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Matthias B. Lehmann, *The Baron: Maurice de Hirsch and the Jewish Nineteenth Century*

John C. Lehr

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Matthias B. Lehmann, *The Baron: Maurice de Hirsch and the Jewish Nineteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 380pp., ISBN 978-1-5036-3030-7.

This biography of Baron Maurice de Hirsch is far more than the life history of an influential Jewish banker and philanthropist. In his impressive thought-provoking book, *The Baron: Maurice de Hirsch and the Jewish Nineteenth Century*, Matthias Lehmann explores the many contradictions of an intriguing character who had a major influence on Jewish life in Europe and the Americas. A banker, railway entrepreneur, philanthropist, and a visionary, Hirsch was one of the wealthiest men of his time, an often-controversial figure who intertwined philanthropy, business, and politics.

Hirsch requested that his personal correspondence be destroyed after his death. This was done. Fortunately, his outgoing letters to his son, other relatives, and friends survived. So too, did his son's correspondence with his circle of associates, enabling Lehmann to create an insightful personal portrait of a major force in late nineteenth century Jewish life, business and politics

Lehmann's biography falls logically into four sections, each detailing and analyzing an aspect of Hirsch's life. Part 1 considers Hirsch's origins and his family's position within European aristocratic society; Part 2 is devoted to Hirsch's role as a railway entrepreneur in building the railway linking Istanbul to Paris; Part 3 describes Hirsch's politics of philanthropy within Ottoman lands and eastern Europe; and Part 4 assesses Hirsch's settlement endeavours in Argentina.

Moritz von Hirsch was born in Bavaria in 1831 into a recently ennobled Jewish banking family. He was sent to school in Brussels to escape Bavaria's antisemitic laws which his family still faced despite their noble status. He married Clara Bischoffsheim, the daughter of a wealthy Jewish banker, and went on to become a successful financier in his own right. He rose to international fame through his involvement in building the Paris to Istanbul railway.

Though Jewish by birth, Hirsch did not practice the religion or observe the rules of kashrut, seeming to favour Protestant Christianity. He always showed deep concern for impoverished and persecuted peoples, among whom were many eastern European Jews. He pursued a universalist humanitarian agenda, providing aid on a non-sectarian basis, hoping to enhance the collective reputation of Jews as modern, civilized, and western. By pursuing "the politics of empathy" (159), and acquiring 'soft power' he turned his philanthropy into political capital which could be used to improve his own personal standing and advance the interests of his railway enterprise. Indeed, his involvement in building the Paris-Istanbul railway served both his own and the national and imperial interests of the Habsburg Empire.

During an era of rising ethnic nationalism in southeastern Europe, emphasizing Jewish cosmopolitanism appeared to be the best strategy to advance the Jewish cause. Hirsch's vision of philanthropy—vocational training and cultural enlightenment—highlighted the cultural disjunction between enlightened westernized Jews and the mass of Jewry locked in ignorance in the East. Hirsch's philanthropy was also directed towards raising Gentile opinions of the Jews and promoting Jewish integration into the mainstream of European life.

When Hirsch established a foundation in honour of Emperor Franz Joseph's fortieth crown jubilee, he intended to build a network of vocational schools serving Gentiles and Jews in Galicia and Bukovina. Politics intervened in the form of conflicting national, regional, ethnic, and religious interests.

Hirsch opposed separatist tendencies in Judaism, advocating assimilation into Christian society. In particular, he wanted to prepare Jewish youths for manual trades and agriculture, lift them out of poverty and nudge them away from peddling. In Russia, he sought to revolutionize Jewish society through creation of a network of modern elementary and vocational training schools. In short, he sought to drag eastern European Judaism into modern life, integrating Jews and Christians. This did not sit well with established Rabbinical authorities.

The debate about the future of Judaism was pushed on to the transnational stage by Hirsch. European Jewish communities held widely different standpoints on Jewish-Christian relations, as did American Jews. Some in the US merely thought him to be in advance of his time, pointing out that the loudest denunciations came from rabbis whose professional or pecuniary advantages were threatened. But Hirsch's intervention in the debate questioned the basic assumptions of religious reform and challenged the authority of the rabbinic elite to speak on behalf of all Jews. It also blurred the boundaries between social and religious assimilation.

Hirsch eventually turned from education to colonization as a solution to the problems faced by Jews in Russia. He was not alone. In the latter half of the nineteenth century agricultural colonization was often conflated with the masculine qualities of courage, self-sufficiency and physical health that Jews allegedly lacked. Thus, involvement in agriculture became a benchmark of Jewish respectability, countering the perceived overrepresentation of Jews in commerce, finance, and the professions. Contact with the land conferred the qualities of a true 'folk' peasant society.

There was no consensus on the best location for Jewish agricultural settlements. The American-Jewish establishment was reluctant to embrace Russo-Jewish immigrants, since they brought with them "a load of ignorance, uncouth habits, and crude notions" (201). Suspecting Ottoman lands would eventually fall under Russian rule,

and after toying with the idea of purchasing an entire country, Hirsch concluded that Argentina, which was then seeking immigrants, was the best location for Jewish agricultural colonies. To further this objective, in 1891 he established the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) with initial capital of two million pounds sterling, followed by a second donation of a further £7.2 million.

Jewish immigrants arrived in Argentina under the auspices of the JCA, so their settlement experiences differed from those of other immigrants. Their settlements were dogged by misfortune caused partly by poor planning and the incompetence of Hirsch's local agents. Convinced objectivity was impossible at the local level, Hirsch insisted on oversight, some might say micro-management, from Paris. He gave assistance in the form of repayable loans, intending to boost recipients' self-image and contribute to their moral betterment. In fact, Hirsch preferred to think of himself as a hard-nosed businessman rather than as a philanthropist. JCA colonies in Argentina were thus as much authoritarian technocratic exercises in social engineering as they were charitable endeavours. Lehmann does not discuss the JCA's activities in western Canada, which faced similar problems, and mostly for the same reasons. Even though the Canadian settlements were little more than a sideshow for Hirsch and the JCA, their omission from this account is still surprising.

Nevertheless, this account of Baron de Hirsch's life and times is a work of exemplary scholarship, meticulous research, and thorough documentation. In his interpretations Lehmann exploits the current literature in germane disciplines. The writing is clear and elegant, despite the occasional use of unnecessarily obscure words, which on two occasions had me running to the dictionary! In short, this biography is more than the story of one man. It is an interpretive history of a transformative period of Jewish life that will appeal to scholars in a variety of disciplines, certainly to anyone interested in the history of the nineteenth century, colonialism, the railway era, Baron de Hirsch, or Jewish settlement in Argentina.

John C. Lehr

University of Winnipeg