

# Glikl of Hameln: The Life of an Early Modern Jewish Woman

## A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

### Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/gluckel-hameln>.

### Introduction

The memoirs of Glikl of Hameln (1646-1724) offer a detailed portrait of the life of an affluent Jewish woman in seventeenth century Europe. A mother of fourteen children, twelve of whom survived to adulthood, Glikl was an active partner in her husband's business in addition to being in charge of running her family's domestic concerns. After her first husband's death in 1689, Glikl continued to manage her family's business affairs. She began writing her memoirs in 1691, and the work, written in Yiddish, serves as an ethical will as well as a chronicle of her experiences and events that occurred in the Jewish community of Germany and beyond. Through an examination of excerpts from Glikl's memoirs and other related resources, this kit aims to provide a picture of Jewish women's lives in Europe in the seventeenth century, focusing particularly on the key themes of family life, religious life, communal Jewish structure, motherhood, and economics.

### Subjects

Marriage, Memoir, Parenting, Women Writers, Yiddish

### Reading and Background:

- This [map](#) of Europe from the Jewish Heritage Online Magazine profile of Glückel of Hameln (see below) shows key locations from her memoirs including Hameln, where Glückel lived only briefly, as well as Hamburg and Metz (in present-day France, near the borders with Luxembourg and Germany), where Glückel lived for longer periods. The map also pinpoints locations to which Glückel traveled in the area that is now Germany, France, Netherlands, and Denmark.
- This [article](#) by Chava Turniansky from the Jewish Women's Archive encyclopedia offers background on Glückel's life and her memoir.
- Natalie Zemon Davis's chapter "Arguing with God: Glikl bas Judah Leib" in *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* describes Glückel's life and puts it within the context of Jewish women's economic participation in the period. Davis also examines Glückel's writing within the genre of contemporaneous autobiographies, noting the ways that it is typical for Jewish life-writing of the period and the ways that it is exceptional as the work of a woman.
- This [article](#) by R. Liberles considers the memoir's questionable reliability as a historical source.
- Natalie Zemon Davis also created this excellent [resource for teaching Glückel's memoirs](#) for Jewish Heritage Online Magazine. It includes background information as well as excerpts of the memoir with discussion questions.
- Readers who wish to read the memoir in full should consult *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln, translated with introduction and notes by Marvin Lowenthal*, or the more recent *The Life of Glückel of Hameln, translated by Beth-Zion Abrahams*. (Some scholars feel Lowenthal's version unnecessarily cuts out important theological and ethical discussions, while Abrahams' incorporates more historical information and references to Talmudic, Biblical, and folkloric quotes and citations.)

### Resources

#### 1: Excerpt on expulsions from "The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln," Trans. Marvin Lowenthal.

In this excerpt from Glückel's memoir, her family takes in Jewish refugees from Poland. The passage shows the dedication and self-sacrifice displayed by Glückel's family when they met co-religionists in need.



The Great Jewish Books Teacher Workshop, a program of the Yiddish Book Center, is made possible with support from the Jim Joseph Foundation. The Foundation, established in 2006, is devoted to fostering compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for youth and young adults in the U.S.

**Suggested Activities:** Invite students to make their own "Glückel Journal" by folding pieces of paper in half. Have the students react to questions you pose or to their own questions in their journal. Students may wish to consider the following questions: How does Glückel's family relate to the values of *hachnasat orchim* (honoring the stranger) and *bikkur cholim* (visiting, and caring for, the sick)? What relationship does this text suggest between Jews of different regions and backgrounds? How does Glückel honor her grandmother's memory in this text? What does this text relate about the importance of female leadership in managing family affairs?

Invite your students to interview matriarchs from their own families. They can ask their matriarchs how they experienced issues of marriage, anti-Semitism, business, communal structure, wealth (and other issues addressed by Glückel) in their lifetimes. What has changed over time? What has not changed? In class, students can reflect on what they see as the biggest changes for women since Glückel's time.

**Source:** *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*. Translated with introduction and notes by Marvin Lowenthal. New York: 1932. Reprinted with new introduction by Robert S. Rosen, New York: 1960, 1977, p. 19 - 20.

## 2: Excerpt on marriage from "The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln," Trans. Marvin Lowenthal.

This excerpt from Glückel's memoir describes Glückel's wedding. Glückel's marriage was arranged, and this passage demonstrates the importance of displays of wealth to the marriage, which was largely an economic arrangement between families and individuals who were not on intimate terms. The passage contrasts life in a large city and a small town as well as shedding light on the marital customs of Glückel's day.

**Suggested Activities:** Show students a clip of a film with a Jewish wedding (for instance, [this clip](#) from *Fiddler on the Roof* or this [lego animated film](#) of a modern Hasidic wedding). How does this wedding compare to the one Glückel describes? What do your students think of as a Jewish wedding, and how does Glückel's description expand their conception?

Discuss the following questions with your students: What are some differences between Hameln and Hamburg? What does this text tell you about the importance of weddings and marriages in the social and economic life of Glückel's community? In the passage, as Glückel looks back on her wedding she remembers the role her father-in-law played very fondly as well as her mother's anger that the groom's family sent peasant carts. Contrast the role of the extended family in today's modern marriage with that of Glückel's.

**Source:** *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*. Translated with introduction and notes by Marvin Lowenthal. New York: 1932. Reprinted with new introduction by Robert S. Rosen, New York: 1960, 1977, p. 23 - 25.

## 3: Excerpt on economics from "The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln," Trans. Marvin Lowenthal.

In this excerpt, Glückel describes the importance of travel and fairs to her husband's business and the toll that travel takes on his health. She also demonstrates her own importance as a partner in her husband's business affairs.

**Suggested Activity:** Have students discuss the following questions: Why was traveling for business so common for Jews in the early modern period? What does this excerpt imply about the dangers of anti-Semitic legislation? How would you describe the relationship between Glückel and her husband based on this excerpt?

**Source:** *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*. Translated with introduction and notes by Marvin Lowenthal. New York: 1932. Reprinted with new introduction by Robert S. Rosen, New York: 1960, 1977, p. 66

## 4: Excerpt on wealth from "The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln," Trans. Marvin Lowenthal.

In this excerpt from her memoir, Glückel describes her daughter's marriage and the exchange and display of wealth that it occasioned. She describes the dowry, travel for the wedding, the noble guests who attended the wedding, and the lavish food and entertainment.

**Suggested Activity:** Have students discuss the following questions: What details indicate that this is a lavish wedding? Why do you think Glückel concludes her description of the wedding with the phrase, "Never a Jew received such a high honor in a hundred years"? What does that tell you about the status of Jews? About Glückel's own pride or boastfulness?

**Source:** *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*. Translated with introduction and notes by Marvin Lowenthal. New York: 1932. Reprinted with new introduction by Robert S. Rosen, New York: 1960, 1977, p. 96-99.

## 5: Excerpts on parenting from "The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln," Trans. Marvin Lowenthal.

In these excerpts from her memoir, Glückel describes her feelings about raising children. Although there was a high infant mortality rate in the early modern period, and some scholars have argued that parents did not form close bonds with their children as a result, in the first excerpt we learn that Glückel cared deeply for her children, worried about them, and was grateful for them. Through her reference to suffering, however, we also learn that she took a pragmatic approach to parenting: she does not heap excessive praise on her children (who are the presumed audience of her memoirs) nor does she shield them from the difficulties of her experience of parenting. Rather, she at once explains to them the enormous burden of raising children and the tremendous reward. In the second excerpt, Glückel uses a fable about birds to demonstrate her belief that parenting is more about giving than receiving.

This resource also includes a conversation about the bird fable from the *Freakonomics Radio* podcast, in which host Stephen Dubner discusses with his children the question of whether children should be obligated to take care of their elderly parents.

**Suggested Activity:** Ask your students to provide an interpretation of the bird fable that explains what obligations parents have to their children, and what obligations children have to their parents. How do they see the bird fable as related to Glückel's excerpt about parenting young children? Does Glückel experience parenting as a sacrifice? What benefit does she seem to derive from motherhood?

Have your students respond to the questions Dubner poses to his children. Do they feel they should be obligated to care for their parents? What can parents realistically expect from their children?

Ask your students to use these texts to compare expectations for relationships between parents and children in Glückel's time and in our own. What different ideas are there today about how to be a good parent? How is parenting represented in popular culture? How would Glückel's approach to parenting be judged today? What can we learn about our own lives and times by reading a memoir written three centuries ago?

**Sources:** *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*. Translated with introduction and notes by Marvin Lowenthal. New York: 1932. Reprinted with new introduction by Robert S. Rosen, New York: 1960, 1977, p. 119 - 120; 2 - 3.

Stephen Dubner. "Should Kids Pay Back Their Parents for Raising Them?" *Freakonomics Radio*. Podcast audio. October 8, 2015.

## 6: Portrait of Bertha Pappenheim as Glückel of Hameln, courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute.

**Bertha Pappenheim** (1859-1936), who was distantly related to Glückel, (through her mother, Pappenheim was a descendent of Glückel's husband's sister Yenta), was a prominent Austrian-Jewish feminist. She translated the Yiddish text of Glückel's memoirs into German in order to bring awareness of Glückel's intellectual gifts to a new readership, as part of her politics of bringing feminism to Judaism. Pappenheim felt that Glückel exemplified the independence and family commitment that she wanted for Jewish women in Germany in her own time. In this portrait by the artist Leopold Pilichowski, Bertha Pappenheim poses as Glückel of Hameln, in the kind of clothing she imagines Glückel would wear.

**Suggested Activity:** Bertha Pappenheim saw Glückel as a role model for German Jewish women of her time. Based on the excerpts above, ask your students to identify qualities of Glückel of Hameln that would make her a good role model. Ask your students: If you were to have a portrait painted of yourself as a historical figure, who would you choose? Alternatively, invite students to come to class dressed as a historical figure that they see as a role model, and to explain what they find admirable about the figure.

**Source:** Portrait of Bertha Pappenheim as Glückel of Hameln, by Leopold Pilichowski, courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute.

## 7: Excerpt of Hayyim Hamel's manuscript of Glückel's memoirs, 18th Century, and excerpt from the first printed version, late 19th Century.

Glückel's memoir was written in Old Yiddish, or Western Yiddish, and is rich in Hebrew elements and quotations from the scriptures, as well as legends, parables, and proverbs that she quotes to bolster her opinions and perspectives. Glückel handwrote her memoirs over decades. The original manuscript has not been preserved, but at least two copies were made: one by her son Moshe and another by her grandson Hayyim. Those copies were passed down from generation to generation until they reached the late nineteenth century scholar David Kaufmann, who published the memoirs in 1896. The images below are of the version transcribed by Hayyim Hamel, and the corresponding page from Kaufmann's published version.

**Suggested Activities:** Use these images as an opportunity for your students to think about manuscripts as objects with lives of their own. Ask the students to imagine how this text was preserved to the present day. What objects do they have in their homes that are very old? Where do these objects come from? How do they get preserved? What objects from their families' past may have been discarded or lost? How do they think the historical record is shaped by what gets preserved and what is lost?

Invite your students to participate in a manuscript copying activity ([adapted from the Piers Plowman Electronic Archive](#)). Write out, by hand, a few sentences from one of the above translated excerpts of Glückel's memoir. Hand your copy to a student and ask him or her to copy it over. Then, ask that student to hand the paper to the next student to copy over. Then, ask the class to compare the copies to the original. What gets preserved, and what does not? Ask them to think not only about errors in the words of the text but also about punctuation, spacing, and the physical appearance of the paper and handwriting. You may want to continue the activity by asking a third or fourth student to copy the manuscript while thinking about how they would want to edit or improve it so that future readers might think more highly of Glückel. If they were copying with this intention of improving, what historical information might get lost or changed?

Ask your students to compare the manuscript and print versions. What information can they learn from each? How is the experience of looking at a manuscript different from print? How are each of these experiences different from reading a text digitally? Invite your students to rewrite one of the above excerpts as a blog, tumblr, tweetstorm or facebook post. How might Glückel have expressed herself differently using digital media?

**Sources:** *Manuscript: Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*. Scribe: Hayyim Hamel, Baiersdorf, 18th Century. Frankfurt-am-Main University Library, [digital edition](#), 2011.

*Die Memoiren der Glückel von Hameln (1645-1719)*, David Kaufmann, ed. (J. Kaufmann: Frankfurt-am-Main, 1896).

## 8: Excerpt, "Finding Yiddish through Women Writers," Wexler Oral History Project interview with Zohar Weiman-Kelman, 2014.

In this oral history interview excerpt, Zohar Weiman-Kelman, a scholar of Jewish literature and queer theory, explains how they first came to study Yiddish through reading Glückel's memoirs.

**Suggested Activity:** Watch the excerpt with your students. Ask students to think about why Zohar Weiman-Kelman may have been motivated to study Yiddish after reading Glückel's memoir. Does reading Glückel's memoir make your students want to learn more? What would they want to read or study next (Jewish history? Writing by women? Yiddish?) Ask them to think of a time when they read or learned about something that left them hungry to learn more.

**Source:** Zohar Weiman-Kelman, interview by Christa Whitney (Wexler Oral History Project, December 14, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-6kInp0kRY>. For the complete interview with Weiman-Kelman: <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/interviews/w....>