



Thoughts on the cradle of Hebrew printing in Bavaria

by Willie Glaser



Introduction

I must inform the reader at the outset, that the following narration is not a learned dissertation of this subject, but rather the compilation from different sources. It is the result of a layman's personal and awakened interest and because of personal involvement with old Hebrew books.

It was only since I wrote the story about The history of the old Hebrew books of Fürth, when I began to realize that apart from Fürth, there are also rich contributions of printing Hebrew Sforim (books and tracts) by two other Jewish communities in Bavaria, Sulzbach in Upper Palatine and Wilhermsdorf in Central Franconia.



Aaron, the High Priest: Detail from a Fürth book of the 19th century

(Photo: Willie Glaser by courtesy of CJCNA)

The meaning of printing for the Jewish world

The Jewish world enthusiastically embraced the craft of printing, which had a tremendous impact on transmission of learning and studying the Torah and Jewish traditions. It was the transformation of the *Aleph* (first letter in the Hebrew alphabet) from the written to the printed text. No wonder that the rabbis pronounced the art of printing an *Avodat HaKodesh* (holy work).

Printing permitted the ordinary Jew to follow synagogue services and read Hebrew scholarly books. Hebrew books covered also many non-religious aspects, such as medicine, science and astronomy.

Today software manufacturers develop Hebrew typefaces for the Internet, yet the courageous pioneers who dared to set Hebrew in print 500 years ago are still held in high esteem.

The impact of the three communities Fürth, Sulzbach and Wilhermsdorf

The printing triumvirate of Fürth, Sulzbach and Wilhermsdorf reached its peak during the 17th and 18th century, along with the growth of the many small *jüdische Landgemeinden in Bayern* (rural Jewish communities in Bavaria).

It is amazing today, that in the 17th century the two small Kehillas (communities) of Wilhermsdorf and Sulzbach were able to support printing presses. At that time Fürth could boast of a large community with some 400 members. With its Jeshiwah (school for higher religious learning), learned Rabbis and many other institutions the Kehilla Kodesh Fürth (Holy community Fürth) deserved its title of *The Jerusalem of Franconia*.

I am compelled to record this, because we, the descendants of these communities are the guardians of a special heritage. We have left behind an unique and beautiful way of life. I am taking the time now to acknowledge and fulfil a moral obligation by paying tribute through this media. I am taking this opportunity to tell future generations about these beautiful Kehillas (communities) we had to leave behind. Bavarian Jewry did not survive the *Third Reich*. Many of its members left Germany for a new life abroad, those who stayed behind perished in the ultimate catastrophe, the Holocaust.



The locations of Wilhermsdorf (W), Fürth (F) and Sulzbach (S) in a map of northern in the late 18th century
(Graphic: rijo)

Bavarian Jewry

A closer look at the history of these communities tells us, that there is a record of Jewish presence in Bavaria dating back to the 10th century. Historians claim Jews living in Bavaria as early as the 8th and 9th century in former Roman settlements such as Regensburg. These communities truly were the cradle of many Jewish families later dispersed around the globe.

In the course of centuries the Jewry of Franconia, Swabia and the Upper Palatine developed a diverse cultural and religious life. A distinct Jewish Bavarian folk culture evolved.

The more recent history of Jews in Bavaria was characterized by a gradual process of emancipation which resulted in the theoretical equality with their fellow citizens of other denominations. This was attained during the second half of the 19th century and lasted until the advent of Hitler.



Blowing the Shofar: Detail from a Sulzbach book of the 18th century
(Photo: Willie Glaser by courtesy of CJCNA)

There were over 480 Jewish communities and some 210 cemeteries in Bavaria. In most of these small country towns and villages, only the former synagogue and a cemetery are bearing witness to a past Jewish presence. Today, they are *Steinerne Zeugnisse jüdischen Lebens in Bayern* (Witnesses of Stone of Jewish life in Bavaria).

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Willie Glaser

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