



Louise Hecht. *Ein jüdischer Aufklärer in Böhmen: Der Pädagoge und Reforme Peter Beer (1758-1838).* Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2008. 403 pp. EUR 49.90, paper, ISBN 978-3-412-14706-8.

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

The Bohemian Haskalah, as opposed to its counterparts in Germany, and later in Galicia and Russia, has received remarkably little attention. In fact, I am aware of only one book on the subject: the incomplete and dated study by Ruth Kestenberg-Gladstein, *Neuere Geschichte der Juden in den boehmischen Laendern. Erster Teil: Das Zeitalter der Aufklaerung, 1780-1830* (1969). In this first full-length biography of the radical Maskil Peter Beer, which began as a dissertation done at the Hebrew University, Louise Hecht places her subject within the generally conservative Prague Haskalah and thereby considerably expands our conception of it.

Beer is significant in three areas of activity, which constitute the major divisions of the volume: Jewish educational reform, historiography, and religious reform. Of these, the last is relatively less significant than the former two and consequently receives appropriately less attention. In each of these areas the author not only increases our knowledge through a rich collection of new factual data drawn from archives in Jerusalem,

Vienna, and Prague, but also enables us to see Beer's activity within what the author calls the "triangle of forces" consisting of Maskilim, the Orthodox elite, and an Austrian state that closely controlled Jewish affairs. The author's ability to contextualize Beer's activity within this field of forces and against the background of political, cultural, and religious developments in both Austrian and Jewish history gives this study a broader range than would be the case were it a more narrowly conceived biography of Peter Beer.

The facts relating to Beer's personal life receive a relatively brief treatment within Hecht's analysis of Beer's autobiography, which she presents as a mixture of fact and fantasy and relates to others written at the time, like that of Salomon Maimon. The author calls it a *Bekehrungsgeschichte*, a history of Beer's conversion from *talmid chacham* to Maskil. She notes, insightfully, that Beer presented an autobiography that could serve as a paradigm for the course of central European Jewry in general.

Beer made his living as an educator in Prague and in this capacity published a number of textbooks for Jewish children. On the basis of archival evidence the author describes how Beer's influence in government circles was weaker than that of his rival Herz Homberg, resulting in the latter's gaining privileges denied to Beer, especially the right to administer the required examination in Jewish religion and morals to Jewish couples before their marriage. Yet Beer's activities in the Jewish school and his educational writings are of great interest and have never before been explored with such thoroughness and depth. Dr. Hecht is clearly at home in the complex workings and changing educational objectives of the Habsburg administration, as she is in the educational literature, both Jewish and non-Jewish, of the time. Following her discussion of Beer's role in the Jewish school, in which he was never able to achieve his ideal of an integrated Jewish and secular education, the author proceeds to an analysis of Beer's various textbooks, extensively comparing them not only with each other (and various editions of the same book) but with similar works by others composed during the same period. She finds a common trend in all of Beer's works: the presentation of Judaism in terms of virtues and values that correspond closely with those of the Austrian *Buergerthum* (bourgeoisie). In drawing especially upon the Bible, to the virtual exclusion of rabbinic literature, the author notes that Beer created a new Jewish canon largely overlapping that of the Catholic tradition in Austria.

In turning to Peter Beer as historian, Hecht makes the important observation that there was more interest in history among Bohemian Maskilim than among their counterparts in Germany. Beer turned to history for two reasons: as a pedagogical tool and for purposes of facilitating religious reform. The author locates Beer's historical work as a middle stage between the biographical, hero-oriented historical writing of the early Haskalah and the more academic historiography that was associated with *Wissenschaft des Juden-*

tums. Through a careful and comparative examination of Beer's historical works, Dr. Hecht is able to discern ideological tendencies that manifest themselves, for example, in Beer's taking Josephus as his model and viewing the Romans favorably while casting aspersions on the Jewish national defenders of Jerusalem and Massada. Importantly, she notes that, although Beer avoids theological interpretations in his more scholarly work, he nonetheless focuses his history upon the Jewish religion lest Jewish history be understood as possessing a national rather than an essentially religious character. She notes that Beer, like Isaac Jost, wanted to see the history of the Jews as part of the national histories of the countries in which they lived and Jewish history per se as the history of their religion—a confessionalization of Jewish identity, which corresponded precisely to the demands of the European states.

Beer's most interesting and significant historical study was his two-volume history of the Jewish "sects." Here Dr. Hecht is to be complimented for her thorough source analysis of this work, which is interesting both for its underlying ideological purposes and for its use of otherwise unknown sources for Hasidism and Frankism. She ascribes its methodological shortcomings, such as its pedagogical motivation and its reliance on eighteenth-century rationalism, not, as have others, to unawareness of progress in Jewish historiography since the Haskalah, but to the intellectual orbit of Habsburg Austria, which had not yet developed the historical consciousness that influenced, for example, the young Leopold Zunz at the University of Berlin. Two interesting novelties in Hecht's analysis are her contention that, despite Beer's high regard for the Karaites, he attributes a positive role as well to rabbinism as a stage in Jewish religious development and also her explanation of Beer's unfavorable treatment of Hasidism and favorable treatment of Frankism as due to the east European character of Hasidism

and to the presence of Frankists in some of the leading families of Prague.

Dr. Hecht's discussion of religious reform picks up the theme of reshaping Judaism to fit a bourgeois framework that she found in Beer's textbooks. Interestingly, a portion of this chapter focuses on a prayer book that Beer wrote for women, which was to be used in the public as well as the private sphere. Thus, the author argues, Beer was able not only to convey to Jewish women the desirable image of the woman of bourgeois values but also to bring some of these new emphases into the larger sphere of religious reform. In this chapter Hecht also provides a detailed, archives-based, and in some respects original account of the establishment of the reformed services in Prague and of Beer's role within that effort.

In her conclusion, Dr. Hecht describes her work as "an act of rehabilitation" of Peter Beer. Certainly, Heinrich Graetz and some others had been unduly critical of the radical Prague Maskil. In this clearly written, well-formulated and persuasive work, Hecht has indeed succeeded in presenting a far more nuanced and complex picture of Beer than the earlier, more superficial research had given us.

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