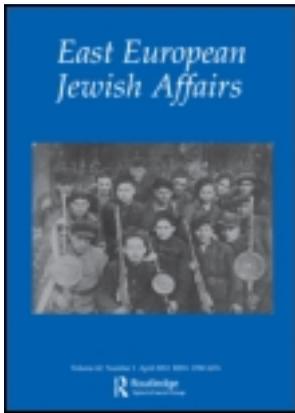


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Isaac Euchel. Architekt der Haskala, by Andreas Kennecke

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and languages ... John Paul II wrote that the Polish idea of the fatherland had evolved from the “purely Polish” idea of the Piast dynasty to the idea of the Jagiellon dynasty. (131)

And from there, he proceeds to a Pope John Paul II quotation: “So Polishness in essence is multiplicity and pluralism and not narrowness and insularity. It seems to me, however, that in our time, the ‘Jagiellonian’ dimension of Polishness that I mentioned earlier regrettably stopped being evident” (132).

The multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, gracefully variegated Grand Duchy–Commonwealth spirit is what can make the small nations of Eastern Europe that have successfully shaken off the Communist yoke, with a little help from Michnik himself, truly great, as opposed to being petty ethnocentric ultranationalist entities forever prone to far-right pro-fascist tendencies – based on claims to purity of race, language, land – whenever times get a little rough.

Which takes us to the final point. The book, which is so deeply about the author’s beloved Poland, carries the subtitle “The New Eastern Europe” even though there is precious little, save an important chapter on the Hungarian Uprising, about other countries in the region. That is not unjustified in the least, because throughout these interwoven and excellently translated and edited essays there runs a wisdom that pertains to the whole region, and beyond.

In recent years, as is the wont of the history of ideas, issues have beget other, bigger issues. The (cunningly racist and antisemitic) New Far Right in Eastern Europe has mobilised to rewrite Second World War history as one of “two equal genocides” (Double Genocide or the Red–Brown movement) and has had some success selling it to the European Parliament and further afield. Its chief document is the 2008 Prague Declaration. The idea is to write the Holocaust out of history without denying a single death. Poland has thus far stood out as a beacon of pluralistic coexistence of views on these and related questions. Its own history has in part immunised even its rightists from the kind of Nazi-collaborator glorification sometimes evident in the neighbouring Baltics states. Its own geopolitics has forged a more nuanced view of today’s Russia, without losing sight of the perils. The complex of issues raised, sometimes tying Double Genocide politics with current geopolitics, is just beneath the surface in Polish discourse too. Michnik’s sophisticated humanistic voice on all this is eagerly awaited.

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Isaac Euchel. *Architekt der Haskala*, by Andreas Kennecke, Göttingen, Wallstein 2007, 453 pp., €49, ISBN 978-3-8353-0200-6

In recent years it has become widely accepted that the eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment, the Haskala, was a much wider movement than the work of Moses Mendelssohn and his circle. In many ways, for example, the Haskala prepared the

way for the unique process of social emancipation that Jews underwent in the nineteenth century. At the same time, it is still controversial what really constituted the structure of the Jewish Enlightenment. Was it a minority group subculture, as suggested by David Sorkin, or was it part of a wider process of modernisation in eighteenth-century society towards the bourgeois model, as argued, amongst others, by Steven M. Löwenstein and Christoph Schulte. In continuing this debate, interpretation of the role of Isaac Euchel (1756–1804) in the Haskala is crucial. In his 1979 book *The Age of Haskala*, Moshe Pelli stressed “Euchel’s apparent importance,” but insisted that further research was required.¹ Shmuel Feiner supported this perspective, describing Euchel as the Haskala’s “Entrepreneur.”²

There is, however, little extant biographical information about Euchel, beyond two significant contributions. The first is Euchel’s editorship of the first modern journal in Hebrew, *Ham’assef*. The second is his biography of Moses Mendelssohn, which is still read to this day. Few sources shed additional light on the man. In recent times, we might add Feiner’s study of the Aproot and Gruschka edition of Euchel’s play *Reb Henochin*, and Panwitz’s examination of Berlin’s Maskilic circle (*Gesellschaft der Freunde*). These two studies are the only ones that reveal aspects of Euchel’s influence as a figure who stood between two generations of Maskilim; firstly, that of Moses Mendelssohn and Hartwig Wessely and, secondly, the generation of Kantian Maskilim, which included figures such as Michael Friedländer.³

The absence of sources and scholarly research has ensured that the writing of a biography of Isaac Euchel is a major task of historical scholarship. Fortunately, Andreas Kennecke succeeds in this task and we have many reasons to be grateful for his work. He has written nothing less than the first comprehensive biography of this important figure. And although in the end Kennecke himself is careful not to overestimate Euchel’s role, the biography is helpful as a marker for further research on the beginnings of the modern Jewish world.

The book is divided into three chapters. The first provides, in 150 pages, a biography of the life and writings of Isaac Euchel. The second chapter is a deliberative reflection on Euchel’s early writings, especially his appeal for a “free school” under the title “Sefat Emet” (1781), with long quotations in translation from Hebrew into German. The third and longest deals with Euchel’s highly significant journal project *Hame’assef* (The gatherer), the first Hebrew publication of the Haskala, published in Königsberg from 1783 onwards. This chapter also illuminates Euchel’s discussion of Kant’s philosophy and his notion of a non-religious approach to history, but it mainly deals with Euchel’s many disputes on Jewish issues. This includes the role of the Hebrew language in the Jewish Enlightenment, the controversies on the funeral custom of early burial, the right way to translate the *Machzor* (prayer-book used on Yom Kippur and other significant high holidays), and the self-historicisation of the Haskala through writing a biography of Moses Mendelssohn. The last part of the chapter deals with the travel writing of the fictitious character Meschulam ben Uriah Haeschemoi, one of the few literary genres used by Euchel in his project of enlightening the Jewish communities of the Old Reich. Nearly all his writings were published in his journal *Hame’assef*. A complete bibliography of Euchel’s work, a bibliography of research literature and an index of names complete Kennecke’s book, making it useful for further research.

Many will agree, as I do, with Kennecke’s key finding, namely that many of Euchel’s texts were the first of their kind to be written in Jewish history. At the same time, he won few readers and those he had were mainly his Maskilic followers.

This seemingly limits his historical role in the Haskala, insofar as leading families and circles had already switched to using non-Jewish European languages and Enlightenment culture. Therefore, the book's subtitle, "Architect of the Haskalah," is ultimately incorrect in describing Euchel's role. For rather than being a central figure in the modernisation of the Jewish communities in the Old Reich, Euchel actually embodies a pretty typical Enlightenment career. The main reason is accurately identified by Kennecke. It was Euchel's belief in the renewal of Hebrew as the key to surpassing the unenlightened way of life and thinking of most of his fellow citizens that formed the passport to his fame. In reality, his enthusiasm for the Hebrew language diminished his historical reputation, since civil society around him increasingly used the established non-Jewish European languages. Kennecke does well, therefore, in emphasising Euchel's astonishing career through his individual writings.

In view of the paucity of sources, Kennecke outlines Euchel's biography via the "Parallelstellen" method. This utilises biographical and intellectual parallel lives in the Enlightenment and compares Euchel writings with those of other Maskilim. Only two direct autobiographical sources – "Brief an den dänischen König" [A letter to the Danish king] and his will, written shortly before his death in 1804 – are preserved. Euchel was never a good promoter of his single authorship in comparison with David Friedländer and others, so Kennecke is forced to use reliable comparative sources from the Haskala. This methodological approach, however, drives the biographical dimension in useful fashion.

To elucidate Euchel's early career Kennecke refers mostly to similar out-of-the-ghetto biographies. In this historical context it is highly significant that the activities of those similar to Euchel can be analysed against the background of court Jews, who were the first to come close to promoting a non-feudal society in which Jews were no longer a marginal group. And this group was much in advance of many later developments. At the same time, Euchel's own grandfather was highly respected by so-called contemporary noble families for his knowledge of art, which cannot be regarded as a classical Jewish field of interest. By comparing Euchel's family with that of the Bendavids, Kennecke plausibly argues that in Euchel's family German was an everyday language, alongside French, and that role models were taken from local noble and merchant families. On their coffee tables lay books by Lessing and Herder. They studied the "Metaphysik" of Wolff or Baumgarten, as well as crudely harsh materialistic (and pornographic) books like "Therèse philosophe." Thus, the Enlightenment began before circles associated with the Haskalah were formed.

However, Kennecke fails to ponder whether this kind of proto-emancipation was significant for Euchel or the wider Haskala.⁴ We learn that Euchel first became a rabbi, but then took on the role of private tutor (*Hofmeister*) in various established families, as was common among many other enlightened contemporaries. Kennecke rightly emphasises the freedom of thought and study in these families, who enabled Euchel to study the Bible and not the Talmud, the Hebrew language and not Rabbinic Hebrew, profane knowledge rather than divine. Again Kennecke measures the stroke of luck that the University of Königsberg, the Friedländer family and Kant meant for Euchel. And even here Kennecke rightly compares Euchel's biography with similar ones, such as those of Lazarus Bendavid, Joel Bril or even the unlucky Salomon Maimon. By mentioning the name of his disciple Rebecca Friedländer in the foreword of his translation of the *Machzor*, Euchel for the first time in Jewish history dedicated a translation of a text to a woman.

All this is well described by Kennecke, but there is a lack of systematisation in his findings. We never get a hint as to what this all means for the wider aspects of the Haskalah or the process of emancipation. Kennecke nearly always stays on the same level of perspective as his characters. His insights are all correct, but not fitted together in a systematic manner of argument. That is the only weak point of this book. Kennecke trades the disaffirmation of Euchel as a university tutor off against other disaffirmations at the University of Königsberg, where neither Jews nor Catholics were allowed to teach, even though Kant and other enlightened professors wrote them letters of recommendation. Again, Kennecke does not forget to say what an unusual path it was to study not medicine but, as Euchel did, oriental languages. He depicts the strong resistance of orthodoxy against the Maskilim, alluding to the important fact that Euchel's disciples never adopted Hebrew, but he makes no systematic point out of this.

However, the principal conclusion seems to be obvious. Euchel was too much of a philosopher and pedagogue, who lacked a real sense of the new way of life of the emancipated families around him. Neither the entrepreneur nor the architect of the Haskala, Euchel was rather that type of antiquated scholar of the late Enlightenment whose fate it was to be somehow between historical movements and processes. Seen in this light, Euchel and the Maskilim were more a subculture than part of the wider cultural modernisation. Kennecke explains the ways Euchel chose to encourage the Enlightenment under the Jews of the Old Reich, in his journal project and his role in scholarly societies. Yet these have only loose connections to the emerging Jewish gentry. Thus Kennecke fails to do justice to the insights he so carefully develops and inadequately explains or justifies the notion that Euchel was an architect of the Haskala.⁵ As Kennecke rightly stresses, the French Revolution never played a big role in Euchel's thinking, and that again underlines his similarity to the late philosophers of the Enlightenment around 1800. But there is no systematic parallel with the late Enlightenment and Kennecke does not assess whether the modernisation of the Jewish minority ever had either an architect or even a revolutionary. To be sure, Isaac Euchel was neither of those things.

Notes

1. Pelli, *The Age of Haskalah*, 193.
2. Feiner, "Isaac Euchel."
3. Aptroot and Gruschka, *Isaak Euchel*; Panwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Freunde*. Israel Zinberg briefly dealt with Euchel, in *A History of Jewish literature*, 135–47, which was initially published in Yiddish in 1929–37.
4. See Schmidt, "Interkulturalität, Akkulturation oder Protoemanzipation?"
5. Aptroot et al., *Isaac Euchel*.

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Vilne. Die Juden aus Vilnius nach dem Holocaust. Eine transnationale Beziehungsgeschichte, by Anna Lipphardt, Studien zur historischen Migrationsforschung 20, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010, 545 pp., €58, ISBN 978-3-506-770660

One of the most impressive experiences I had as a student of East European history was on an excursion to Vilnius. Following extensive reading, I had in my head a vivid vision of the old Jewish quarter. But upon arriving I found that the *durkhhoyfn* had either vanished or had been transformed into garages. In place of the dense architecture around the former central synagogue now lay an empty square, a few parking lots and a deserted green. Looking at my fellow travellers, I realised that I was not alone in my disorientation. This was not because we were unprepared for seeing the urban aftereffects of the Holocaust, but rather because in our mind we had a picture of a city shaped less by history and more by collective memory. In her fantastic account of Vilnius Jews after the Holocaust, Anna Lipphardt explains on what such perceptions are based and why the Vilne (the Yiddish name for the city) of our mind so heavily shapes our expectations of the Vilnius of today. What is more, she locates these visions in the global world and unfolds a ground breaking transnational and cultural history of Jewish life, thought and memory after the Holocaust.

Her starting point is less a research question than an observation. During her extensive stays in Vilnius she encountered a strange rift between empty spaces in the urban structure and a strong "topophilia" (19). She realised that this love for the place transcends the actual location. It is a matter of memory and drove émigrés to re-associate in many *landsmanshaftn* all over the world. As a direct outcome of this observation, her study of Jewish Vilne is a piece of urban history mainly in a metaphorical sense. She concentrates on Vilne as an image and as a motor for community-building after migration. Her book is closely related to the broad literature on hometown associations, but it also stands out because of the central function Vilne had in Jewish émigré lives. Very much like Hasia Diner stated in relation to New York's Lower East Side, Lipphardt shows that Vilne has always been more than a place. It became a symbol for Jewish life in Eastern Europe, the "Yidishe gas" (Jewish street), the traditional rabbinical religion, Jewish communal self-organisation