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Arranging reality: The editing mechanisms of the world's first Yiddish newspaper, the Kurant (Amsterdam, 1686-1687)

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6. The makers

Three persons mentioned by name were involved in publishing the *Kurant*: Uri Faybesh Halevi, David de Castro Tartas and Moshe bar Avraham Avinu. Who were these men and what was their role in the making of the *Kurant*?

6.1. Uri Faybesh Halevi (1627-1715)

The printer and publisher of the first 67 issues of the *Kurant* was Uri Faybesh (Phoebus) Halevi, born in Amsterdam in 1627. He was the grandson of the famous Uri Halevi, who had come from Emden to Amsterdam with his son – Uri Faybesh’s father – Aron. Uri Halevi and his son are believed to have been the first Jewish teachers of the so-called New Christians from Spain and Portugal.¹ Uri Faybesh Halevi was a member of the High German (Ashkenazi) community, but joined the small Polish congregation in 1666. Three years later he returned to the High German congregation, but apparently he did not feel at home there and went to the Sephardic congregation. Officially this was not permitted to High German Jews, but an exception was made for him because of the reputation of his grandfather and father.²

Uri Faybesh Halevi married his niece, the daughter of his sister and David Pastes, the son of the rich, non-Jewish stocking-maker Hans Pastes. David Pastes, and probably his parents as well, converted to Judaism.³

In 1658 Halevi started his own printing house. He soon became one of the leading Jewish printers in Amsterdam. In 1664 he was accepted as a member of the Amsterdam Guild of Booksellers, Bookprinters and Bookbinders, under the name of Philips Levi, or Philips Levi

¹ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 234; Swetschinski, ‘Tussen middeleeuwen en Gouden Eeuw’, 58, 76, 78; this story was based on a short history of the Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam, written by Uri Faybesh Halevi (see below; see also Meijer, ‘Beeldvorming om Baruch’, 38-40) and on a book by the author Daniel Levi de Barrios (1635-1701) (see Pieterse, *Daniel Levi de Barrios*, 43-46). Vlessing, ‘New Light’, 43-52, however, has not found evidence for the assertion that Uri Halevi was the leader of the community; although he and his son Aron seem to have been respected members of the community, they were mainly known as its kosher butchers.

² Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 236-237.

³ Van Eeghen, ‘De kinderen’, 32-39.

6. The makers

van de Velde.⁴ As far as is known, he published about hundred books in Hebrew and Yiddish, mainly religious works.⁵ Among them is a beautiful Passover Haggadah from 1662 and a magnificent festival prayer-book in folio with a richly engraved title page, which served as an example for many eighteenth-century calligraphers and gained him his reputation in Eastern Europe.⁶ He also published some interesting non-religious works, like a Yiddish translation of the tenth-century history book *Sefer Yosipon* (1661),⁷ and an edition of the famous Yiddish chivalric romance *Bovo-bukh* (1661).⁸ He was interested in exporting his books to other countries, mainly to Poland, but was almost constantly hampered by lack of money. This, however, did not prevent him from undertaking ambitious and risky enterprises. In 1669 he published, together with his son, an edition of the *Tsenerene*, the popular Yiddish adaptation and paraphrase of the Pentateuch, *haftarot*, and *megilot*, first published in 1590.⁹ Despite the sure financial success of this popular ‘women’s Bible’, which was widely read by men as well, Uri Faybesh Halevi went bankrupt together with his financier in 1672 – a disastrous year for the Netherlands, also economically. A year later the economy brightened up somewhat and he resumed his printing business.¹⁰

In 1678 he began his most daring enterprise: the publication of a translation of the entire Hebrew Bible into Yiddish by Yekusiel Blitz. It was a very complicated project, which took three years. Joseph Athias, another leading Amsterdam Jewish printer, joined the venture in 1675, but when it did not work out, he published his own translation, by Joseph Witzgenhausen. Witzgenhausen’s translation was printed twice, in 1679 and 1687.¹¹ For a long time, both printers fought about the approbations of the *Va’ad Arba Aratsot* (Council of Four Lands), the central body of Jewish authority in Poland, which gave them the right to

⁴ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 235; Kleerkooper & Van Stockum, 1529; Van Eeghen, *De Amsterdamse boekhandel*, IV, 212.

⁵ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld *Hebrew Typography*, 234.

⁶ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld *Hebrew Typography*, 243.

⁷ Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 43.

⁸ See 4.2; Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 41.

⁹ *Haftarot* are portions from the book of Prophets, read in synagogue each week, *megilot* are the Five Scrolls: Song of Songs, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Lamentations; Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 55.

¹⁰ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 237; Van Eeghen, *De Amsterdamse boekhandel*, IV, 213.

¹¹ Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 67; Aptroot, *Bible Translation*, 21 found that the two editions are identical, except for the title pages and the prefaces.

6. The makers

distribute their Bible in Poland. In the end Athias received this privilege, yet Halevi received the privilege from the King of Poland.¹² Although both printers were ruined by the publication of their Bible translations, they were able to find new financiers and continued printing.¹³ Uri Faybesh Halevi printed two Hebrew Bibles. In 1686 he was in financial trouble again and he had to pawn four presses, Hebrew types and other printers' tools. He continued to print small works, mostly financed by others.¹⁴

1686 is also the year in which the first known issues of the *Kurant* were published. It is unknown who decided to publish this newspaper and by whom it was financed. Halevi's book production includes nothing else similar to the *Kurant*. No statement of principles can be found in the *Kurant*; of the first issue in the volume containing the newspaper, dated August 9, 1686, only the last two pages are included, and it is by no means sure that this was the very first issue.

Halevi may also have been influenced by Sephardic printers. As mentioned above, Halevi was – despite his Ashkenazi descent – a member of the Sephardic congregation. Moreover, although the Sephardic and the Ashkenazi Jews formed two distinct communities, each with its own language, culture, traditions and customs,¹⁵ in the printing business Sephardim and Ashkenazim met and exchanged ideas.¹⁶ In several cases the publication of Yiddish books was stimulated by Sephardic practices. In Eastern Europe the translation into Yiddish of the Bible and other religious books was considered improper, but the Amsterdam Sephardim freely published Bible translations and prayer books – and also non-religious literature and poetry – in Portuguese and Spanish. This inspired Jewish printers – both Sephardim like David de Castro Tartas and Joseph Athias and Ashkenazim like Uri Faybesh Halevi – to publish Yiddish translations. In his foreword of Yekusiel Blitz's Yiddish Bible translation Halevi

¹² Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld *Hebrew Typography*, 237-249; Aptroot, *Bible Translation*, Ch. 1; Aptroot, *Bible Translation*, 24 thinks that the result of the quarrel may have been that Halevi's privilege prevented Athias from importing his Bible into Poland, while Athias's privilege prevented Halevi from selling his Bible in the Polish Jewish community.

¹³ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 239-240. According to Van Eeghen, 'Een veiling', 30, printers generally were unable to finance expensive volumes, so they always needed financiers.

¹⁴ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 240.

¹⁵ Michman, 'Beyn Sefaradim Veashkenazim', 28; see also Ch. 4.

¹⁶ Baumgarten, *Le peuple des livres*, 69-71.

6. The makers

states that the example of the Sephardim guided him.¹⁷ Possibly another Sephardic enterprise, the Spanish *Gazeta de Amsterdam* (and the Italian *Gazzetta d'Amsterdam*), guided him in publishing the first Yiddish newspaper?

Because of his non-Jewish in-laws Halevi may also have felt at home in Christian circles. Jewish printing houses were in any case a meeting point for Jews and Christians. Jewish printers often employed non-Jewish compositors for publications in the Latin alphabet, and worked with non-Jewish bookbinders and paper merchants, and Christian printers who published Hebrew books hired Jewish compositors.¹⁸ We know that there were lively discussions between Jews and Protestant Christians about religious matters.¹⁹ In his foreword of the Yiddish Bible translation – which was inspired by the Dutch *Statenvertaling*²⁰ – Halevi states that he wants to give the Ashkenazi Jews the possibility to study the literal text of the Bible for discussions with Christians.²¹ Could it be that Halevi published the *Kurant* to enable its readers to discuss the world news with Christian neighbors or to be as well-informed as their non-Jewish business relations? It may not be accidental that the first known issue of the *Kurant* was published in August 1686, just before the re-conquest of Buda, just like the first Dutch newspapers started to appear shortly after the beginning of the Thirty Years' War.²²

In the same year, 1686, Halevi – or, according to the colophon, his son David, who often assisted him – published a Yiddish translation of *Yeven Metsula*, a report of the Chmielnicki massacres in Poland, originally written in Hebrew by Natan (Nata) Hannover (Venice 1653).²³ The translator of this book was Moushe bar Avrom Ovinu, who was the compositor of the *Kurant*. He is also mentioned as the compositor of a *Taytsh Yom Kippur Katan*, with Yiddish kabbalistic prayers for the fast-day preceding the New Moon (1687).²⁴

¹⁷ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, 'Yiddish Language and Literature', 36; Aptroot, *Bible Translation*, Ch. 10.

¹⁸ Baumgarten, *Le peuple des livres*, 69; Van Eeghen, 'Casper Pietersen Steen', 51-65.

¹⁹ Van den Bergh & Van der Wall, *Jewish-Christian Relations*; Van Rooden, *Theology*.

²⁰ Aptroot, *Bible Translation*, Ch. 6.

²¹ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, 'Yiddish Language and Literature', 36-37.

²² See Ch. 3.

²³ Steinschneider, *Cat. Bodl.*, nr. 6637⁴; Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 86.

²⁴ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography* nr. 365; Steinschneider, *Cat. Bodl.*, nr. 2791; Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 91 (without mentioning the printer); this is probably the publication referred to in the advertisement in the *Kurant* of December 13, 1686: see 9.3.7.

6. The makers

Halevi stopped publishing the *Kurant* after Tuesday, June 3, 1687. No explanation is offered either in Halevi's last issue or in the first issue by his successor David de Castro Tartas. Possibly it did not sell as well as expected and became too expensive for Halevi. An indication of its not being a commercial success may be that between December 6, 1686 and February 14, 1687 the paper was published only on Fridays, as was announced in the *Kurant* of December 6, 1686.²⁵

Halevi continued printing for another two years. On August 18, 1687 his first publication in non-Hebrew print appeared: *Noticias dos Judeos de Cochim* by Mosseh Pereyra de Paiva, who had been sent to the Dutch colony of Cochin in India by the governor of the Sephardic congregation of Amsterdam to investigate the situation of the Jews there.²⁶ Ten days after this publication in Portuguese, Halevi published a Yiddish translation, of which only a reprint from 1713 exists, *Tsaytung oys India, or: Kenis der yehudim fun Cochim*.²⁷ The *Dinstagishe Kurant* of August 26, 1687,²⁸ then already printed by David de Castro Tartas, probably refers to this publication:

From East India [= India] letters have been received that thousands of black and white Jews have been living there for about fourteen hundred years, and they settled there after the destruction of Jerusalem, and great, wise men are among them, and they have the same books or Torah as here in this country.²⁹

In 1688 Halevi also printed two prayer books for the Jews of Cochin.³⁰

²⁵ Incorrectly dated December 5, 1686.

²⁶ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 241; Segal, *Jews of Cochim*, 39-44.

²⁷ Segal, *Jews of Cochim*, 39-44; Pereyra de Paiva, *Notisias*; Steinschneider, *Cat. Bodl.*, c. 1980, nr. 6540; Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 194; according to Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld *Hebrew Typography*, 241 of the Yiddish translation of 1687 no copy has been left. We know of its existence from a reprint of the text by Samuel b. Judah Shamash, Amsterdam, 1713. On the title page of this reprint the edition of Uri Phoebus with the exact date of publication is stated.

²⁸ Incorrectly dated August 27, 1687.

²⁹ See 9.3.5 for the Yiddish text.

³⁰ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, nr. 366 and 375: *Seder Azharot* and *Yad Eliahu*, religious poems for Sukkot by Eliah Adeni.

6. The makers

In 1689 Uri Faybesh Halevi ceased printing in Amsterdam. In 1691 he settled in Żółkiew, in the eastern part of Poland (now the Ukrainian city of Zhovkva), with his family. Żółkiew was the residence of King Jan III Sobieski, and the home of many Polish noblemen and prominent Jews.³¹ According to Jonathan Israel the king adopted a favorable policy toward Jews, as did Polish noblemen, because they wanted to revive Poland's eastern territories and could use Jewish businessmen.³² After having received privilege from the King, Halevi started a printing house in Żółkiew. In 1705 he returned to Amsterdam, but his family stayed in the printing business in Poland until the twentieth century.³³ Back in Amsterdam, Halevi resumed his membership of the Sephardic congregation. In 1710 he wrote the history of the Sephardic Jews of Amsterdam.³⁴ He died on 17 January 1715 (23 Shevat 5475) and was buried on the Portuguese cemetery in Ouderkerk aan de Amstel.³⁵

6.2. David de Castro Tartas (c. 1625-c. 1700)

From Friday, June 6, 1687 the *Kurant* was published by David de Castro Tartas, who was born in the town of Tartas in the south-west of France around 1625. His parents were 'New Christians' who had escaped from Portugal to Tartas and lived there as Roman Catholics. In 1640 they came to Amsterdam, where they started living as Jews again. David's brother Isaac emigrated to Recife in Dutch Brazil in 1641. In 1644 he went on to Bahia, which was Portuguese. There he was seized as a Judaizer and sent to Lisbon. After a long trial by the Inquisition, during which he refused to renounce his Jewish faith, he was burned alive in an *auto-da-fe* on December 15, 1647. In the Amsterdam community he was long remembered as a martyr.³⁶ His fate was similar to that of the three Portuguese Jews mentioned in the

³¹ Balaban, *Geschichte Druckereien*, 15.

³² Israel, *Mercantilism*, 125.

³³ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 241-242; Balaban, *Geschichte Druckereien*, 16-17.

³⁴ Ets Haim in Amsterdam keeps a booklet with a facsimile edition of the Portuguese text and a Hebrew translation, published in 1933, with an introduction by J. da Silva Rosa: *Narração da Vinda dos Judeos Espanhoes a Amsterdam*, Amsterdam 1933.

³⁵ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 242; Da Silva Rosa, 'Di kurantin', 9-10.

³⁶ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 339-340.

6. The makers

Fraytagishe Kuranten of August 23, 1686 (then still printed by Uri Faybesh Halevi), who were burnt at the stake in Lisbon after they refused to renounce their faith.³⁷

David de Castro Tartas began his career in the oldest Jewish printing business in Amsterdam, that of Menasseh Ben Israel. In 1662 he founded his own printing house. He became a member of the Amsterdam Guild of Booksellers, Bookprinters and Bookbinders.³⁸ It was not easy for him to find his place between two important printers, Uri Faybesh Halevi and Josef Athias, and in the field of Hebrew and Yiddish religious literature he was less ambitious than his competitors.³⁹ Nonetheless, as far as we know he published more than a hundred books, mainly in Hebrew and Spanish, specializing in small prayer books.⁴⁰ In 1675 he published homilies for the inauguration of the Portuguese synagogue.⁴¹ He also published popular non-religious Yiddish books, like an adaptation of Arthurian legends by Joseph Witzenhausen, from 1671,⁴² a Yiddish poem about a case of bigamy in Hamburg by Ezekiel ben Zachariah from 1675,⁴³ *Masekhet derekh erets* by Shabse Bass, a Yiddish handbook for travelers, containing prayers, descriptions of coins, weights and measures and an enumeration of the distances between several West-European cities and the means of transportation to arrive there (1680),⁴⁴ and *Pahad Yitshak* by Isaac Vita Cantarini, on the history of the Jews of Padova in the seventeenth century (1685).⁴⁵ He printed several books in Spanish and Portuguese, and a few prayers in Dutch.⁴⁶

³⁷ See 9.3.1.

³⁸ Van Eeghen, *De Amsterdamse boekhandel*, V, 335. It is unknown when he became a member; the first time he was mentioned as such was in 1678.

³⁹ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 340, 342.

⁴⁰ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 339-382 mention 66 Hebrew and Yiddish books, and 42 in the Roman alphabet, the majority in Spanish, some in Portuguese and two in Dutch.

⁴¹ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 342.

⁴² פון קיניג ארטיש הוף, *A Fine Tale of King Arthur's Court*, see Frakes, *Early Yiddish Texts*, 692-702; Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography* nr. 458; Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 59.

⁴³ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography* nr. 461; Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 63.

⁴⁴ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography* nr. 467; Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 78.

⁴⁵ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography* nr. 483.

⁴⁶ *Gebedt door de Joden van de Portugeesche Natie gedaan ... den 27. October 1688; Lof-zangh en gebedt, gedaen door de Joden van de Portugeesche Natie ... den 30. Julii 1690*. Uyt het Hebr. door Samuel Teyxera Tartas (Tartas's son-in-law): Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography* nr. 33 and nr. 34.

6. The makers

Tartas found himself a niche market: the publishing of newspapers, and not necessarily Jewish ones. He became known especially as the printer of the Spanish *Gazeta de Amsterdam*, which appeared certainly from 1672 until 1702 and was probably meant for Sephardic, Spanish-speaking Jews and for non-Jewish readers in Spain; he also published an – apparently non-Jewish – Italian newspaper, the *Gazzetta d'Amsterdam*.⁴⁷ So he was the most obvious person to take over the publication of the *Kurant* in June 1687. He made some changes in the lay-out to give the paper a more professional appearance: the heading became larger, the Amsterdam city arms were added, similar to those of the *Gazeta* and the *Gazzetta*, and the name of every single copy was changed from *Kuranten* to *Kurant* – but the style of writing stayed the same. This is the main reason for assuming that the compositor was also responsible for the editing.

Tartas initially maintained the publication on Tuesdays and Fridays, but on Friday, August 8, 1687⁴⁸ it was announced that the paper would appear only on Fridays until 1 Nisan (March), 'because the Tuesday edition sells poorly'. As the last known issue dates from December 5, we do not know whether the *Kurant* was published twice a week again after 1 Nisan, as promised, or if it appeared at all. It seems likely that De Castro Tartas, too, despaired of the commercial possibilities for the *Kurant* and stopped publishing it in December 1687 or a little later. This may also have to do with the role of the compositor (see 6.3).

De Castro Tartas stayed in the printing business until 1697. Then he sold his printing tools and left Amsterdam for an unknown destination.⁴⁹

6.3. Moushe bar Avrom Ovinu (Moshe bar Avraham Avinu) (?-1733/1734)

⁴⁷ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld *Hebrew Typography*, p. 342; two issues of the Italian *Gazzetta d'Amsterdam* of March 30 and September 14, 1673 were in a Dutch private collection. The owner, J. Anderson in Vlaardingen, sold the copy of March 30 in 1965 to the antiquarian bookseller I. Gans, and in 2010 showed me the copy of September 14. See also *NIW* November 28, 1975. See also 3.9.

⁴⁸ Incorrectly dated Friday August 5, 1687.

⁴⁹ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 344-346; Kleerkooper & Van Stockum, 830 gives an inventory of his printing tools, part of the notarial deed in which Tartas sells his printing shop to Moses Mendes Coitinho in 1698. According to Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography* 342, most probably Moses Mendes Coitinho continued to print the *Gazeta de Amsterdam* under Tartas's name.

6. The makers

The third and maybe the most important person involved in the making of the *Kurant* was Moshe bar Avraham Avinu, or, as his name probably was pronounced in Amsterdam in those days, Moushe bar Avrom Ovinu. Moushe had come to Amsterdam not long before. He was born in Nikolsburg in Moravia (presently Mikulov in the Czech Republic),⁵⁰ a mainly German-speaking city, which was the center of the Moravian Jewish community.⁵¹ According to Freudenthal and others, his original family name had been Haase, but this seems rather unlikely.⁵² As his name – bar Avraham Avinu, son of our Father Abraham – indicates,⁵³ he was a *ger*, a convert to Judaism. In 1680, apparently after he converted, he married a Jewish woman, and probably shortly after that he came to Amsterdam.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ He mentions his place of birth in one of the books he published when he was a printer himself:

Steinschneider, *Cat. Bodl.*, nr. 2623: *Birkat Hamazon* (Amsterdam 1694).

⁵¹ Gold, *Die Juden und Judengemeinden*, 417-421.

⁵² A lot of confusion has been created by Steinschneider's remarks about Moushe's place of origin. In one of his later publications, from 1694, he was referred to as משה בר אברהם אבינו מקק ניקלשבורג, מבית הארנבת, 'the printer the convert the honorable Mr. Moshe bar Avraham Avinu from the holy community of Nikolsburg from the house of the hare'. Steinschneider remarks that *beit ha'arnevet* – 'the house of the hare', translated by Steinschneider as *domus leporum*: 'house of hares' – may be identified as the Haselburg monastery in Prague. Steinschneider thinks so because Moushe is referred to elsewhere as *Pragensem Amstelodami circumcisum* (Steinschneider, *Cat. Bodl.*, nr. 2623, 6414). Apart from this, nothing indicates his having been in Prague. Freudenthal, *Aus der Heimat*, 176, n.1 mentions Steinschneider's explanation and adds, without additional quotation of sources, that he came from a Christian family, named Haase. Van Eeghen, 'Moses Abrahamsz', 58 reproduces the name Haase, and adds that he was also known by the name of 'Polak', which might be an indication that he had lived in Poland. Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 384 also give Haase as his original name, and state, like Van Eeghen, that he came from Nikolsburg or Prague. However, the only thing he told about himself is that he came from Nikolsburg, 'from the house of the hare'. It is far from sure that he is referring to his name here, it seems more likely that he had lived in a house with an image of a hare on a stone tablet or a sign board. Shmeruk & Bartal, 'Telaot Moshe', 127 n. 16 give an even more far-fetched explanation. They translate Steinschneider's *domus leporum* – 'house of hares' – incorrectly as בית-מצורעים, 'lepers' house', by which they refer to the hospital for infectious diseases that was founded in Nikolsburg in 1680, and they even suggest that there may be a relationship between his conversion and his belonging to the lepers' house.

⁵³ A *ger* was supposed to sever his original, non-Jewish, family ties. His name should not be associated with his non-Jewish father, which is why he is referred to as 'the son of Abraham'. In many cases this also became his actual name.

⁵⁴ The so-called 'Desolate Boedelskamer' of Amsterdam, the inventory of Amsterdam citizens who were unable to pay their debts, mentions on November 28, 1690: 'Moses Abrahamsz boeckedrucker' (Moses son of

6. The makers

According to Baumgarten, Jewish composers and other workers in the European printing business often served as intermediaries between the Jewish and the Christian world because Jewish books often were printed by Christian printers. They dispersed the traditional Jewish culture, but also introduced new developments from the Christian world to the Jewish world. Because of their technical skills, their multilingualism and their knowledge of Jewish culture they occupied a central position in the Jewish cultural world. Several composers traveled through Europe to offer their services to printing houses.⁵⁵ Many of them were Jews who had converted to Christianity, writes Baumgarten, but some, especially in Amsterdam, were Christians who converted to Judaism, like Moushe.⁵⁶

It is unknown whether Moushe had worked in other printing houses before he arrived in Amsterdam or where he learned his skills. In most parts of Europe Jewish composers, unlike their non-Jewish colleagues, did not start as craftsmen but learned the trade on the job. The main reason was that in most places Jews were not admitted to the guilds. However, both in Nikolsburg and in Amsterdam the printers' guild was accessible to Jews, so Moushe may have worked as a composer in his home-town.⁵⁷

Moushe's name is mentioned for the first time in 1686, in the Yiddish translation of *Yeven Metsula*, printed by Uri Faybesh Halevi.⁵⁸ Moushe is mentioned as the translator of this book, which means he probably had a good command of both Hebrew and Yiddish. In the same year he started to work as the compositor of the *Kurant*, also for Uri Faybesh Halevi. At the bottom of each issue he is mentioned: על ידי המסדר ה"ר משה בר אברהם אבינו זצ"ל,

Abraham, book printer), ten years married to Freide Israels, bought citizenship of Amsterdam in 1690. As the Amsterdam marriage register does not mention their marriage, Van Eeghen, 'Moses Abrahamsz', 58-70 assumes that they had married outside of Amsterdam; this is not sure, though: according to Verdooner & Snel, *Trouwen in Mokum*, 12-13, 17th-century poor Ashkenazi Jews did not always register their marriages with the civil authorities. Moushe's daughter Gella mentions her mother's name in a prayer-book her father published and she composed in 1710: 'marat Freide bat har"r Israel Kats z"l', 'Mrs. Freide, daughter of Mr. Israel Kats of blessed memory' (Steinschneider, *Cat. Bodl.*, nr. 8114). Freide's father's name Kats – an abbreviation of *kohen tsedek* – indicates that he was a *kohen*, so we may well assume that she was Jewish. And as it is very unlikely that a non-Jew would marry a Jewish woman, Moushe most probably had converted before he came to Amsterdam.

⁵⁵ Baumgarten, *Le peuple des livres*, 69-70.

⁵⁶ Baumgarten, *Le peuple des livres*, 71; Ya'ari, 'Gerim bimlekhat hakodesh', 245-251.

⁵⁷ Baumgarten, *Le peuple des livres*, 72-73.

⁵⁸ See 6.1.

6. The makers

‘By the compositor Mr. Moshe bar Avraham Avinu, blessed be the memory of the righteous one,’ but there is some reason to assume that he also served as the translator and editor. As the main sources of the *Kurant* were contemporary Dutch newspapers, the editor had to select, translate and edit the Dutch news items. This means he had to be able to read Dutch and know the Roman alphabet. Although most Ashkenazi Jews understood Dutch quite well, probably only a few were able to read it. Jewish printers often had non-Jewish compositors who were unable to read Hebrew or Yiddish, and Jewish compositors who did not know the Latin alphabet.⁵⁹ As Moushe was a former Christian from Nikolsburg, his mother tongue most probably was German, which made it comparatively easy for him to read Dutch. In order to convert to Judaism he had had to learn Hebrew. And he apparently learned the Yiddish language from his contact with Jews, first in Nikolsburg which had a great Jewish community and later in Amsterdam. That he was able to translate into Yiddish at the time the *Kurant* appeared is shown by his Yiddish translation of *Yeven Metsula*.

When David de Castro Tartas took over the *Kurant* in June 1687, Moushe was part of the deal. As we do not know of earlier publications by Tartas in which Moushe was involved, we may assume that he joined Tartas especially for the purpose of editing the *Kurant*. His name is still mentioned at the end of every issue, but without the title *hamesader*, ‘the compositor’. This might be interpreted as ‘made by Moushe bar Avrom Ovinu,’ which assumes a greater responsibility than just being the compositor. The fact that the style of writing remains unchanged after the take-over by Tartas,⁶⁰ makes it even more likely that Moushe was the editor and the translator of the *Kurant*.

The last issue of the *Kurant* that we know of dates from December 5, 1687. Although there are no indications that this was the very last issue, Moushe probably did not work much longer on the *Kurant* after the last known issue was published because in 1688 he started working for the Jewish printer and businessman Cosman Gomperts – a member of the Gomperts family, the only really influential Ashkenazi family in Amsterdam,⁶¹ and a son-in-law of Glikl Hamel, (1645–1724), who wrote about her life as a Jewish businesswoman in

⁵⁹ Kleerkooper & Van Stockum, 819-821 mentions Jewish and non-Jewish compositors who testified to having worked for Tartas.

⁶⁰ See Ch. 8.

⁶¹ Israel, *Mercantilism*, 112; Kaufmann & Freudenthal, *Die Familie Gomperz*.

6. The makers

Germany.⁶² Under Gomperts's name he published two books in 1688, a Yiddish prayer book and a Yiddish paraphrase of Pentateuch.⁶³ In 1690 Moushe took over Gomperts's printing house, where he printed a *Tsenerene* and a customs book.⁶⁴ However, he went bankrupt within a year and the printing house was returned to its former owner. It seems that one of the reasons for his bankruptcy was David de Castro Tartas's action against him in printing a Polish prayer book without privilege. Tartas lost his case, but Moushe had no financial resources to resume printing.⁶⁵ Apparently Moushe's relations with his former employer had soured. But Moushe did not give in easily, and in 1694 he gave it a second try. He became a member of the Amsterdam Guild of Booksellers, Bookprinters and Bookbinders. Again he started printing the Polish prayer book, again Tartas tried to prevent him and lost. Moushe printed four cheap books under his own name, but with Gomperts's types, one of which was the Hebrew and Yiddish prayer book *Birkat Hamazon*.⁶⁶ The disputed Polish prayer book was never printed, though.

He left for Germany that same year.⁶⁷ Via Berlin, Frankfurt an der Oder and Dessau he ended up in Halle, where he became the university printer and, with the help of his ten children, set up his own printing house as well.⁶⁸ While in Berlin he published a Hebrew translation of the New Testament.⁶⁹ His *magnum opus* was *Telaot Moshe* (or *Teloos Moushe*,

⁶² Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 382; Israel, *Mercantilism*, 118, Kaufmann, *Zikhrones Glikl Hamel*, 144 ff; Kaufmann & Freudenthal, *Die Familie Gomperz*, 330.

⁶³ *פראנקפורט ק"ק פראנקפורט* by Eliakim b. Jacob Melamed of Komarno: Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography* nr. 500; Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 95; and *מליץ יושר* by Jacob b. Isaac Ashkenazi of Janow: Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography* nr. 501; Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 94.

⁶⁴ *Tsenerene*: Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 96; *פקודי ה'* by Zadok b. Asher Wahl: Steinschneider, *Cat. Bodl.*, nr. 7405; Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 97.

⁶⁵ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 385-386.

⁶⁶ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 386; Steinschneider, *Cat. Bodl.*, nr. 2623; Gutschow, *YidNed*, nr. 111.

⁶⁷ Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew Typography*, 384-388; Van Eeghen, 'Moses Abrahamsz', 58-70.

⁶⁸ Freudenthal, *Aus der Heimat*, 175-188. Moushe's daughters Ella and Gella became famous for being two of the very few women in the trade: Ya'ari, 'Nashim bimlekhat hakodesh', 262-263; Freudenthal, *Aus der Heimat*, 176; Steinschneider, *Cat. Bodl.*, c. 2893-2894, nr. 8114; even the Yiddish poet Itsik Manger wrote a short story about Gella, apparently unaware of the fact that Moushe was a *ger* and had lived in Holland: Manger, *Gele*, 7-12.

⁶⁹ Freudenthal, *Aus der Heimat*, 177.

6. The makers

1711), which is considered the oldest book on geography in Yiddish.⁷⁰ The text was taken from two sources, the Hebrew *Iggeret orhot olam* by Avraham Farissol (Venice 1587) and the German translation (1612) of the Latin *Tabularum Geographicarum Contractarum* (1600) by the Dutch – Christian – geographer Petrus Bertius. He shortened the text, removed striking Christian elements, but maintained the essentially Christian point of view and refrained from adding specifically Jewish elements.⁷¹

In 1714 Moushe printed a collection of homilies. As it was said to contain anti-Christian slander he was arrested, but released shortly afterwards. His printing house was confiscated and once more he became a university printer.⁷² No publications of his are known after 1714, but his name is mentioned now and then in publications of his children on the basis of which it is assumed that he died in 1733 or 1734.⁷³

Moushe's activities as a printer show that he took original initiatives, often combining Jewish and Christian elements. Although we do not know who came up with the idea of publishing a Yiddish newspaper, it might well be that Moushe himself had a hand in it.

⁷⁰ Steinschneider, *Cat. Bodl.*, nr. 6414.

⁷¹ Shmeruk & Bartal, 'Telaot Moshe', 121-137.

⁷² Freudenthal, *Aus der Heimat*, 186-187; Van Eeghen, 'Moses Abrahamsz', 66 assumes that Moushe was arrested because of *Telaot Moshe*, but that seems unlikely.

⁷³ Steinschneider, *Cat. Bodl.*, nr. 8832.