



Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815

Itzig Behrend, Chronicle of a Jewish Family in Hesse-Kassel, c. 1800-1815
(Retrospective Account)

Itzig Behrend (1766-1845) spent his whole life in Grove (Hesse-Kassel), a small rural community with a few Jewish families. The following family chronicle provides a wealth of information on marriages, births, deaths, and other notable events in the Behrend family, but it also offers a rare view into Jewish social and communal life in Grove and the surrounding area in the first decades of the 19th century. Moreover, the chronicle is also a rich source of first-hand commentary on the major political events of the time and their effects on the local Jewish population. Itzig describes, for example, the French invasion of the Kingdom of Hannover in July 1803 and the founding of the Kingdom of Westphalia in 1807. He also makes specific reference to Jérôme [Hieronymus] Napoleon's "Decree Abolishing Fees Imposed on the Jews" (January 27, 1808).

Our Family Chronicle

Itzig Behrend

This is the story of Jitzchak (Itzig), the son of Jakauf, known as Jakob.

Jakob was a son of Bär, Bär a son of Jakob. I, Itzig, am the third son of my father Jakob of Rodenberg. I was born in Grove, in house no. 65. I still recall my great-grandfather Jakob, who lived to the age of one hundred. His son was named Bär. Bär married a woman named Chaja from Hildesheim and fathered four daughters and two sons, of whom my father was the oldest. [. . .]

Our wedding took place on Sunday and Monday, the first days of the lunar month Ijar 1793. On Wednesday, Sidra . . . (February 11, 1796), with God's help we moved into house no. 88 in Grove. And Jitzchak took Rivka into his mother Sarah's tent. [. . .]

On May 13, 1800, Jewish male subjects from the age of 15 to 40 were summoned to Gudensberg by Landgrave Wilhelm IX for military conscription or exemption. And so it was. But the *parnassim* of the communities made an arrangement at high cost, of which our portion, paid here to the local tax authorities, amounted to 100 talers. Since the Landgrave was away on a trip and came back on *Schwuau*s and wanted to leave again in a few days, the *raw* (rabbi)

instructed the *parnassim* to go to him in Weissenstein on *Jontew* (since this was permitted by the Law), and there, with a great deal of money, they averted the *gesere* (evil decree). [. . .]

On May 9, 1803, all of us Schutzjuden (Protected Jews) here and in Nenndorf were summoned at the behest of the local merchants and the towns of Witteln and Aplern. That is, the merchants had petitioned the court to the effect that we should not engage in commerce, sell from door to door, or employ many servants (clerks). We then presented a document of protest in Rinteln by way of Fürstenau, which cost us 13 talers and 21 groschen. Feibisch O.N., Meyer and his brother Gumpel, I, Itzig, and my brother Aron contributed to this sum. Thereafter, we heard no more of the matter. May God continue to grant peace to us and all Israel. [. . .]

On May 15, 1803, all of us Jews gave a ball with music at the rathskeller, since on that day our Landgrave had been named a Prince Elector. In addition, on that morning seven psalms, selected by his honor Rabbi Löb Berliner of Kassel, were sung in the *schul* (synagogue). And on the same day, the Jews of Kassel, [. . .] about which we received a printed book. The ball cost us, that is, my father, Itzig, Aron, and Abraham, 15 talers. Since that time, the *Leibzoll* has been abolished in all of Hesse. [. . .]

In June 1803, the French, under a commander named Mertier, marched into the kingdom of Hannover, which they wanted to occupy, since England had not kept to the peace treaty. Hannover's troops wanted to resist, but they thought twice about it and drew back *b'schaulem* [peacefully]. The French marched in undisturbed. Some of their patrol and volunteer corps plundered and set fires, but the ones who were caught were severely punished and shot. At that time, we had many of our friends' valuables in our house. They feared that they would lose everything. Those were our friends from Nienburg, Stolzenau, Ohes, and Baschehusen (Barsinghausen).

In the month of Elul [August/September] most of the French left the Hannover Principality and passed through Hesse to Bavaria. The ones who remained stocked up provisions for a year in Hameln.

At that time, I, my brother Feibisch, and the merchant Scher bought from the French a lot of new and used iron, such as wheels, winches, chains, and blacksmith's gear – one batch for 3,000 talers – all of which the French had taken from the armory in Hannover. A good part of this was sold by us for 1,400 talers, and a part for me and Feibisch for 400 talers, and in February 1806 part was sold here at an auction for 600 talers. At that time there were still goods on hand with a net worth of about 400 talers, of which some 110 talers counted toward expenses.

From December to February there were many Prussians, Russians, English, and Swedes in the territory of Hannover, but they all went home without having achieved anything. [. . .]

At Rosch Haschana 1805 I turned 39 years old in good health, and never in my life had the grain prices been higher than in that year: barley cost 1 taler and 6 groschen, rye 1 taler 24 groschen, oats 24 groschen, beans 1 taler 15 groschen. [. . .]

In January 1808 the Emperor Bonaparte installed his brother Hieronymus [Jerome] as king of Westphalia, on condition that he [Napoleon] would keep half of the principalities in the kingdom. It [the kingdom of Westphalia] includes the principality of Minden, Ravensberg, Osnabrück, Paderborn, Hildesheim, Kassel, Göttingen, the Harz, Eichsfeld, Goslar, Halberstadt, and Magdeburg, along with their estates. When the king assumed rule, a deputation of *parnassim* went to Kassel to pay lavish tribute to him, each according to his means. He issued all kinds of new decrees, some of which freed the Jews from their chains and declared them citizens equal to the *gojim*. Everyone can live and trade and practice a craft as he wishes.

On the 1st of March, the king was paid homage by all.

After January 27, 1808, by royal decree the Jews will cease paying greater fees than the Christians. We used to have to pay money for our protection, but now no more. Instead, each of us will take out a patent for whatever trade he wishes to ply.

A tavern costs 1 taler a year, timber trade 2 talers, a yard goods business 4 talers, a butcher shop 3 talers, a grain business 5 talers, a wholesale wine business 4 talers. In the past, we had to pay one heller more excise on a quarter (liquid measure) than the *goj*; we also had to give the tongue of a slaughtered animal to the rabbi; and for every slaughtered head of cattle we had to pay, besides the meat heller, 1 taler to the tax authorities. And there is no longer a poll tax. [. . .]

On August 6 [1808] the king of Westphalia came to Nenndorf with an entourage of various gentlemen and ladies, 60 persons and some 300 soldiers, both Foot Guards and Horse Guards. The soldiers were quartered in Gross-Nenndorf, Klein-Nenndorf, and Gross-Rodenberg. All of us local *Jehudim* [Jews], along with Feibisch Nenndorf, supplied them with meat, bread, straw, and fodder, as well as spices and poultry. The latter was ordered and certified by a supervisor named Messier and paid for by a quartermaster, nota bene with a nice deduction. The knowing person will catch on.

When the king arrived, sixteen maidens from the town in white dresses with green trimming, presented him with a poem on a taffeta or velvet pillow, and in return he gave each of them a pair of gold earrings and a necklace, which were bought in Nenndorf from Aron Escamp of Hamburg.

Moreover, the king was kind to everyone. Best of all, he decked out from head to toe three gentile *chasanim* and *kalles* (grooms and brides) in festive clothes, and besides that he gave each couple 300 talers in cash as a dowry. They had to marry during his stay here, on a Sunday. On that occasion, there was a great ball, open to everyone, with grand fireworks, festive lights, pole-climbing, races, cannon salutes, and a lottery with all kinds of *s'chaures* (goods), part of

which we supplied. The brides and grooms received wares from me and Gumpel that were worth about 300 talers. [. . .]

The year 1810 was a quiet time with no business, and for this reason I was often at home and dependent on what little business I did there. In order to earn something in some other way, I obtained the office of tax collector for the community of Grove, at Mühlenstrasse and Rodenberger Tor. My fee for the monthly collection was 37 groschen and for additional collection I got 2–3 groschen per head. [. . .]

In January 1812 many French and Dutch marched through here once more on the way to Danzig. Their passage lasted until the end of March. Every day during that time we had to billet all kinds of people speaking every possible language: Swiss, Croats, Dutch, French, Italians, Germans.

In January 1813 this army returned from Russia, like sheep without a shepherd, *mehulle mit die Pulle* [broke and druck].

In July 1813 the president of the Jewish Consistory, Israel Jacobson, came to Nenndorf with a coach, riding horses, and servants. One Schabbes he attended the *schul* of my brother Feibisch. He himself functioned as *chasen* there and he also chanted the Torah portion for the week, and then he delivered an edifying sermon. The next Schabbes he wanted to attend the *schul* in Rodenberg, but he was hindered by bad weather. Then he came here on the Thursday before his departure, gave a lovely sermon in *schul*, and said a prayer of thanksgiving because God had restored his health in Nenndorf.

We, my brothers Feibisch and Aron and I, Itzig, sent him, as the president of the Israelite Consistory, a German letter, in which we expressed our respect for him, and our teacher, Herr Sussman Cohn, sent him one in Hebrew. The testimonial was presented to him on a green and gold embroidered pillow by three young girls dressed in white, my daughter Marianne, my niece Pesche (Betti), the daughter of my brother Feibisch, and my niece Caroline, the daughter of my brother Aron. Caroline gave a fitting speech. Also present was my nephew Behrend, Aron's son, who had just become Bar Mizwa, and who recited his *drosche*. Our president was deeply touched by all this. Soon thereafter, all four children received presents from him. Behrend got a silver medallion, Caroline a pretty sewing-cushion, Marianne a string of yellow beads, and Betti the same. For the rest, he behaved in a friendly and kind way to rich and poor. He gave the poor handsome presents of money. His stay in Nenndorf had much pleased him and on the day of his departure he regaled many of the spa guests, also inviting several local personages. Zahn supplied the food, and there was no lack of wine and music. It cost him over 100 talers. During his stay at the spa he took his meals (*koscher*) from Gottschalk. [. . .]

At the end of October the kingdom of Hannover was also restored to its earlier standing under von Bremer and von Decken. The Prince Elector of Hesse also returned to Kassel, and there was great joy and celebration. We Jews, too, said the *Hanaussen Teschuo* prayer, with music,

after the weekly portion of *Tauldaus* in the synagogue. On the next day, Sunday, the Christians celebrated the day of his return. The National Guard marched with a band to the church. That evening, there was festive lighting and a ball. [. . .]

After the king of Westphalia, Hieronymus, who had reigned from 1807 to 1813, had been driven out by the allies and our Prince Elector had returned to his land, the former local collectors had many unpleasant quarrels with their communities over the war contributions, which, as the communities now charged, they had supposedly imposed too heavily and kept for themselves. Thank God, the accusation did not affect me. No one even said anything to me in this regard. *Haudu laschem ki tauw* (Thank the Eternal One, for He is good . . .).

On December 16, 1813, a proclamation by the Prince Elector appeared in which he summoned his subjects to volunteer for army service, since he had to muster 24,000 men. Many did volunteer, since they thought that they could be forced to serve. It was also rumored that all those from 18 to 50 would be called up. From Rodenberg the following reported voluntarily to the Rifle Corps: my son Bernhard, the sons of Head Forester Kleinstöber, Pastor Kinder, Bailiff Deichmann, and several others. They were taken by Kilian to Rinteln, and the trip cost nothing. My son Bernhard received from me 30 talers in cash, a gun (13 talers), a game bag (5 talers), a wallet (1 taler), and in addition he got a cloth overcoat and trousers, 3 shirts, 3 pairs of stockings, and a silver pocket watch as a present from his Aunt Jette.

From Trier we received news, and again from the fortress of Cheonsville, which was besieged by the Hessians, saying that they had to battle stoutly against the French. [. . .]

On March 14, 1815, and by the Jewish calendar on the 2nd of Adar [scheni], my esteemed father, after a short illness, passed away peacefully in his 83rd year as a result of infirmity.

Present at his deathbed were my brothers Feibisch and Aron, the cantor Bornheim, and I, as well as all of the members of the local congregation. He had invited all of them for a leave-taking and had a *Mischebeirach* said for them. He begged all present for forgiveness, in the event that he had ever injured them, pledged 2½ talers to the poor fund and bequeathed whatever was left of his estate in cash to the poor. [. . .]

My dear departed father was a most honest and upright man. As a member of the congregation he bore the same burdens as the rich, far beyond his financial circumstances. He was, however, not rich in earthly goods, but rather he was rich because he was content with what had been granted him. When we, his children, often pointed out to him that his charitable deeds exceeded his monetary means, he soothed us, saying that it is good to surpass oneself in this respect. “You will get it all back. The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace. You will advance in the world and it will be your lot to dwell in honor in our congregation, which will increase.” – God fulfilled these words. [. . .]

Source of English translation: Monika Richarz, ed., *Jewish Life in Germany, Memoirs from Three Centuries*, translated by Stella P. Rosenfeld and Sidney Rosenfeld. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 41-49.