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The Turkish Cavalry in Swarzędz, or:
Jewish Political Culture at the Borderlines of Modern History

It seems inappropriate to start an investigation about the relationship between changes in the political and military developments at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the Jewish political culture with an anecdote about the encounter between a rather small-sized Jewish community in the province of Greater Poland, Swarzędz (Swerszen would be the German name of that small town), and the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte in the year 1806. However, taking into account the many books, articles, memoirs, letters and legends that have been devoted to the complex relationship between Napoleon and the Jews, a forgotten but meaningful anecdote might serve as the ideal vantage point to reflect upon the shifts Jewish communities underwent after the end of the French monarchy, the Polish Commonwealth, and the Holy Roman Empire.

The task of the following is to explore how the bases of Jewish political agency changed in the course of the so-called Sateizzeit, roughly speaking the period between the 1780s and the 1830s, in the Jewish communities of France, Germany, and Poland. It will be argued that the advent of Napoleon introduced an urgent need to revise fundamental elements of Jewish political agency. One expression for this ubiquitous search for new strategies and focus of agency is the attempt of the Jewish notables of Swarzędz to symbolically integrate their community into the political project of the French emperor through a highly original ritual to greet the monarch. The encounter of the Jews of Swarzędz with Napoleon Bonaparte will be compared to similar innovative strategies of Jewish communities to define their place in a new political setting, beginning with the Jews in revolutionary Paris in 1789.

It will be argued that this search for new role models led to a re-evaluation of more or less remote examples of Jewish political agency, which Jewish intellectuals discovered in non-Jewish contexts. Such a perspective takes into account processes of interaction between Jewish communities and their social and political environment.

The following anecdote took place in Greater Poland, in a small community not too far from the regional capital, Poznań. It seems of significance, as it can serve as an example for an interrelatedness that has long been overlooked, or at least underestimated, between Napoleon’s early military suc-
cesses in Central Europe and the self-perception of Jewish communities in Europe. Swarzędz, a relatively young town, which is located approximately 14 kilometers from Poznań, was founded by an aristocrat, Zygmunt Grudno Grudański, in 1621. The founding privileges were exceptionally beneficial for the Jews as for the Protestants who were called upon to settle in the new location. The Jews who settled in Swarzędz originated from Poznań, and the new community depended on the regional capital. As the legend still in circulation in the nineteenth century narrated, these Jewish pioneers cleared the forests with their own hands in order to build the new town, and erected a synagogue in its center. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Swarzędz counted around four thousand inhabitants, with a clear majority of Jews. Napoleon came to the region in the aftermath of the downfall of the Holy Roman Empire, weeks after the Imperial Diet had been forced to agree to the dissolution of the Empire on August 6, 1806. The encounter of the Jews of Swarzędz with the French emperor has been described by a Polish aristocrat, August Wilkoński (1805–1852), and first been published in Biblioteka Warszawska, a Polish learned periodical, in 1841:

"It was in the fall of 1806 that the mayor of Swarzędz called upon the Jewish elders to explain what was the reason for the unusual commotion among the Jews that had been noticed by many. During the market, the rumour spread among the Christians that the Jews had rented the total amount of 120 horses from the nearby villages. They trooped up these horses close to their cemetery and adorned them with decorative harnesses. The curious villagers were pondering the Jews' intentions, but the news that Napoleon, the French emperor, would personally inspect his troops stationed in the areas surrounding Swarzędz made the people forget about the so-called Jewish secret, and many people left for Zielonice, the location of a water-mill on the route to Poznań, where the emperor was expected to pass by [...] Next to the stables of an inn, near a lake, an innumerable crowd of Jewish observers had assembled, and their garbage, brawling and shouting was loud enough to compete with the noise of a distant artillery. [...] It was obvious by


2 Adolf Warschauer, Die Entstehung einer jüdischen Gemeinde, in: Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland 5 (1890), 170–181, here 179. In Warschauer’s interpretation, the privileges for the Jews settlers were more advantageous than for the Protestants, as they were completely free in choosing their leaders, whereas the Protestants had to have their list of candidates confirmed by the owner of the town.

How close is this anecdote to the actual events in the fall of 1806? At this point in our investigation, we do not have any independent confirmation of Wilkoński’s description. A shorter version was published by the popular historian Ezriel Natan Frenk in 1912. In this version, the young Jews of Swarzędz dressed themselves up in many colors, formed a cavalry regiment carrying flags, and thus succeeded to surprise the Emperor and his entourage. Among the local notables receiving the emperor were some older Jews, and one of them, who could speak a little bit of French, turned to Napoleon and said: "Don’t be afraid, great emperor, these are not soldiers but just Jews – unlucky like all Jews from Swarzędz." Frenk emphasizes that it is not known if the story is true, whereas Wilkoński gives his anecdote a title that emphasizes the account’s supposed veracity: "Napoleon and the Little Jews of Swarzędz. A true story." Wilkoński depicts the “żydki,” the “small” or “miserable” Jews with all the contempt that an average Polish noble of his time would feel for them, – thus being true to his social rank. However, both sources quite clearly point to an episode that includes a huge number of local Jews disguising themselves as military unit in order to present themselves to Napoleon Bonaparte.

August Wilkoński, Napoleon i żydki ze Swarzędza. Zdania prawdopodobne [Napoleon and the Little Jews of Swarzędz. A true story], in: Biblioteka Warszawska 2 (1841), 516–528. It was edited and reprinted in the author’s collected writings in Napoleon i Żydki Swarzędzkie [Napoleon and the Swarzędz Jews], in: Ramoty i zamiotki Augusta Wilkońskiego [Branches and Sprigs, by August Wilkoński], vol. 1, Poznań 1862, 57–59. Wilkoński, in his time a quite popular writer, renders the short address of the head of the “Turkish cavalry” to Napoleon in German in both versions. – Translation of the quotation by PG.

On the level of ceremonial traditions, such a procedure was an absolute novelty. It represented not only a deviation, but a clear and very strong transgression against the traditional ritual. To greet a new ruler in military attire was something unheard of for a Jewish community. Moreover, it was not without risk, and one element in understanding the masquerade is the attempt to emphasize the non-threatening character of those on horseback. While making a statement of allegiance, it kept a door open to claim a purely carnivalesque intention. Such a claim could easily have been substantiated by pointing to the tradition of the Purim holiday. Nonetheless, the Jewish notables of Swarzędz urgently wanted to distinguish themselves in the eyes of the emperor, to make a statement in reference to this powerful monarch. Thus, they acted in order to distance the community from tradition, though not totally, and they tried to distinguish their community, though not unequivocally.

Not surprisingly, the community’s protocol does not refer to the events in any way. In the unlikely case that a scribe would have noted the event, it almost certainly would have been erased after the final defeat of Napoleon for evident reasons. As condescending as Wilkoński is toward the Jews of Swarzędz, as unlikely it seems that his intention was to denigrate these or other Jews by reporting the event that struck his mind just as what it was indeed: more than one hundred Jews on horseback imitating a Turkish cavalry in order to greet the most powerful man of Europe. The other references to the incident are not as detailed as the account by Wilkoński or by Frenk. In the correspondence of Napoleon himself, we find several notes concerning the general enthusiasm with which he was greeted in Greater Poland in 1806, but no specific references to his passage through Swarzędz. Thus, he writes to the Marchal Ney: “Mes troupes sont entrées en Pologne; elles ont été reçues à Posen avec un enthousiasme difficile à peindre,” and the bulletin of the troops notes that in the provincial capital of Greater Poland, “les-feîtres [étaient] parées comme en un jour de fête” and that “les Polonais sont animés de la meilleure volonté. Ils forment des companies à pied et à cheval.


6 Samuel Zarev, Pike, Napoleon in Jewish Folklore, in: YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Sciences 1 (1946), 294–304; here 296, reduces the encounter to five lines with Posen taking the place of Swarzędz, whereas in the war diary by the Polish-Catholic priest Kaswery Zimiecki, Dni naszæzi i grozy. Fragment dziennika [Days of Hope and Threat. Fragments of a Diary], accessed through http://www.sierpc.com.pl/czytyenia/zimiecki/dni_naszizi.html (official internet site of the community of Sierpc in the vicinity of Swarzędz, December 2006), the event is noted on February 2, 1945, and refers the anecdote to the fact of a personal encounter between Napoleon and the Jews of Swarzędz.


Austria, as has been shown. The fact that Polish troops under Dąbrowski had participated in the campaign of Egypt doubtless strengthened the hopes of the Poles to see the French leader making significant decisions in favor of their nation. It is this very specific combination of factors that inspired the Jews of Swarzędz to choose their attaire: the campaign against the Ottoman Empire, the popular hopes placed in Napoleon to restore Poland, more specifically the close connection between the French leader and the project of the Jew’s emancipation, as well as the vision of a restoration of a Jewish state. It should be stressed that there is a difference between symbol and reality, between an innovative symbolic statement of allegiance and factual participation in military actions. Nevertheless, the greeting of Napoleon by the Jews of Swarzęd as Turkish cavalry is a perfect illustration for the hopes to acquire a new standing in the framework of the political project that constituted Napoleon’s Europe. Within this framework, the masquerade expressed the willingness to go far beyond the traditional place of Jewish communities, it contained a promise to participate actively on behalf of this project. However, it should also be emphasized that the intention to create a direct contact to the highest authority available and to forge a significant bond represented the continuation of well-established patterns of Jewish political tradition under the conditions of exile, the “royal alliance.”

The Epistemic Significance of the Jews of Swarzęd as Turkish Cavalry

As a point of departure to understand the further epistemic significance of this anecdote, one has to recall both the symbolic and instrumental value of any ceremonial enactment of allegiance or loyalty between a sovereign and his or her subjects. As recent studies in the semiotics of ceremonies of political or any

11 Szymon Askenazy, Napoleon a Polska, Warszawa et al. 1918, 2 vols., here vol. 2, 210, 227; see also Frunk, Yehudei Polin bi-Yemei Milhamot Napoleon, 6.


13 Iconographic references to the campaign in Egypt and Palestine are numerous, e.g., in contemporary caricatures favorable to or against Napoleon, documenting the popularity of this imagery, see e.g., Gisela Vetter-Liebenow, Napoleon – Genie und Despot. Ideal und Kritik in der Kunst um 1800, Hannover 2006, 25 and 75. Roizman Raza (“Roustan”), Napoleon’s manehuk background from 1798 on, represented one more continuous iconographic reference to the campaign in Egypt, ibid., 93, 113, 123.


17 Shauliel Leib Tintor, Shadlonim. Interesseret idisher tipp fun nozzer avar [Intercessors. Interesting Jewish Figures From a Recent Past], Varshe s.d. (1925 or 1926), passim, gives a host of examples of the way passing through small shtetelkh, or small towns, thus offering opportunity for intervention, e.g., 81, 140–156, 320. In the case of the expulsion from Prague, representatives of the Jewish Community would wait for Maria Theresa on a presumed itinerary of the queen in order to plead their case, François Guenzel, Textures of Intervention. Rescue Efforts for the Jews of Prague, 1744/48, in: Simon Dohnow Institute Yearbook 4 (2005), 353–373, here 366.

was the transition of a given region from one ruler to another in the context of war and conquest. In some cases, a new ruler would not be able to secure his or her hold over conquered territory, and a too early demonstration of loyalty to the temporary ruler could be interpreted as treachery — as was the case in Prague in 1744.19 Napoleon — the leader of the nation that had introduced legal emancipation for the Jews, under whose name the vision of the Jews restoring their state in Palestine was publicized all over Europe, who was greeted as the presumed saviour of Poland by the Poles, and who, in 1806, already had subdued two of the partitioning powers — must have put the stakes very high as to how to greet this exceptional personality. And indeed, what the leaders of the modest community in Swarzędz in Greater Poland devised as a surprise for Napoleon, was without doubt à la hauteur, as its leaders in many respects deviated from patterns practised over many generations.

Firstly, they chose a military attire to solemnly greet the emperor: symbolically, they pledged allegiance as soldiers. They departed from the tradition to engage in military affairs only under duress, and declared their willingness to join the forces of the new ruler. Secondly, they performed some sort of levée en masse, with a huge group of community members participating in the greeting, engaging not only the representatives or elders, but a large number of male community members. Even the huge parade in Prague in 1741 cited above showed only half of the number of horses involved in the welcome extended to Napoleon by the Jews of Swarzędz — at least following the account of Wilkoński. Thirdly, they would surprise the new ruler with an unprecedented form of greeting for him, engaging their community as well as Napoleon in some kind of new bond of allegiance, necessitated by the exceptional circumstances. Any deviation from ceremony is significant, as sticking to traditional procedures has its meaning. And indeed, despite their military, massive, and surprising greeting of the French emperor, the Turkish cavalry of Swarzędz followed traditional forms to pledge loyalty in one important dimension. The local Jews addressed the monarch as “Szwancerz Juden,” thus emphasizing their self-perception as collective body. It appears as a bold way to affirm the community’s existence and presence, striving to establish a new formula for the traditional “royal alliance.”20 This interpretation is further corroborated by the fact that the Jews of Swarzędz just one year earlier had won the status as independent community. After decades of communal disobedience that had led to a servitude of tax payments by the Jews of Swarzędz after the dissolution of the Council of Four Lands in 1764, and brought

21 Warschauer, Die Entstehung einer jüdischen Gemeinde, 181.
22 David Ruderman, Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key. Anglo-Jewish Construction of Modern Jewish Thought, Princeton/Oxford 2000, 141, thus characterizes the audacious political writing A Discourse Addressed to the Minority (London 1770), with which Abraham ben Naphtali Tang (d. 1792) entered the heated debate concerning the rejection of Robert Wilkes from the English parliament. I shall return to this example of intense participation in non-Jewish political affairs later.

19 Guesnet, Textures of Intercession, 356f.
20 For an overview concerning the political tradition of the ‘royal alliance,’ see Yeruhalimi, Diener von König und nicht Diener von Dienern. Einige Aspekte der politischen Geschichte der Juden, passim.
Legends depict all but one of the Zaddikim as skeptical of the French emperor, as these tales were disseminated after his final defeat. The only Zaddik who is presented in a number of legends as a fervent supporter of Napoleon was Rav Mendele Rymanover, said to have prayed for the defeat of the Russian troops after Napoleon attacked Russia. 24 Napoleon’s most prominent opponents were Shneur Zalman of Ljady and the Maggid of Kozienice, to whom is attributed the prophetic formula taken from the book of Esther napol tipol (“you shall fall”). 25 The legend about the encounter of the Maggid of Kozienice and Napoleon is especially telling, as it puts the Hasidic leader and the French emperor at eye level, with the Maggid prophecying Bonaparte’s defeat. Threatened with capital punishment by the latter, the Hasidic leader was vindicated by the further events. What emerges from this and other legends is in fact a new, eschatological vision of the contemporaneous world. For many Jews, the rise of Napoleon had messianic dimensions. In the entourage of the Seer of Lublin, the final defeat of Napoleon was closely connected to the sudden death of their leader, and both were seen as announcing the end of the world. 26 Millenarian expectations also emerged in other parts of Europe. A provincial functionary in revolutionary France reported to a high-ranking police administrator in Paris, Merlin de Douai, about a conversation he had had in February 1799 during a coach travel with an Ashkenazi Jew from Germany, which he rendered as follows: 27

"- Are you still waiting for the Messiah?
- No, he has arrived.
- I have not read the news in any gazette.
- You did not see then that Bonaparte has seized the Holy Land?
- Yes, I know that, but what does our general, who eats bacon and sausages, have in common with the Messiah? Did not Godfroi de Bouillon also seize Palestine without the Temple of Jerusalem rising from its ruins?
- Well, this time it will rise. There are 1,500,000 Jews in Europe who, if they must, will sacrifice their fortunes and their lives for such a glorious enterprise."

24 Niﬁot ha-Hose [Wonders of the Seer], Warsaw 1910/11, 59. I am grateful to Susanne Talalakhon, Potzdam University, to have shared her insights concerning Hasidic tales and legends with me; see also Levine, “Should Napoleon be victorious . . .?”, 74, and Dubnow, Geschichte des Chassidismus, vol. 2, 234f.
25 Levine, “Should Napoleon be victorious . . .?”, 82; Pipe, Napoleon in Jewish Folklore, 301;
26 Niﬁot ha-Hose, 18–20.
27 Letter from the commissioner of the North to Merlin de Douai from February 28, 1799, in: La Révolution française à travers les archives, Paris 1988, 426–429; see also Shulim, Napoleon as Messiah, cf. above, n. 9. The addressee of the letter, Merlin de Douai (1754–1858), was an ambitious functionary and politician, serving for a short period of time as member of the directoire. He distinguished himself as an advocate of a strong centralized police. -- Translation of the quotation by F.G.

28 Frank, Yehudei Polin bi-Yemei Milhamot Napoleon, 9.
29 Shurei Hod li-Khovu ‘Adonnai ha-Kessar, 3.
31 Dubnow, Geschichte des Chassidismus, vol. 2, 148, 265–270; Levine, “Should Napoleon be victorious . . .?”, 82. It should be noted in passing that Levine’s presentation of Shneur Zalman’s political options is not convincing. He contrasts the potentials of Jewish existence in “the interstices of shtetl autonomy with greater opportunities for civic society and associational life” to the precariousness of “feudal society” where “the collective lives and the plausibility of their faiths” of the Jews “were depending on charters here or concessions there” on the one hand and “Napoleonic totalitarian mass society” on the other. Levine distorts all three societal frameworks, underestimating the binding forces of contractual solutions in the ancien régime, postulating a civic society where there were no citizens, and re-projecting twentieth-century categories on the turn of the nineteenth century.
Political Developments and Epistemological Changes as Determining Factors of Modern Jewish Political Culture

The French revolution and the partitions of Poland as the revolutionary and the reactionary guise of the collapsing ancien régime, the ever expanding control of modern state administration that did not tolerate intermediate political powers, institutions and associations (including the Jewish community), and the massive military threat posed by Napoleon to the consuetudinary

distribution of political power over wide areas of the European continent challenged the sources of political power themselves. This was true for empires and nations as it was true for the Jewish communities in Europe. The emergence of Hasidism as the main challenge to the traditional Jewish community in Eastern Europe very clearly illustrates the parallelisms in the developments in the Jewish and Gentile political culture. In the course of merely a few decades, this movement was able to establish charismatic religious leadership with a strong tendency to heredity, to create new communities with a membership that was founded not on the principle of locality, but of voluntary adherence, to take over community boards and rabbinate throughout substantial stretches of Eastern Europe, and, by the end of the nineteenth century, to establish cultural hegemony in these regions. All this was only achievable through a quite radical reassessment of what created political authority within a community, a reassessment that occurred throughout European Jewish communities of the period. In German-speaking areas and Western Europe, the main thrust of this challenge to older concepts of communal authority came from acculturating segments of Jewish society that from the seventeenth century on developed new concepts and models of Jewish-gentile cohabitation. Here, the political challenge within the communities was defined by the objective to establish new and wide areas of a Jewish-gentile hyper-culture, for which the state’s administration and its institutions were perceived to be preeminent symbols.

Thus, the remarkable statement by the community of Swarzędz dressing up as Turkish cavalry as a matter of fact puts this small community at the intersection of two substantially differing models of modernization of Jewish agency. On one hand, there is a strong expression of an ‘Eastern European model,’ as it were, to mobilize the local Jewish community as a political entity, and to strive for an inclusion into a political vision of breathtaking dimensions. On the other, the very fact of (symbolically) integrating this community into the greater political scheme of a Gentile leader proves that these Greater Polish community leaders understood what modernization is about toward the West.

Indeed, we come across earlier examples of similar political strategies in revolutionary Paris. As Jews were in principle not allowed to settle permanently in the French capital before the emancipation, no formally constituted community existed, and the number of Jews living in Paris did not exceed one thousand. They were comprised of a small group of Sephardic Jews from the well-to-do communities in the South, Jews originating from Algorithmian and Lotharingian communities, of which the city of Metz was the most

32 Pipe, Napoleon in Jewish Folklore, 297.
33 Ezriel Naan Frenk, Aggadot Hasidim. Le-Bnei ha-Ne’urim ve-le’Am [Legends of the Hasidim. For the Youth and the Nation], Vanke 1923, 142. In Frenk, Yehuda Polin bi-Yemei Milhamot Napoleon, 507., the author adds that on the order of Prince Czartoryski, the Maggid prayed for the success of the emperor.
important, and a small number of Jews from outside France: German territories, Poland, England, and others. One of them was Zalkind Hourwitz, a Jew from Poland, self-taught, who had come to Paris in 1774 or earlier.35 Known for his Apologie des Juifs, an essay pleading for the emancipation of the Jews that had won the prize of the Académie de Metz (along with two other essays), he was one of the unremitting supporters of unconditional emancipation of the Jews when the issue was put on the agenda of the Assemblée Nationale.36 When, in mid-July 1789, the National Guard was created in order to prevent a military coup and to maintain order in the face of famine, an estimated one hundred Jews, among them Hourwitz, joined the ranks of the militiamen.37 In the period of deliberations of the Assemblée Nationale, the cause of the Jews of France was defended, among others, by Hourwitz and Jacques Godard, an advocate, member of the national assembly and of the assembly of the Paris representatives, the Commune de Paris. In a moment of intense discussions about the project of a comprehensive emancipation of all Jews of France, and not just those from the South, Hourwitz and other Jewish members of the National Guard would escort Godard to the Commune de Paris on January 28, 1790, where the latter would address the representatives in order to win their crucial support.38 Here, Godard praised the Jews clothed in the National Guard’s uniform for their “patriotic zeal that distinguished them from the outset of the revolution on, that had motivated them to take up the arms and had turned them into courageous and unfailing fighters.”39

The message of the Jews in uniform was a multi-layered one. First and foremost, it declared the readiness of the Jews of Paris to defend, together with the other guardsmen, the acquis of the revolution, and thus to adhere to the project of social and political change. They also documented their resolve to give up part of their collective distinctiveness in merging in a larger collective, that of Parisian guardsmen. Consequently, they conveyed one more message, crucial in the eyes of Zalkind Hourwitz, the instigator of the Jewish escort: As the political and social framework change, Jews also will change. They would not cease to be Jews, as some have argued against Hourwitz, who clearly rejected all expectations that Jews would give up their religion once emancipated.40 But they would indeed change, becoming “plus heureux et plus utiles.” One cannot stress enough the similarity in political strategy delineated by this Polish Jew in his Apologie, and the symbolic act of emphasizing the need for emancipation by joining the National Guard. Like in the later case of the ceremonial intuition of the Jews of Swar­ędz, at the core of Hourwitz’ strategy lay a new perception of Jewish agency. In the case of Hourwitz, this new orientation was without doubt inspired by the writings of Moses Mendelssohn, much admired by Hourwitz, and who had defined a new attitude for a shidtah (Hebr., intercessor), for a Jew speaking up for his people: not to plead with the authorities, but to submit a claim to the public for reflection.42 “I had to defend my people in front of the public,” writes Hourwitz in his Apologie, defining his task of being one of an advocate and a witness, feeling “the absolute necessity that some Jew answered” the question on how to make the Jews “more happy and more useful.” To give this answer was not only to “intervene,” but to “take up a struggle.”43 A few pages later Hourwitz took up that idea once more, emphasizing his notion of Jewish agency: “écoutez les Juifs eux-mêmes plaider leur cause” (let us listen to the Jews themselves pleading their cause) in order to gauge the question whether or not to grant the status of equal citizenship.44

It is a marker of the so-called Sattelzeit that Jewish thinkers and writers in a simultaneous yet unsynchronized search for political orientation turned to earlier examples of Jews acting on behalf of their community. The need to change or adjust the status of the Jews within the various non-Jewish communities they were living in was evident, as evident as was the necessity to revise the tools to achieve this objective. In the same spirit that

35 Ibid., 5.
36 Ibid., 29–59.
38 Ibid., 91–96.
41 Hourwitz, Juif Polonais. Apologie des Juifs en réponse à la question, 29 (especially note 2).
42 François Gesnaut, Moses Mendelssohn’s Tätigkeit als Försterprecher im Kontext jüdischer politischer Kultur der frühen Neuzeit, in: Menora. Jahrbuch für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte 16 (2005/2006); Julius H. Schoeps et al. (eds.), Moses Mendelssohn, die Aufklärung und die Anfänge des deutsch-jüdischen Bürgerums, Hamburg 2006, 115–137, 132–137. There are numerous parallels in the argument of both authors in matters of the emancipation of the Jews, like the corollary of Jewish betterment through emancipation, the limited perspectives of agrarian productivisation, the value of commercial activity, a strong stance against rabbinical jurisdiction, and advocating early burial.
43 Hourwitz, Juif Polonais. Apologie des Juifs en réponse à la question, Préface, 8–11. The French terms is “causer en lies,” which connotes competition as well as fight.
44 Hourwitz, Juif Polonais. Apologie des Juifs en réponse à la question, 8. Among the examples to follow for France, Hourwitz mentions the Netherlands, England, Poland, Sweden, Austria, and the status of the Jews in Bordeaux and Bayonne, ibid., 35.
led Zalkind Hourwitz to “take up a struggle” and to “defend [his] people in front of the public,” these predecessors in Jewish agency selflessly put personal interest aside in favor of the needs of their community. They shared the common feature to represent an example of Jewish agency as expressed through concrete, political intercession. Most prominent among these earlier examples that were now re-assessed were the biblical figure of Esther, Philo, the Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, and Menasseh ben Israel, the Sephardic rabbi from Amsterdam, the self-proclaimed savior of the Sephardic Jews living as neo-Christians in Spain, France and Portugal. All three were “re-introduced” during this period by Jewish authors by dint of a previous reception by non-Jewish authors. This potential to disregard traditional borders between religious and political discourses was an infrequent but ubiquitous phenomenon in enlightened Europe, as David Ruderman has shown in his study on the English-Jewish Enlightenment in the second half of the eighteenth century. There, he portrays David Levi (1742–1801) as probably the “first major public Jewish intellectual” in Europe, continuously and aggressively attacking English Protestant Hebraists for their philological shortcomings, and the astonishing figure of Abraham ben Naphali Tang (d. 1792), “jumping into the commotion of a national debate” of the Wilkes affair.45 Thus, one characteristic of the borderline of modern Jewish history is deliberate, conscious, public and non-apologetic transgression of borders between Jewish and non-Jewish discourses with a clear intention to act politically — whether the political objective was the fate of the Jewish community or of non-Jewish society.

Thus, the context of Moses Mendelssohn’s cooperation with Christian Wilhelm Dohm in publishing Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden in 1781 is a reference to Menasseh ben Israel. Mendelssohn added his translation of the Vindiciae Judaeorum by Menasseh, first published in 1655, under the title Rettung der Juden. Menasseh, rabbi in Amsterdam, as a writer was perceived as the “official exponent of Judaism to the Gentiles.”46 He undertook it in this essay dedicated to the Supreme Court of the Parliament to demonstrate the necessity of a Jewish re-settlement in England.47 After a surprisingly intense and positive reception of his earlier essay Hope of Israel (1650) in England, encouragement by members of a British mission to Amsterdam visiting a synagogue in 1651, and the fact that the Parliament officially recommended examining the proposal of Menasseh ben Israel to re-

45 Ruderman, Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key, 108–144, here 141.
46 Cecil Roth, A Life of Menasseh ben Israel. Rabbi, Printer, and Diplomat, Philadelphia 1934, 90.
50 Guesnet, Moses Mendelssohn’s Tätigkeit als Fürsprecher im Kontext jüdischer politischer Kultur der frühen Neuzeit, 133.
History as Guide for the Perplexed

In contrast to this overly optimistic Mendelsohnian re-conceptualization of Jewish political agency as solely requiring an accessible and reasonable public and good arguments, the choice of past examples of Jewish agency by other authors demonstrates less confidence in pure reason as the decisive factor. Thus, in 1836 Mordechai Aaron Ginzburg published a translation of Legatio ad Gaium by Philo of Alexandria, describing the mission of a group of Jews from this Mediterranean metropolis under the leadership of the philosopher. What fascinated Ginzburg in Philo was the figure of the intellectual "standing up to the kings" and becoming the saviour of his people. Ginzburg contrasts the significance of Philo's writings as one of the oldest existing Hebrew texts to the fact that most Jews ignored this example of devotion to the Jewish people, and even did not have the text in Hebrew at their disposal. He further emphasized that not only Philo, but most of the Jewish leaders of the period of the Babylonian exile were examples of faithfulness to their God, of virtue and dignity. Ginzburg links the achievements of Philo in defending the Jews of Alexandria against these first attempts of blood libel to developments in his own times. He suggested that the courage of Philo in defending his fellow Jews may serve as a direct example to his contemporaries — and it seems a significant fact that he published this appeal years before the Damascus Affair. This first Hebrew version of Philo's text, who himself had written in Greek, was a translation from a German version published in 1783 by Johann Friedrich Eckhard.

55 Shvartsberg, Ha-Mal'akhut 'al Kais Kalligula, 6.
56 Ibid., 9.
57 See Gersdorff in the Cajar. Aus dem griechischen des Philo übersetzt von Johann Friedrich Eckhard. Leipzig, in der Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1783. This translation was itself the result of the pan-European philhellene movement leading to a systematic translation of Greek texts, see Suzanne L. Marchand, Down from Olympus, Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750–1970, Princeton 2003, 24, emphasis. There are two noteworthy differences between Ginzburg's translation and its German template. The first concerns the episode in the Legatio of how the temple in Jerusalem was finally saved from being desecrated due to a letter sent by King Agrippa, the friend and confidant of Gaius, to the emperor. This letter finally motivates Gaius to give up on his project to have a gigantic sculpture of himself erected in the Jerusalem Temple, and thus represents the core of the account about how the desecration was prevented. Ginzburg singled out the pages containing the letter by a title that does not occur in the Greek original, nor in the German translation: "Letter by Agrippa the king to Gaius the emperor." Obviously, for Ginzburg the words of the Jewish king Agrippa that finally altered the course of events represented the core message of Philo's work, because he cut short his translation at this point, omitting the final parts of the original text. Obviously, his intention was to acquaint readers with this example of Jewish intercession, and to emphasize the significance of this letter as a pattern of political procedure. Significantly, Ginzburg's translation was reprinted in 1894 at a time when Jewish political self-organization reached the stage of mass movements. While it is not surprising that a Jewish author looked for political orientation by turning to this kind of historical example, it remains a noteworthy fact that he extended his search to the non-Jewish reception of a Jewish text from the Greek ancient world.

60 Similarly, only a few years later, Me'ir Halevi Letteris published a dramatic version of a highly paradigmatic example of Jewish political agency, the biblical legend of Esther. He published his Halakhic Ester in 1843. However, this book was not an adaptation of the biblical text, but a translation of
the tragedy Esther by the most classical of all French classics, Jean Racine, published in 1689. Racine’s version of the biblical legend emphasized the religious dimension of Esther’s readiness to sacrifice herself and the unconditional obedience to divine inspiration. The new emphasis on divine intervention in the face of imminent danger and the confidence in divine justice contributed to the edifying character of Racine’s adaptation of the biblical legend of Esther. The translation itself was finished a short period before the dramatic events of the Damascus Affair, as Letteris wrote the introduction in the spring of 1839. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the author refers less to the politico-national content of the biblical legend, and more to aesthetic aspects, expanding about the challenge to translate the Alexandrine of the French original, mentioning the surprising decision to translate the twelve syllables of the French Alexandrine line with eleven syllables in the Hebrew translation. In the context of this reflection about the Jewish political culture at the boundaries of the modern age, it is all the more relevant that Letteris chose to re-introduce the Megillat Ester in a new form, a text that cannot but raise the question about the responsibilities of each individual Jew toward his or her community. The author explicitly refers to an earlier example of such a translation, citing the Ladino adaptation Ester by Salomon Usque, published in Venice in 1619. In the case of Shalom Ester, the text is re-appropriated from a non-Jewish adaptation, and it is an open question whether this re-appropriation constitutes a reclaiming for the Jewish community, or if the fact that it had gone through an adaptation by Racine, one of the most appraised authors of all times, added to the authority of this text.

Conclusion

At the end of the period under consideration here, the search for new “guides for the perplexed,” for new perspectives of Jewish political agency, had above all yielded a choice of options, taken from the wealth of Jewish history, offering a considerable range of political options. Without doubt, in the context of the Damascus Affair, to reassess Jewish political agency was becoming an even more urgent task. In the beginning, we find Mendelssohn’s reappraisal of the course of action taken by Menasseh ben Israel. Though Mendelssohn pays tribute to the sense of political responsibility of Menasseh, he chose a different strategy by turning to the unfolding public sphere and reclaiming the end of discriminatory legislation toward the Jews. In contrast, the overwhelming force of history in its making that marked the Napoleonic era created an opportunity for religious leaders within the emerging Hasidic movement to claim political leadership. The same events, however, inspired the leaders of Swarzędz, a small but ambitious Jewish community in Greater Poland, to demonstrate their eagerness to insert themselves in what they probably conceived as part of the emperor’s project: to bring emancipation to the Jews and to define their community’s constitutional status, and, possibly, to conquer Palestine and recreate a Jewish state. The course of history was different, but nevertheless, the intuitive and innovative strategy of the Swarzędz–elders constitutes a significant illustration for the obvious need for Jewish communities to develop new models of political agency. The resurgence of the blood libel in the context of the Damascus Affair reinforced a tendency to consider all options for political strategies. What stands at the end of the period under consideration, is a broad array of potential strategies. This emerges most clearly from the wide range of politically active figures of the Jewish past and present who entered the Jewish public discourse. This can be illustrated by the strong emphasis on Jewish political agency in an early Jewish periodical, the Revue orientale, edited by the highly original rabbi of Bruxelles, Eliajik Carmoly. From the start of the learned journal, the editor published articles about the shadlanim of the early modern period like Josel of Rosheim, Menasseh ben Israel and Jom Tov Lipman Heller, and wrote and published the first modern historiographical study on Philo of Alexandria. Furthermore, he emphasized the political achievements of Jews from the eighteenth century active on behalf of their respective communities like Isaac Pinto, Jacob Pereire and Abraham Furtado in France. Long biographical articles presented the life and deeds of political activists of the turn of the century and in the course of the Napoleonic period like Michel Berr, secretary of the Great Sanhedrin, David Sintzheim, president of the Consistoire des Israélites de France, and Jonas David Meyer, president of the Consistoire supérieur hollandais-allemand, among others. Much attention was devoted to the events surrounding the Damascus Affair. The wide range of periods, characters, contexts, and strategies notwithstanding, one common feature is shared by the objects of

64 Shalom 'Ester, Shalom le-Rahok u-le-Karov [Introduction], 7.
65 Ibid., 11.
66 Revue orientale. Recueil périodique d’histoire, de géographie et de littérature 3 (1843/44). Carmoly, editor of this periodical and author of numerous studies, scorned by later Jewish historians like Heinrich Graetz, certainly deserves more academic attention than he has received to date.
67 Carmoly's articles were among the first publications of source material especially concerning Josel von Rosheim.
68 A fascinating article, or rather list, by Carmoly is devoted to "Diplomates juifs modernes," cf. Revue orientale, 3 (1843/44), 353–355.
Carmoly's curiosity: the political involvement of deserving individual Jews who influenced the course of history and the fate of their communities. This emphasis on Jewish political agency clearly has to be understood as the heritage of the Jewish interpretation of the European Enlightenment, as illustrated by Jewish public intellectuals like Abraham Tang, Moses Mendelssohn or Zalman Hourwitz, and the profound impact that politics itself, i.e., the events surrounding the French Revolution, the partitions of Poland and the Napoleonic Wars, had on European Jewish communities. This heritage was marked by an attempt to draw from ancient sources of Jewish political agency, even if these sources had to be re-discovered in the context of non-Jewish discourses.