

Glückel of Hameln Writes about the Wedding of her Eldest Daughter (Late 17th Century)

Abstract

Glikl bas Juda Leib (1646-1724), known in German literature as Glückel von Hameln, was a very successful businesswoman after she became a widow and lived in Hamburg and Metz. For the twelve children from her marriage who reached adulthood, Glikl sought both a good education and good marriages. Since the material security of Jewish families was based almost exclusively on trade, marriages also served to establish business relationships. Glikl's memoirs are the first autobiography of a woman from the German-speaking world, although they were not written in German but in Yiddish. The following excerpt from the memoirs is taken from one of its many German translations and describes the circumstances of the marriage of Glikl's eldest daughter, who was married at the age of fourteen to the son of her father's business partner, who was about the same age.

Source

Our business prospered. And Zipporah, my eldest child, was now a girl of almost twelve. Whereat Loeb Hamburger in Amsterdam, the son of Reb Amschel, proposed her marriage to Kossmann, the son of Elias Cleve, of blessed memory.

My husband was accustomed to travel to Amsterdam twice a year, and now, after writing the marriage broker he was coming to see what could be done, he set forth six weeks in advance of his usual time. The country was at war and Elias Cleve had left his home in Cleves and moved with his people to Amsterdam.

As soon as my husband reached Amsterdam, rumours spread through Hamburg that the match had been arranged. It was mail-day when people read their letters at the Bourse. Many refused to believe the rumours, and betting ran high around the Bourse; some said one thing, others said another, as to whether the marriage would take place. For Elias Cleve was a great prince in Israel, he had the name of a man worth at least 100,000 Reichsthalers, and the name did not belie him. Whereas my husband was still young, our fortunes had only begun to rise, and our little home swarmed with children—God be with them! But whatever the Most High decrees must come to pass, whether we mortals like it or not; and forty days before the birth of every child, a call goes forth in Heaven: "Such-and-such a child shall be given the daughter of So-and-so."

Well, my blessed husband concluded the match with the rich Elias Cleve and settled on our daughter a dowry of 2200 Reichsthalers in Dutch money. They fixed the wedding for a year and a half later in Cleves. My husband likewise undertook to contribute 100 Reichthalers toward the wedding expenses.

When time for the marriage drew near, I with a babe at my breast, my husband, my daughter Zipporah the bride, our Rabbi Meir, who is now the rabbi of Friedberg, a maidservant and our man Elegant Sam—in sum, a great retinue—set forth for the wedding.

We sailed from Altona in company with Mordecai Cohen, Meir Ilius and Aaron Todelche. I cannot begin to tell

what a merry voyage it was. And after a gay and delightful trip we arrived safely in Amsterdam.

It was still three weeks before the wedding, and we put up with the aforesaid Loeb Hamburger. We ran through more than twelve ducats a week, but we gave no thought to it, for during the time we passed in Amsterdam my husband earned a half of the dowry.

Fourteen days before the marriage we set forth “with timbrels and with dances,” twenty strong, for Cleves, where we were welcomed with all honours. We found ourselves in a house that was truly a king’s palace, magnificently furnished in every way. The livelong day we had no rest for the elegant lords and ladies who came to have a peep at the bride. And in truth, my daughter looked so beautiful that her like was never seen.

Then came the great preparations for the wedding. At that time, Prince Frederick was in Cleves. His older brother, Prince Elector Karl, still lived, and Prince Frederick was then a young lord about thirteen years of age. Not long after, Karl died and Frederick in turn became Prince Elector. Prince Maurice of Nassau and other titled personages and great lords were likewise in Cleves, and they all signified their desire to witness the nuptials.

Naturally, Elias Cleve, the father of the groom, made fitting preparations for such notable guests. On the marriage day, immediately after the wedding, there was spread a lavish collation of all kinds of sweetmeats and fine imported wines and fruits. You can readily picture the bustle and excitement, and how Elias Cleve and his people set themselves to wait upon and cater to their distinguished company. There was not even time to deliver and count over the dowries, as is customary. So we placed our own dowry in a pouch and sealed it, and Elias Cleve did likewise, that we might tally the sum after the wedding was over.

As the bridal pair were led beneath the *chuppah* [wedding canopy] out it came that in the confusion we had forgotten to write the marriage contract! What was to be done? Nobility and princes were already at hand and they were all agog to see the ceremony. Whereat Rabbi Meir declared that the groom should appoint a bondsman to write out the contract immediately after the wedding. Then the rabbi read a set-contract from a book. And so the couple were joined.

After the ceremony, all the distinguished guests were ushered into Elias Cleve’s enormous salon with its walls of leather tooled in gold. There stood the mighty table laden with dainties and fit for a king. And the company were served according to their rank.

My son Mordecai was then a child of about five; there was not a prettier boy in all the world, and we had him dressed in his neatest and best. All the nobility wanted to eat him up on the spot, and the Prince in particular, God heighten his fame! Never let go his hand.

When the guests of honour had eaten of the fruit and cakes and had done justice to the wine, the table was cleared and removed. Then appeared masked performers who bowed prettily and played all manner of entertaining pranks. They concluded their performance with a truly splendid Dance of Death.

A number of prominent Sephardim likewise attended the wedding, among them one Mocatta, a jeweler, who wore a beautiful small gold watch set with diamonds and worth no less than 500 Reichsthalers. Elias Cleve wanted to buy the little watch from Mocatta for a gift to the Prince. But a good friend who was standing by said to him, “What for? —why give the young Prince such a costly present? If, to be sure, he were already Prince Elector, well and good.” But, as I have said, the Prince Elector died soon after, and our young prince succeeded to the title and now he is Elector himself. And after that, every time Elias Cleve met his prudent friend he cast it in his teeth. In truth, if Elias Cleve had given the little watch, the young Prince would have always remembered it, for great lords never

forget such things. But there is no point in grumbling over what is past.

As it was, the young Prince and Prince Maurice and all the noble-born guests departed in great content, and never a Jew received such high honour in a hundred years. And the wedding was brought to a happy end.

After the wedding I went to visit the grave of my sister Hendel, nearby in Emmerich. God alone knows the heartache and grief her death meant to me, and the pity of it—still—that one so young and more than fair must bite the black of earth. She was not twenty-five years old. But what good does it do? We must all yield to the will of God. She left behind a son and a daughter. The son grew up to be a good young man and an excellent Talmud student; but alas, he died young and unmarried, mourned by all far and near.

The day following the wedding we set out in good spirits on our homeward journey. We passed through Amsterdam in order to retrace our steps, as it is written: “And he went unto his journeys unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning.” So we returned to Amsterdam, where we remained for about two weeks that my husband might do a little business.

Then we sailed for Delfzijl, which is reached by crossing the Dollart, a rough body of water where the ships roll so heavily that even the strongest man, if he be not used to the sea, falls deathly sick.

When we boarded ship we left our servants and children in the main cabin, which was as big as a house, and my husband and I hired from the skipper a small room where we could be alone. It had a sort of porthole which opened and closed at will, and you could look through it into the main cabin and hand things back and forth.

We entered our little room where we found two benches which served for lying down. My husband now said to me, “Glückelchen, stretch yourself out nicely on a bench, and I will cover you well. Take good care not to stir, only lie still and the sea will not disturb you.” I had never crossed the Dollart, but my husband had time and again, and he knew what to do.

I did as he told me and lay quite still, but my maidservant and my nursing child were in the cabin and the weather was bad, the winds were contrary, and the ship tossed so that everyone on board became violently sick and had to—pardon the expression—throw up. There is truly no sickness like it in the whole world; I do believe the throes of death cannot be worse. However, as long as I lay still I felt nothing.

But my maid, who had my baby with her in the main cabin, fell sick and could not lift her hand, and the baby, no doubt, felt none too well and began to scream and howl. [...]

Source: *The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*. Translated by Marvin Loewenthal. New York, 1932, pp. 95-101.
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