

CHAMPION OF BUSINESS ETHICS

GLÜCKEL OF HAMELN

Born 1645, died 1724

JEREMY ROSEN

Glückel of Hameln lived some 300 years ago when Jews in Europe struggled to survive as outsiders and outcasts in an inhospitable 'no man's land'. They were at the mercy and whim of rival political and ecclesiastical powers, without formal recognition and subject to completely unpredictable commercial and political winds. Think of Glückel's near contemporary 'The Jew Suss', Joseph Oppenheimer rising from obscurity to become one of the major financiers of the European Courts and then falling to imprisonment and doom.

Glückel's life also had its tragedies and its failures although unlike Oppenheimer she was a learned and committed Jewess and her religion was a constant source of inspiration and comfort. There were plenty of other Jewish religious businesswomen like her. Almost every woman then had to be involved commercially in one way or another, just to survive, but Glückel is remembered because, unusually, she wrote a diary. It is still in print today so we know much more about her, her private thoughts, her approach to life than we do of any other pre-modern Jewish woman. Her diary is invaluable to historians for its comments on the significant events in the Jewish and the non-Jewish world of her lifetime.

She lived out the whole of her life confined socially to a narrow circle of fellow Jews and, despite her wealth, was always constrained to live in claustrophobic, dark, unsanitary ghettos. Yet commercially her world extended throughout Northern Europe. She was a pious and learned woman who lived according to the strictness of Jewish law, a loyal and devoted wife to two husbands and the mother of 12 children. Her diary records the lengths she went to to ensure that she married them well into that small circle of similarly pious and economically prosperous contemporary Jews.

But what makes her particularly interesting is that, in addition to being such a balabusta in her family, she was a highly

successful and energetic businesswoman.

Her first husband Chaim was a banker in Hamburg where she went to live and spent most of her life. He had dealings with cities as far afield as Amsterdam, Paris, Vienna and Leipzig. While he concentrated on finance, Glückel traded and she would travel to the major fairs of the Rhineland and east to Leipzig. She records one business trip that involved travelling to Cleves, Altona, Amsterdam, Emmerich, Delft, Emden, Wangerooge and Hanover before finally returning to Hamburg. These were journeys of months, not days.

She usually travelled alone and dealt with confidence and expertise. But above all, she was honest and fair and conscious of the ethical values and demands of Torah. She strongly disapproved of those Jews who were either dishonest or devious.

When her beloved husband, friend and partner died in 1689, she took over the whole of his business, ran it successfully and expanded it. Nevertheless she remarried, another banker, Cerf Levi from Metz in 1700 and went to live there. They were also happily married and worked together in business. But a few years later he made some

disastrous decisions and lost all of his and her money. Shortly afterwards he died and she was left to rebuild her life and those of her unmarried children, which she did.

Glückel, like many historical figures, is claimed by disparate and different groups. She wrote in Yiddish so she is a Yiddishist. Her passionate belief in the Return to Zion and her desire to go to Israel make her a Zionist. Her learning and religious commitment make her a Pietist. Her independence and commercial success make her a feminist. Her insistence on her children being independent make her a liberal and her emphasis on business ethics makes her an ethical icon. How ironic that one of her descendants has recently been prosecuted in connection with the notorious Madoff affair in the United States.

In the end, Glückel defies category. She was her own unique person and when we read Glückel's life and realize how hard and unpredictable it was, we are bound to conclude that for all the pressures, we Jews really are very fortunate to live in freer times.

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Glückel's son Leib had not been successful in business and she reports his cry for help:

"If only my brothers will have pity and help me with this money, so that I can come to terms with my creditors and return to Hamburg again so that, with God's help, I can stand on my own again".

My sorrowful heart was heavy and full, and because of my bitter tears I could not at first answer him. Then I said to him, "This is vile of you! You know how ruined your brothers are because of you, and cannot afford the losses caused by you..."

Then we both wept and lamented for an hour, and could not say a word to one another. Then I quietly wrapped my cloak about me and in tears arrived back in Hamburg. I told not a word of what had passed to my children; but my son Leib would not let the matter drop. He sent letters to the others and begged them so hard that out of pity they promised to help him. After a short while this was done, he settled with his creditors and came to me in town. When his father-in-law learnt of this, he sent his daughter, Leib's wife, and child, also to me, and sent her two reichstaler every week as pocket-money. What was I to do? I had to be content with things as they were.

At that time I was still quite energetic in business, so that every month I sold goods to the value of 5,000 or 6,000 reichstaler. Besides this, I went twice a year to the Brunswick Fair

and at every fair sold goods for several thousands, so that I could have recovered the loss I suffered through Leib, if I had had peace. I did good business, received wares from Holland, bought much goods in Hamburg and sold them in my own shop.

I did not spare myself but travelled summer and winter and all day rushed about the town. Besides this, I had a fine business in seed-pearls. I bought from all the Jews, picked and sorted the pearls and sold them to the places where I knew they were wanted. I had large credits. When the Bourse was open and I wanted 20,000 reichstaler, cash, I could get it. Yet all this availed me nothing, for I saw my son Leib, a pious young man, well versed in Talmud, doing nothing! I said to him one day: "Listen to me. I see no prospect for you. I am doing big business and it is beginning to be too much for me. I want you to help me and I will give you two percent of everything I sell." He accepted this offer with great joy. He was very industrious and had a chance of re-establishing himself if only his goodness of heart had not been his undoing. Through my introductions he became well-known.

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The MEMOIRS of GLÜCKEL of HAMELN

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With a New Introduction by Robert Rosen

