapshot of the “lying in” period that often followed childbirth and highlights Glückel’s role as both mother and daughter and evidences aspects of early modern pregnancy, lifespans, familial affection, social class, and Judaism, all with a touch of humour.

Source

[...]

Immediately on our arrival in Hamburg I became with child, and my mother along with me. In good time the Lord graciously delivered me of a young daughter. I was still a mere girl, and unused as I was to bearing children, it naturally went hard with me; yet I rejoiced mightily that the Most High had bestowed on me a healthy, lovely baby.

My dear good mother had reckoned out her time for the same day. However, she had great joy in my being brought to bed first, so she could help me a little, young girl that I was. Eight days later my mother likewise brought forth a young daughter in childbirth. So there was neither envy nor reproach between us, and we lay next to each other in the selfsame room. But, Lord, we had no peace, for the people that came running in to see the marvel, a mother and daughter together in childbed.

To fill this book out a bit, I must really tell you a pretty jest played on us. We lay together in a small room, it was winter, and my blessed father had a pack of servants; and even though the mothers and babies put up with one another nicely, we were rather crowded. So, to make a little more room, I used to sleep in my own chamber. However, because I was still young, my mother would not suffer me nights to take my child away with me. I therefore left the baby in our common room, where it slept and a maid lay near it. My mother bade me not to worry; if the child cried she would have the maid fetch it to me that I might nurse it, and the maid would carry it back and place it again in its cradle. With this I was quite content.

Thus I passed a number of nights in my own chamber; and just before midnight the maid would bring me the child to suckle. Once, though, I awoke about three in the morning, and I said to my husband, ‘What can it mean? The maid has not yet brought me the child.’ ‘Doubtless,’ said my husband, ‘it is still sleeping.’ I gave myself no peace, however, until I had run into the room to look after the child.

I went over to the cradle, and I found it empty. I was sorely frightened, yet I did not want to scream for fear of arousing my mother. So I began to shake the maid in the hope of waking her quietly. But she lay in a deep sleep, and I had to begin screaming aloud before she could break off her slumber. ‘Where have you put my child?’ I cried. Wherat she began talking half in her sleep, not knowing what she said. At this my mother awoke and said to the maid, ‘Where have you put my Glückelchen’s baby?’ But the maid proved too sleepy to reply.

So I said to my mother, ‘Mother,’ I said, ‘perhaps you have my baby in bed with you.’ ‘No, no,’ she answered, ‘I have *my* baby in bed with me,’ and she stuck to it as though some one wanted to make off

with her baby.

Then it occurred to me to look for her child in its own cradle. And there it lay, soft asleep. So I said, 'Mother, give me now my baby—yours lies in its cradle.' But she refused to believe me, and I had to fetch a light so she could examine it carefully. Finally I was able to make her accept her own baby, and bring away mine. By this time the whole house was aroused and everyone badly alarmed. However, fright soon vanished in laughter, and the word went round, 'A little more, and we'd had to summon the blessed King Solomon himself.'

[...]

Source: *Glückel of Hameln*, translated with notes by Marvin Lowenthal. New York: Schocken Books, 1977, pp. 35-37.

Recommended Citation: Glückel of Hameln (18th century), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/ghdi:document-5448>> [April 02, 2025].