Secularisation and religious conflict within Jewish communities throughout Central Europe

The example of the Hevra Kadisha, the Jewish burial society

Cornelia Aust, Free University Berlin

1. A common feature throughout Central and Central Eastern Europe was the existence of important Jewish communities from the Middle Ages onward. These communities were marked among other things by various conflicts that emerged in the course of religious dissidence, for example Sabbatianism, Hassidism or the Haskala, the Jewish Enlightenment – which will be the background for my expositions.

Looking at the different Jewish communities seems to be a clear invitation for comparative history to perceive similarities and differences and to measure the characteristic features of different social systems. But in this case – comparing the chronological and qualitative differences in the process of shifting authority within the Jewish communities (especially their burial societies) – the view has to go beyond a simple comparison. Here the approach of a research on cultural transfer may be helpful. Transfer means the moving of people, material objects, concepts and cultural systems from one culture or one area towards another. We have to keep in mind that such a cultural transfer is not mainly determined by the will to export, but by the willingness to import different cultural goods. This behaviour is often connected to the desire to change or modernise one’s own culture.¹

In researching Jewish history in Central Europe, the comparative view and the question of cultural transfer can even be doubled. On the one hand there is a connection and a transfer between the different Jewish communities, but on the other hand we have to consider the influences of the surrounding gentile society towards the Jewish minority. Only keeping in mind these two aspects will enable us to draw a sharp picture of the changes within Jewish communities throughout Central Europe.

2. Often unmentioned in general works on the development of European Judaism in modern times, the Hevrot Kadisha – the Jewish burial societies – are an impressive example of a traditional authority within the Jewish communities.

The origins of these burial societies – emerging in Ashkenazi Judaism from the 16th century on (the first one was founded in Prague in 1564) – probably go back to Sephardic and Christian influences. In traditional Jewish society the power of the Hevra Kadisha – made up of married and distinguished men – emerged from their task of taking care of the dying and the dead and being responsible for the cemetery of the community.

The tasks of the burial societies were not limited to the burial. Often three pillars have been defined: Tora – meaning the learning of the scriptures; Avoda – meaning prayer and service and Gemilut Hasadim – meaning that in addition to caring for the dead it assumed responsibility for a wide range of charitable works including supplying clothing and food to the Jewish poor, providing dowries for poor brides, visiting the sick and comforting mourners. Common prayers and days of fasting, an annual banquet or – like in Vienna – a weekly lesson given by the rabbi have been important elements within the societies. These occasions led to a feeling of a closed community including the dimension of strict social control. The Berlin Hevra Kadisha (1675-1827), for example, forbids its members to shave their beard or their earlocks in 1720 or gambling – especially with Christians. All members were forced to take part in the duties of the society like watching the dying, cleaning the dead (Tahara) and accompanying the funeral procession.

Another important occasion has been the annual elections of the elders (Gabaim) of the society – not at all a sign of democratic structures within the society like it’s sometimes put. In her work on the Prague, Hevra Kadisha Sylvie-Anne Goldberg speaks of a limited democracy guaranteed by its members. But many elders kept their functions for many years and passed them on to their children or close relatives. The book (Pinkas) of the Berlin Hevra Kadisha even shows that the annual elections often took place only each third year (although the ordinances prescribes annual elections). Only 18 members were accepted to the Berlin society by 1720 (according to the Hebrew meaning “life – chai” of the number). It seems to be anachronistic to speak even of a limited democracy even if we have to be careful with later descriptions and critics of Jewish enlighteners (Maskilim) who often declared the burial society to be a dictatorship of a few over the whole community. The most fitting description may be, as Goldberg explains later, “an institution based on oligarchy but whose concrete functioning depended on all its members” (p. 98).

Inside the Jewish community the social control was extended beyond the own members to the whole community, as we can see from the ordinances of the Prague society in 1692: “We have also voted unanimously no longer to tolerate the disorder of women who justle each other at funerals and at the funeral.

---

preparations, which is a terrible thing…And also this disorder that reigns at the burial of a met mitsva [an abandoned corpse], where the women rush almost into the midst of men, which puts us in grave danger…” (Goldberg, p.223). But beside the ability to denounce or punish social and/or religious deviation, we may assume that the Hevra Kadisha could rely on a wide social consensus. Otherwise the control of a small group over the whole community would not have been possible. This consensus was based on the traditional view of death as a borderline situation, changing from one level of life to another. Death had to be controlled by a strict system of rites and customs imposed and accepted by the society. Although death is inescapable, no common definition of it exists in different cultures or times. Philippe Ariès tried to describe different models of dealing with the problem of death in the gentile European society, especially in France, from the Middle Ages to the 20th century. For traditional societies he is speaking about a “tamed death” (la mort apprivoisée), which stays dominant at least until the end of the 18th century, although Ariès describes a number of changes from the 13th century onward. Death didn’t appear in this model as an individual incident – marked by the private mourning of the closest relatives –, but as a collective incident for the whole community which for example often attended the funeral procession. Rites and customs are carried out to express central values of the society and to integrate death into life. The death cult helped to keep and to strengthen the social structure of the society. The deceased became a part of an eternal society that created a bond between dead and living. In addition the mourners have been reintegrated into their community by common rites. But, according to Ariès, the model of the “tamed death” is changed by an increasing individualisation already from the Middle Ages onward. Together with this increasing process of individualisation, a new form of the fear of death can be observed in the Western parts of Central Europe from at least the middle of the 18th century onward – strengthened in the time of the Haskalah. I will get back to this point - the fear of apparent death – in the next part. Finally we may conclude that Enlightenment, modernisation and secularisation led to an increasing emancipation of the living from the dead – a process which, for example, can be shown in the books of the burial societies.

3. With the end of the 18th century and the process of opening and reforming the Jewish society and the communities – at least in the bigger cities – the burial societies were affected by the positions held by the Jewish enlighteners (Maskilim). One important point was the dispute over the time of the funeral. In Jewish tradition it was customary for the funeral to take place without delay – usually within 24 hours. This emerging discussion was influenced by a common phenomenon: the fear of apparent death. Many Jewish enlighteners demanded a

3 Philippe Ariès, Geschichte des Todes, München 1993.
delay of the funeral for two or three days, often encouraged by new regulations imposed by the gentile rulers. The first regulations were issued in the Habsburg Empire in the 1780s, in the Northern part of Germany in 1794 and in Prussia in 1798. Although Moses Mendelssohn still argued with a tradition mentioned in the Talmud to give reasons for the delay of the funeral (in 1772), his physician Marcus Herz reasons that simply no religious, moral or political reasons exist for an immediate funeral. In Berlin the strict position of the Hevra Kadisha led to the founding of the so-called “Gesellschaft der Freunde” (“Society of Friends”) in 1791 with branches in Breslau and Königsberg. It was founded by young unmarried men – e.g. Josef Mendelssohn, one of Moses Mendelssohn’s sons and his later biographer Isaac Euchel. One of its concerns was to watch over a three-day delay of the funeral by all members and their families. Another new burial society was founded in Breslau in 1798 that insisted upon the three-day delay of the funeral. Especially in smaller towns, this delay was accepted until the mid 19th century. Besides this, the Maskilim tried to introduce what they believed were more aesthetic elements in the burial ceremony – a question that has been of significant importance in other reform projects like the synagogue and especially the service. Here the use of a coffin and a hearse in the funeral procession has been in the focus of attention. According to these questions the book of the traditional Hevra Kadisha in Berlin only states in 1812: “?? ??? ???????????? ????????????????? ??????????????????? ‘??’ – “for the reason of tradition no change should be introduced”. In opposite to this, the “Society of Friends” tried to introduce a mortuary, a hearse and prescribed the dress code black coats for the bearers. But only in 1820 did they succeed in buying a coffin that was used exclusively for members of the Society. The Jewish community asked for the permission to use the coffin for all their members only in 1827, after the break down of the traditional burial society.

These discussions on the use of a coffin and a hearse as well as the detailed prescriptions for the dressing of the bearers may also be seen as a question of aesthetics. The form of gravestones and the general outlook of the cemetery became issues of this conflict as well. On the one hand the reformers often pursued aesthetical aims, which seemed to be within easier reach and could strengthen the general influence of the reformers. On the other hand, the aesthetical approach did express a symbolical participation in the European bourgeois aesthetic of the 19th century. Therefore it is difficult to decide weather to call this development a part of the process of acculturation or an act of cultural transfer. But especially in the process of individualisation, which was mentioned before, we find more or less parallel developments. Examples are a privatisation of death, the form of gravestones or the content of the inscriptions. Language and style of the gravestone inscriptions and the content of the funeral orations came into discussion in the Jewish communities. More than once the traditional Hevra Kadisha in Berlin forbade the use of German inscriptions or adding praise
or exaggerations about the deceased and stressed the same point according to the funeral orations. That is why there has not been any non-Hebrew inscription in the old Jewish cemetery in Berlin that was closed in 1827. German inscriptions can be found in a bigger number only from the middle of the 19th century onward.

All these examples can be seen as part of a process of acculturation into gentile society, especially the adoption to the German bourgeois public sphere (at least in the bigger cities). It has been, to quote David Sorkin, the “reference group” for the emerging Jewish bourgeois public and the changes inside the (urban) Jewish society. These can also be seen from a change of structure and organisation of the societies. The traditional corporate societies became or have been replaced by bourgeois societies (which is called a “bürgerlicher Verein” in German). There have been complaints about the neglect of the voluntary duties by the society members from the middle of the 18th century onward. This seems to be an expression of decreasing interest in the traditional Jewish community. Therefore many of the former voluntary duties like digging up the grave or accompanying the funeral procession became paid for services. Besides the decreasing interest in the traditional community organizations in general, another reason for this development may have been the opening of new possibilities to fulfil charity or similar duties in the gentile society or a parallel Jewish bourgeois society. Finally, the Jewish community became directly responsible for the burial and all connected duties. The new Hevra Kadisha founded in Berlin in 1827 stopped existing already by 1849. Often a bourgeois society, like the “Society of Friends” in Berlin, which sometimes emerged from the traditional society, continued to exist, being involved in charity and providing a bourgeois sociable atmosphere to its members.

We might notice here a more or less parallel development in the gentile and the Jewish society, even if it happened later in the Jewish society. We have to ask if it may be more fitting to speak about a transfer of cultural ideas and patterns – still in progress in the gentile society, rather than about a simple process of acculturation.

4. Looking eastward, the situation has been very different. There are no similar changes occurring at the turn from the 18th to the 19th century in Polish or Russian Jewish communities. The burial societies continued to exist in the traditional form described in the beginning. The destruction of the autonomy of the Jewish communities in Poland (1822) and Russia (1844) included the abolition of the traditional community leadership (Kahal) and the burial societies. But the Hevrot Kadisha continued to exist, covered by a wide social consensus within the Jewish community. Certainly some Eastern European Maskilim tried to introduce some changes to their communities in general, and to the burial societies in particular. They took as an example the changes in Berlin, Vienna or
Breslau but met with little or no success at all. Vilna may be an interesting example for us: In 1918 David Magid published an anonymous letter dated in 1848 that sharply criticized the conditions in the burial society and their leadership belonging to the economic elite of the community. He accused them of bribery, underpaying of the gravediggers and shameless treatment of the dead, using their unlimited power within the community. The author demands a clear account from the society leaders because he sees them wasting money. When David Magid published the letter in 1918 he states similar conditions inside the burial society, even when an article in “?????” from 1892 gives some hints for changes. On the one hand the worse situation of the new cemetery (opened in 1831) is criticized because there is no plan of the cemetery and it’s nearly impossible to find a special grave. The author censures, as well, the coffin and dress code of the bearers. But on the other hand he adds that the enlightened (??????) in the community introduced minor changes such as a new coffin and proper mourning clothes. He holds up as an example the burial societies of Berlin, Königsberg and Warsaw. Here, again, we see the discussion on aesthetic questions determined by the European bourgeois ideas of aesthetic.

When we compare the differences we can see the influence of one Jewish community to another on the one hand, but on the other the influence (or in this case maybe the missing influence) of the gentile society. The most important reason for the different development in cities like Warsaw or Vilna (not to speak of smaller towns and villages) can be seen in the missing bourgeois background as a “reference group”. Also the orthodox or Catholic church could not be a model for religious reforms like Protestantism has been in Germany. The question of missing emancipation, which should not be forgotten, seems to be only of minor importance since Jews were given the equal rights of the gentile population in the Congress Kingdom of Poland by 1862, which did not lead to significant change within the burial societies. Into this setting, the Maskilim tried to import the ideas from a very different sphere but they often have been only a small group in a more or less traditional environment. The second way was to leave the Jewish society totally. But of course we find some similarities to cities like Berlin or Vienna. The discussions were on the same topics (like the coffin or the hearse) and it was not just conflicts or religious discussions, but ideological conflicts about power and legitimating authority within a Jewish community or in a wider frame of Jewish society in Central Europe.

5. In summary I would like to raise several points regarding the question of power, legitimacy and authority within traditional Jewish communities and the ways of changing. We may conclude from the example of the Jewish burial societies:
1) The authority within a traditional community seems to be dependent mainly on a wide consensus of the majority of its members. Even in an oligarchic system of power, respect and wealth of a person (or a group of persons) may raise him (them) to power, but they are not sufficient for a long-term legitimacy.

2) Only such a consensus is able to create commonality, based on shared values and beliefs. The fragmentation of this consensus leads to the decline of traditional community structures and their institutions – like the Hevra Kadisha in this case.

3) We could describe a number of interdependent developments in Central Europe from the mid 18\textsuperscript{th} century onward. On the one hand the attitude to death changed, based on increasing individualisation and secularisation. On the other hand a bourgeois public sphere emerged. Both are parallel processes in gentile and Jewish society, although the Jewish case comes later and its extent differs within the area described here. Because many ideas and patterns of the gentile society have been used in the Jewish community as well, we may speak about intercultural transfer. The transfer of these ideas from more western Jewish communities eastwards may be seen as an internal transfer. But obviously both ways of cultural transfer are linked together. In the case of a missing gentile “reference group”, the ideas transferred within the Jewish society could not, or only partly, gain acceptance.