

1 Continental Beginnings

By the time Solomon Bennett arrived in London as an immigrant in 1800, he was 33 years old and no longer a young man. He had grown to adulthood in his native city of Polotsk, in what was called Poland then but Belarus after 1772, then traveled to Copenhagen to pursue professional training as an engraver, and finally arrived in Berlin, where he gained employment and a modicum of recognition in his field before departing only four years later. These Continental experiences proved to be critical in the shaping of his subsequent professional and intellectual life in England. Unfortunately, in contrast to the relatively rich documentation of the thirty-eight years he spent in London until his death, the record of his early life in Europe is scanty. One must rely almost exclusively on Bennett's own recollections of his pre-London experiences, written several decades later in England; on several engravings he produced primarily in Berlin; and on a few official documents that he preserved and carried with him to chart the high points of his early life in all three European cities. While Bennett's own biases in presenting himself as well as the passage of time and place that had elapsed must be taken into account, these materials still constitute valuable sources of his early aspirations and values.

1.1 Polotsk

Bennett was born in Polotsk in 1767, since he explicitly tells us he left in 1792 when he was twenty-five years old.¹ Whether he lived in the city proper or in the surrounding region, also known as Polotsk, is difficult to determine. Polotsk was situated after 1772 in the district [*oblast*] of Vitebsk in Belarus. It was a bustling commercial center, located where the Dvina River connects to the Polota River, whence Polotsk took its name (see Figure 1.1). Beginning in the fifteenth century, Polotsk was under the authority of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania; it became known as the Polock Voivodeship, an administrative unit and local government in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth until the first partition of Poland in 1772, when Russia gained sovereignty over the region. As an important economic and

¹ Salomon Bennett, *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke's Place Displayed, in a Series of Critical, Theological and Rabbinical Discussions, on a Hebrew Pamphlet, Entitled "Minḥat Kena'ot" (Avenge Offer)* (London: the author, 1818), 2. The entire passage is cited below, at note 18. Note that throughout, words written in Hebrew (e.g., *Minḥat Kena'ot*) are transliterated into English characters.

cultural hub of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the city was also known for its multilingual, multireligious, and multinational character, a home not only to significant Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Jewish communities but also to notable numbers of Armenians and Muslims.²

From at least the sixteenth century on, Polotsk had a sizable Jewish community. In the years of Bennett's youth, most of its citizens were Jews. In 1780, the town had 360 wooden houses, of which 100 belonged to Jews; but the number of Jewish families amounted to 478, with a large minority of 437 Christian families. In this same period, Polotsk became a major center of Hasidism in Lithuania and subsequently a battleground between Hasidim and their opponents, the followers of Elijah Gaon. Despite the conspicuous Jewish presence in the town, it was never a major center of rabbinical learning and did not boast many significant Judaic scholars.³

Bennett's observations of his early years in Polotsk comprise six pages of his first book published in London in 1809 called *The Constancy of Israel*, a work to be examined more closely in the next chapter. This small section follows previous discussions of Christian missionary texts and Bennett's rebuttal of their misleading arguments and misrepresentations of Scripture, as well as a long excursus on Jewish history and its profound religious legacy. It constitutes part of Bennett's overview of the Jewish contemporary world – a fascinating transition from his-

2 On the cultural significance of Polotsk, see the important book and essays by Stefan Rohdewald, especially *Vom Polocker Venedig: Kollektives Handeln sozialer Gruppen einer Stadt zwischen Ost- und Mitteleuropa (Mittelalter, frühe Neuzeit, 19. Jh. bis 1914)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005); "Eine Mischung von Menschen und Sprachen wie beim Turmbau zu Babel: Die russländische Vielvölkerstadt Polock im Kaleidoskop von Augenzeugenberichten," in *Ein weißer Fleck in Europa . . . : Die Imagination der Belarus als Kontaktzone zwischen Ost und West*, ed. Thomas M. Bohn and Victor Shadurski (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2011), 127–138 (Bennett is mentioned on 130; see also the report of the London missionary John Christian Moritz on his engagements with the Jews of Polotz in 1818, "Extracts from Letters of the Rev. L. Way," in *The Jewish Expositor and the Friend of Israel* 4 [1818]: 116–117, also mentioned by Rohdewald on 130); "Schwache unter Schwachen: Zur Aushandlung jüdische Raumes in Städten des Grossfürstentums Litauen im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert am Beispiel von Polock," in *Machträume der frühneuzeitlichen Stadt*, ed. Christian Hochmuth and Susanne Rau (Konstanz: UVK Verlag, 2006), 259–281; and "Durch Mikroskop und Fernglas: Belarussische gesamt-europäische und andere Geschichte(n)," in *Belarus-Reisen: Empfehlungen aus der deutschen Wissenschaft*, ed. Thomas Bohn and Marion Rutz (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020), 181–195 (Bennett is mentioned on 190). My thanks to Professor Rohdewald for his assistance.

3 Herman Rosenthal, A. S. Waldstein, and Peter Wiernick, "Polotsk (Polotzk)," in *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–1906), <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12257-polotsk-polotzk>.

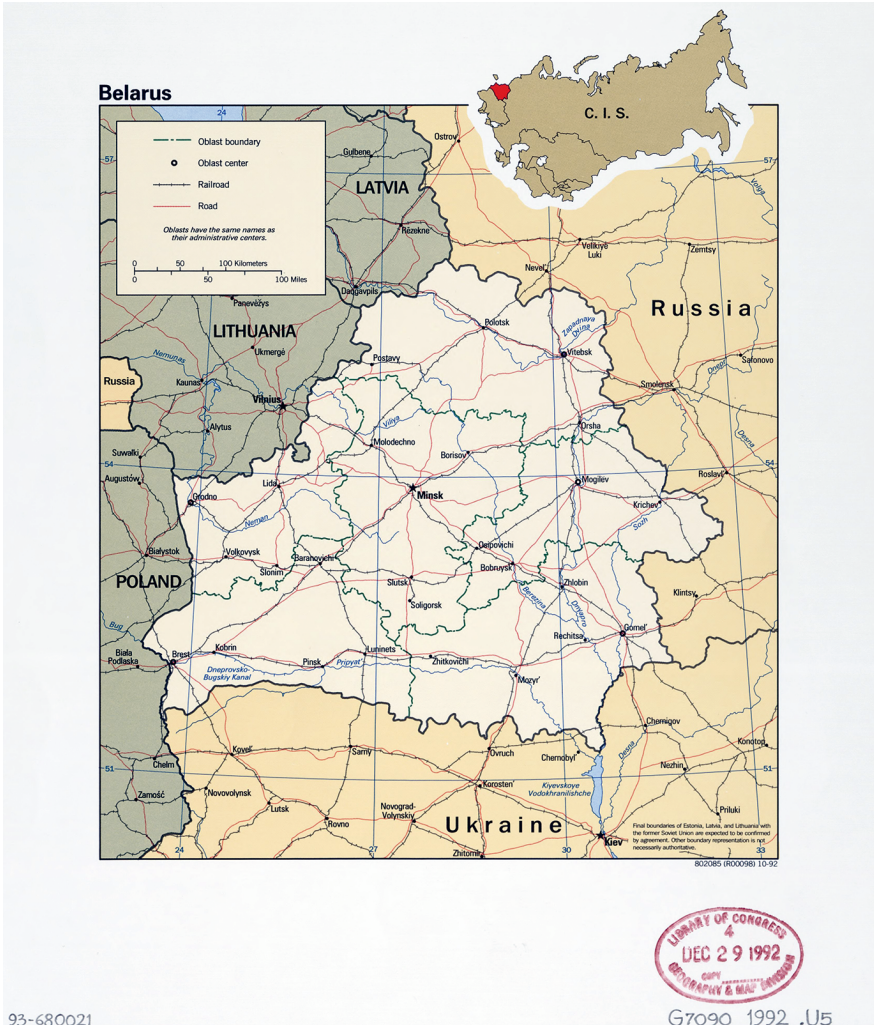


Figure 1.1: Historical boundaries in the Lithuanian–Belarusian lands, eighteenth–twentieth centuries.

tory to autobiography, reminiscent in some ways of the famous autobiography and depiction of eastern European Jewry by Solomon Maimon, Bennett's early contemporary.⁴

⁴ *The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon: The Complete Translation*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Abraham Socher, trans. Paul Reitter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

Bennett introduces his account of Poland in general and Polotsk in particular as follows: “I will give here a short account of the present state of my dispersed brethren in Europe, according to experience in my native country, and in my travels; an intimate and practical knowledge of their existence, related without prejudice, must be far more preferable than the narrations of theoretical observers, or the superficial accounts given by some gentlemen travelers.” Recalling the ancient prejudice of Roman Catholics against Jews, Bennett makes clear that the situation was no different in Poland, even though it once “served as the principal asylum for the Jews in Europe.” Jews inhabited “cities, towns, villages, farms or inns [. . .]; indeed, it was commonly calculated, that above two million Jews were resident in Poland.”⁵

His first recollection of his homeland is a bitter one: “The memory of my infancy is still struck with horror, at the oppressions and cruelties, individually inflicted on the Jews in that kingdom, and the shedding of their blood for false accusations, by the inducement of the Priests; the principal and most absurd one was, to charge the Jew with murder, in order to procure Christian blood to put in their Holy Passover Cakes; this was a general opinion, and a malicious doctrine propagated in all the Catholic dominions[.]” The accusation is then generalized to include all Catholic countries, directly addressing his Protestant readership, although he does admit similar sentiments once existed in England as well. In the end, however, the last king of Poland and his government rejected these accusations and tolerated Jews in their midst.⁶

Bennett also offers a portrait of the culture and economic life of his co-religionists:

As to the civilization and moral conduct of the Jews in Poland, they are principally distinguished by their dress, religious application to the Hebrew theological Studies; as the Talmud, Ritual and Juridical Laws; they are also men of acute minds, very much inclined to philosophical and scientific Studies; notwithstanding the Country is not yet cultivated for these sublime knowledges; they produce able Physicians, Surgeons, Rhetoricians, &c. (They possess also the advantage, that these insignificant reptiles who pass by the name of Rabbies, whose faculties are not superior to those of the Roman Catholic Monks, form no figure

5 Solomon Bennett, *Nezah Yisra'el: The Constancy of Israel: An Unprejudiced Illustration of Some of the Most Important Texts of the Bible: or, A Polemical, Critical, and Theological Reply to a Public Letter, by Lord Crawford, Addressed to the Hebrew Nation* (London: W. H. Wyatt, 1809), 215. The more reliable figure for the population of Polish Jews in the late eighteenth century was about 750,000. See Moshe Rosman, “Poland before 1795,” *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, <https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/17>, and Gershon David Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 20.

6 Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 215–216.

at all in these Countries.) As to their domestic occupations, the rich class carry on an extensive commerce wholesale and retail; some carry on Breweries and Distilleries of all kinds; some are Publicans and Innkeepers; the poorer class are mechanics of all branches, from a Blacksmith to a Jeweller; in short they are active in all occupations, chaste, modest, and sober in their domestic concerns, (though a little unclean, also improper in their dwellings,) strict in religion, sociable, hospitable, and kind, especially to strangers of any persuasion.⁷

Some of these observations surely invite comment. That the Jews of Polotsk dress differently and engage in traditional ritual observance is expected; that they possess acute minds to engage in philosophy and science, especially medicine and rhetoric, is more surprising. Bennett's reference to rabbis as reptiles and equivalent to Catholic monks is in line with other negative comments regarding the rabbinic he made throughout his life. It might also suggest the relatively low status of rabbinic studies and institutions in the city in his day. His mention of Jewish breweries, distilleries, taverns, and inns reflects the knowledge of Jewish economic life we know from other sources. It also might suggest the business of the Bennett family, given his admission that when this group was threatened with harassment and excessive taxation, it harmed him directly, as we shall soon observe.⁸

Bennett's narrative suddenly shifts from the general to a specific set of events that precipitated a crisis for his co-religionists but ultimately led to their relief and deliverance. The considerable attention Bennett devotes to this part of his narrative testifies to the personal significance it held for him. It begins with his recounting of the first partition of Poland in 1772 by Russia:

a great part of that country fell under the dominion of Russia, under the opulent and wise Empress Catherine II. This newly captured Territory (which is my native Country) was divided into two departments, i.e., Polotzk, and Mohiloff.⁹ The long-established Jews in these two Departments were calculated according to the Government List at 40,000 families, con-

7 Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 216–217.

8 On the economic diversity of the Jews of Belarus, see John Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews: The Origins of the Jewish Question in Russia, 1772–1825* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 57. As Klier points out (57, 67), Russian legislation focused on two groups—merchants and townspeople—although a substantial number of Jews did not fit either category. On the depiction of the Jews as unclean, see the report on the Jews written by M. V. Kakhovskii, the governor of Mogilev province, in 1773, as summarized by Klier (62).

9 In 1772, the Russian government of Catherine I appointed Z. G. Chernychez the new governor-general of Belarus. His district included two provinces, Mogilev and Polotsk, each with its own military governor. See Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews*, 59. Klier (53–55) well explains Catherine's conception of the proper social structure of the regime, and particularly the new area of Belarus she acquired where each legal group had its clearly defined rights and responsibilities, and which became the site of her test area for administrative reforms initiated in 1775.

tributing to the duties, besides the Clergy and poor Families, who were exempted from paying duties. Possession being taken, a general and equal liberty was granted to subjects of every religion.¹⁰

This all came to an end more than a decade later, as Bennett describes with great emotion:

But in the year 1786 [actually 1782–1785] mines were digged under the House of Jacob in that country; the ancient hostility of the Catholics towards the Jews was not yet forgotten; conspiracies were formed between the Polish Nobility, Gentry, the Russian General, Governors and Superintendents, to deprive the Jews of their liberties, under the pretext of the benefits which would thence accrue to the Nobility, Gentry, and even to the Crown itself; (an imitation of the Prussian and German Constitution towards the Jews) on the first attack they were deprived of their Breweries, Distilleries, Public-houses, Inns, &c. which was a great part of their business; (I myself was also a sufferer by these innovations) thousands of families were reduced to poverty for want of their usual business; besides other innovations took place in regard to Trade, Mechanics, &c. But the assault on their genealogy, morals, and good conscience, was more horrible to them than the former attack; it was also decided not to receive the testimony of a Jew, neither administer to him an Oath in any Court of Justice. What was there then more to expect? but a general destruction!¹¹

Bennett proceeds to describe the unprecedented response of the Jews to these changes threatening their economic and civil welfare: the convening of a Jewish congress, the selection of delegates to represent their interests before the Russian government in St. Petersburg, and their effective presentation pointing out the vital economic contribution of the Jews and, especially, the Jewish innkeepers and distilleries. Bennett concludes: “In short, the dexterity of the Deputies attracted the favourable attention of the Ministers at that Court, and the affair was taken into consideration.”¹²

¹⁰ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 227. The figure of 40,000 is also the estimate given by Simon Dubnov, which is based on Bennett (whom Dubnov merely designates as a “contemporary”). See Simon M. Dubnov, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland: From the Earliest Times Until the Present Day*, trans. I. Friedlaender, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1916–1920), 1:307; but see Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews*, 55–56, for a discussion of other historical estimates that reduce this number. On the *plakat* of 1772 addressed to the native population, assuring that all would be free to express their religious beliefs and would receive all the rights of citizens of the Russian Empire, see Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews*, 59–60.

¹¹ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 217–218. Bennett describes the actions of Governor-general Passek (Passicoff) that began as early as 1782 and 1783, including the resettlement of Jews, the severe regulations on the distillation of alcohol, and the erosion of their political rights. The petitions of the Jews against Passek took place in 1784–1785, not 1786. See Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews*, 68–70.

¹² Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 219.

At this point Bennett introduces the villain of the affair: the governor-general of the region, who had been responsible for causing the radical deterioration of the Jewish condition in the first place. In a kind of modern evocation of the book of Esther and the holiday of Purim, he offers a dramatic and exhilarating denouement to the threat posed by the Russian Haman, who is prevented from conducting his evil decree by none other than Catherine II herself:

An immediate order was issued to the General Governor (at that time Pieter Bogdanowitch Passicoff) with some of the Superintendents, to appear before the Court at Petersburg, to give a full and proper explanation of those innovations; to answer the objections made against them, and to give a reason for reviling the moral and civil character of the Jews. The answers being cold and dry, and incompatible with the questions put to them, the merciful Empress advanced towards the General Governor and expressed herself in these terms: "Passicoff! I placed you in these Countries to guard my Subjects, to endeavour for the Commonwealth and benefit of my citizens; but, by no means to oppress or to distress; I will not treat you according to your deserts, for I respect your age, and the many services you have performed in your former time; but return back and accommodate the business that no complaints or the tears of my Citizens may appear before my Throne." Permission was then granted for the speedy departure of the General Governor, and two of the Deputies, and mediations took place.¹³

Bennett concludes by proclaiming that "a new Charter was granted to the Jews in all the conquered dominions, to be incorporated Citizens, like the Russians and Poles, either in bearing public burdens and duties, or in enjoying all the benefits of the Commonwealth without exception; [. . .] in which happy state the Jews in that Empire continue until the present moment."¹⁴ It is interesting that Bennett ends on this positive note, without mention of any of the limitations placed on the Jews by the subsequent partitions of Poland following his own departure from Polotsk, especially the emergence of the Pale of Settlement. Nor is this aborted calamity at all connected in his narrative to his coincidental departure from the city in the late spring of 1792, immediately before the second partition.

Bennett's description of the events of the 1780s and their aftermath appears to coincide with the historical account of them drawn by Simon Dubnov and more recent scholars.¹⁵ Indeed, Dubnov referred to Governor Passek (Passicoff) as

¹³ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 219–220.

¹⁴ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 220.

¹⁵ See Dubnov, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, 1:310–314. Note that Dubnov cites Bennett (310) without mentioning him by name. Especially helpful in contextualizing the background of this incident with Passek and its outcome is Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews*, 67–70. (Klier also quotes the scholarly essays of Iulii I. Gessen listed in his bibliography.) Klier describes the motives of the Jewish representatives in St. Petersburg as threefold: to cease all Jewish resettlement; to defend the economic position of the Jews, ensuring their ability to lease distillation rights and even acquire them; and to gain representation for Jews in the urban estate courts. While the Jew-

anti-Jewish and even cites from Bennett's account as his primary source ("a contemporary who had himself been affected by these measures informs us [. . .]"). Bennett had begun his account of his homeland by referring to anti-Semitism generated by Catholic attitudes. As he addressed his Protestant English readers, the Passek affair was similarly linked in his mind to "the ancient hostility of the Catholics towards the Jews [that] was not yet forgotten."¹⁶

When Bennett decided to leave his birthplace, however, he was motivated by reasons having little to do with hostility toward Jews and their economic interests. He recounts his departure from Polotsk in two different instances, each complementing the other and also adding interesting details to a seminal moment of his life. The first immediately follows his description of the threatening situation just depicted:

In May 1792, I undertook to travel abroad, to pursue studies; leaving behind me in White Russia, my wife, children, parents, and relations, together with some property. I departed in pursuit of studies which were known to me merely nominal, but not particularly; to study at my own hazard and expence, though incompatible with my fortune; to visit countries, nations, and languages, that I scarce knew by their names; an undertaking seldom practised in our climate, and particularly by those of our persuasion. Yet my natural zeal for study, which at that time surpassed my understanding, fortune, and the natural tendency towards my family, parents, and relations, impelled me to prepare for my journey. On the above date, I set off from my abode in Polotzk, in White Russia, for Riga, in Courland; from Riga I embarked for Copenhagen, the metropolis of Denmark; in which city I laid the foundation of my studies: and the Arts became my principal object.¹⁷

The second account of his departure appeared nine years later in a highly polemical English work meant as a defense against his detractors, especially the chief rabbi of London, a work we shall also consider more fully in a later chapter:

An earnest desire for studies in my adolescent state, was brought to a conclusion in the twenty-fifth year of my age, at which time I was able to undertake the task of travelling to foreign countries, and thus on my expenses, for pursuing literary studies, and of arts. Thus, I left my place of abode, viz. Polotzk, in White Russia, in June 1792, by the full permission and assistance of my family and relations, as is evident from my passports of that government, and the magistrate to foreign countries for the pursuance of studies of arts &c. without which no subject of that empire is allowed to go to foreign countries, unless bail be given from his relations to the government, for the security of the person. The revolution which then raged in Poland induced me to go to Riga, from thence by sea, and accordingly

ish petitioners failed to win all their demands, the Senate did act in their favor in regularizing their legal position and in barring Passek from limiting or regulating the Jewish leasing of distillation rights.

¹⁶ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 217.

¹⁷ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 220–221.

Copenhagen was the first station for my views. In this metropolis, I was three years, as is evident from those documents I obtained at the Academy of Arts.¹⁸

There is much to glean from these two passages. He first tells us that he left Polotsk either in May or June of 1792. He openly admits that in addition to leaving his parents and other relatives, he also deserted his wife and children. He came from a family of some means, who provided him with the necessary support to leave the country legally. He also had acquired some property, which he was obliged to relinquish. I have speculated that he and his family were innkeepers or distillers, considering his preoccupation with the events related to this profession and his own acknowledgment that he had suffered some losses related to the decrees directed at the liquor business in the 1780s. He claims that his family did not stand in his way but assisted his departure without hesitation. Yet it is hard to imagine that his wife and children – or, for that matter, his parents – accepted his decision. During his later feud with the allies of Rabbi Solomon Hirschell (to be discussed in chapter 3, below), his critics pounced on the fact that he had left his wife an *agunah* [an abandoned wife] and that she lived with sorrow and bitterness until her death.¹⁹ Bennett offers no apology and displays no remorse for leaving her and apparently several children. Nor is it clear how he successfully remarried according to Jewish law and even raised nine additional children with his English wife. Yet the official documents, which we shall examine shortly, approving his departure to Riga and Copenhagen are in fact extant, documents that he carried with him wherever he went.²⁰ They appear to confirm the truthfulness

18 Bennett, *The Present Reign of the Synagogue of Duke's Place*, 2. "The revolution that then raged in Poland" apparently refers to the debate over and eventual adoption of the Polish constitution of May 3, 1791, its aftermath, and the final partitions of 1793 and 1795 by Russia. See Samuel Fiszman, *Constitution and Reform in Eighteenth-Century Poland: The Constitution of 3 May 1791* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Jerzy Lukowski, *The Partitions of Poland: 1772, 1793, 1795* (London: Longman, 1999); and Klier, *Russia Gathers Her Jews*. I am indebted to Dr. Maria Cieřla for her valuable input on this and various other points of Belarusian Jewish history. On the Jews of Belarus in general, see Claire Le Foll, *La Biélorussie dans l'histoire et l'imaginaire des Juifs de l'Empire russe (1772–1905)*, Collection Etudes juives (Paris: Honore Champion, 2017).

19 See Meir Rintel, *Minḥat Kena'ot* (London: Jechiel Hanoi, 1816–1817), 22–23; Arthur Barnett, "Solomon Bennett 1761–1838: Artist, Hebraist, and Controversialist," *Jewish Historical Society of England Transactions* 17 (1951–1952): 94.

20 These documents are preserved in MS Jews College 116, now housed in the library of the London School of Jewish Studies. I am indebted to the librarian of that institution, Eria Zimmels, who secured a copy of the manuscript for me. The oldest external sources of Bennett's early life located so far (other than his own writing), they offer some indication of the earliest forms of his name. In the documents approving his departure from Polotsk in Russian, the name appears as Benet Szlomowitz; his graduate certificate (in French translation) from Copenhagen has "Salom-

of his assertion that he had material and legal support to desert his family and friends, despite the moral impropriety of such an act.

Most importantly, like other Jewish contemporaries, Bennett felt compelled to leave Poland in pursuit of knowledge, which in his case meant literary studies and the arts. The learning he sought was clearly not religious but secular, since his primary destination was the Academy of the Arts in Copenhagen, where he pursued a degree in copper engraving; his unique aspiration, for which he was willing to uproot himself from home and family, was to become an artist/engraver.

One might ask the obvious question of how he acquired such a deep yearning to pursue secular learning even at the expense of disrupting his life and destroying familial relationships. Bennett never discussed his education in Polotsk, neither his Jewish nor his secular learning. He mentions, as quoted above, that he initially knew no foreign languages nor much of anything about the countries to which he was traveling. We might assume that he had received a traditional education in Hebraic studies, allowing him fluency in writing in Hebrew and citing Scripture. He certainly was familiar with Talmud and rabbinic law. But how did he master secular studies, at least enough to yearn for more, prior to his departure in 1792 at the age of twenty-five?

He offers one clue in *The Constancy of Israel* when discussing his fascination with the physical structure of the Temple as described in the book of Ezekiel, which eventually led to a published book: “I have in my possession two different plans of the Temple described by Ezekiel, which I performed in the earlier part of my life for the Bible Society when in my native Country, according to different Commentators, executed in a proper manner, with all dimensions, geometrically represented, and fully described, agreeable to the text of the Bible, (which at a more successful period, I intend to engrave and publish).”²¹ I am not sure to what Bible Society Bennett was referring. It seems likely that it was connected to the famous Jesuit College of Polotsk [*Collegium Polocense*], which was established by the Jesuit Order in 1580 and continued to function until 1820, when the Jesuits were banished from the Russian Empire. The college was particularly well-known for its important library and printing press. It seems that Bennett, in his quest for general knowledge, took full advantage of this significant resource to the extent that he could. It might be reasonable to assume that he omitted mention of a Jesuit institution in writing to Protestant readers, simply referring instead to a

mon Bennet,” which is identical with the German certificate from the Prussian academy. While the name “Benet” or “Bennett” might appear unusual for a Polish Jew, it is worth recalling the well-known Banet (Benet) family of the nineteenth century stemming from Moravia, especially the rabbis Mordechai and his son Naphtali.

21 Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 156–157.

Bible society. If this assumption is correct, Bennett's quest for knowledge and particularly his interest in art and engraving had already begun when he was living in his native town. He was accustomed to interacting with Christians on matters pertaining to the Bible long before his frequent encounters with them in London. This is the only time he mentions his biblical studies prior to the publication in London of his first book, in 1809.

We have already noted the existence of official documents that Bennett carried with him throughout his European travels and kept in his possession for the rest of his life. Two are pertinent to Bennett's life in Polotsk and offer an additional glimpse into his activity before and during his departure. The first is Bennett's handwritten application to travel to Reval in 1790, requesting a passport from the Polotsk city magistrate, who took his case to the governor's chancellery. The official response then follows:

By order of Her Excellency Empress Ekaterina Alekseevna, All-Russian Sovereign, [etc. . . .] Permission is granted to the Polotsk town-dweller, the Jew Benet Shlomovich, from Polotsk to Reval and back, to lodge three horses at the post offices [along the way?], with driver and cattle. This certificate is issued in the well-to-do regional capital of Polotsk, signed by hand and accompanied by the insignia of my imprint on Dec. 1 [7?], 1790. General in service of her imperial majesty and most merciful ruler, Administrator of the Polotsk land holdings, Director of the Order of the Holy Apostolic Prince Vladimir, Cavalier of the Great Cross of the Second Order.²²

The document appears to be a kind of official passport authorizing Bennett to travel to Reval, which is the old name for the city of Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, some 394 miles away, proceeding due north through Latvia and Estonia to the Baltic Sea. The document is given to Benet Shlomovich (Szlomowicz), who is called a Jewish burgher of Polotsk. He is even granted the benefit of lodging three horses in every post office along the way, with "driver and cattle." How many burghers of Polotsk were entitled to such privileges, let alone a Jew? Was Bennett employed by or an agent of the government or a nobleman?

The second document, issued two years later, grants Bennett permission to travel to Riga and back:

To the Polotsk town-dweller, the Jew Benet Shlomovich, following the permission granted by the Polotsk city magistrate, for the duration of one year, for the production of Rechitsky textiles in the foreign Polish territories [i.e., the ones not annexed by the Russian Empire] and the German lands, from Polotsk via Riga to Czechia [?], has permission to pass [travel] freely

²² MS Jews College 116. The translation is from the first of two Russian documents. My sincere thanks to Professor Benjamin Nathans for translating the two documents.

and without hindrance, in recognition of which I certify with my own hand, in the regional capital of Polotsk [. . .] on the 21st of May 1792, The Polotsk deputy of Her Imperial Majesty[.]²³

While the purpose of Bennett's first trip is not stated, this trip to Riga is approved to "produce" or sell Russian textiles originally made in the Minsk region of Belarus for export to Poland, Germany, and perhaps Czechia (Bohemia). As in the first document, permission is also granted for a return to Polotsk. Should we assume that Bennett used this document to journey to Riga on his way to Copenhagen, or was this meant to be an entirely different trip for the purpose of producing or selling merchandise abroad? The economic dimensions of this trip revealed in the document seem totally unrelated to Bennett's own lofty claim that he was departing his home in pursuit of an artistic education. It seems impossible to determine whether this was simply another planned round trip, such as the one in 1790, or was a pretext for moving westward to Denmark absent the intention of ever returning. In any case, these two documents carefully preserved by Bennett complicate the narrative he offered his English readers.

Further, they underscore even more the moral ambiguity of his departure from his native home. Was he planning his final departure under the false premises that he was engaged in a business trip abroad? Could he have been hiding his real intentions of studying abroad and even deceiving the authorities who had approved only a limited excursion? If so, how did he get away with this deception, and how was it possible that his family condoned such deceit? Together with the severe damage he was inflicting on his own family by deserting them, the entire circumstances of his exit from Polotsk paint Solomon Bennett as a seemingly insincere and flawed character, a judgment that he would have to endure for the remainder of his life.

1.2 Copenhagen and Berlin

What remains clear is that Bennett left Polotsk for Copenhagen via Riga in May or June 1792. He studied for at least one year at Det Kongelig Danske Skildre- Bildhugger- og Bygnings-Academie i Kiøbenhavn [the Royal Danish Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in Copenhagen] and received a certificate of graduation, a French copy of which he kept in his possession (see Figure 1.2). The letter is signed by the director of the Royal Academy, Johannes Wiedewelt, and the secretary, Christian Faedder Hoyer, both distinguished Danish artists. The handwritten document, dated 1793, declares that Bennett was in residence for one year. During that period, he successfully completed all his requirements in

23 MS Jewish College 116, translation of second Russian document.

Nous, soussignés Directeur et Secrétaire de l'Académie Royale
des Beaux-Arts en Danemarck, attestons, que depuis un an
le Sr Bennett Salomon fréquente cette Académie et pen-
dant ce tems il s'est appliqué avec succès, non seulement
à la gravure en pierre fines, mais encore à la gravure en tail-
le-douce, et que s'il peut trouver du soutien par une pension
il deviendra un très habile graveur

L'Académie Royale de Peinture, Sculpture et d'Ar-
chitecture le 8 Aoust 1793

J. Wiedeweth
p. t. Directeur

C. Hoyer
Secrét. perpét.

Figure 1.2: The certificate translated into French authorizing Solomon Bennett's completion of his studies at the Royal Academy of Copenhagen.

engraving on fine stone [la gravure en pierre fines] as well as copper-plate engraving [la graveur en taille douce]. It added that if he succeeded in supporting himself through a pension, he could become a skilled engraver.²⁴

He relates how he “laid the foundation of [his] studies, and the Arts became [his] principal subject” in his new surroundings. For Bennett, Denmark was known for its tolerant government, moral character, civilization, industry, and economic activity. Jews living there enjoyed full liberty as incorporated citizens. He considered the local Jewish community “very moderate people, not very partial to theological studies, but hospitable and industrious, producing also some

²⁴ There is a French copy of Bennett's certificate in MS Jews College 116. On Jewish students at the Royal Danish Academy, see Lise Svanholm, “Danish-Jewish Painting,” in *Danish Jewish Art*, ed. Mirjam Gelfer-Jørgensen (Copenhagen: Rhodos, 1999), 481–513, especially 485, 507. My thanks to Naomi Keren for this reference. On the Jewish community of Copenhagen, see her forthcoming Bar Ilan University dissertation, “Modern Jewish Identities in Denmark as Reflected in Ego-Documents (1770–1870),” and her recent Hebrew paper delivered at Bar Ilan University titled “From Berlin and Amsterdam to Copenhagen: Maskilic Networks and Their Influence on the Formation of Modern Jewish Schools in Copenhagen” (March 3, 2022). My thanks to her as well for allowing me to read this paper.

Physicians, Surgeons, and Artists.” He apparently meant that Copenhagen was not remarkable for its Jewish learning but nevertheless attracted Jews in medicine and the arts, and thus he was not totally unique in his professional pursuits. He also observes that he had conversed with Jews from Sweden present in the city who also enjoyed the benefits of their new surroundings. From these brief observations, it appears that Bennett was unaware of or indifferent to the seeds of the Haskalah budding in the city and the emerging conflict between Jews of a new order and those of the old.²⁵ During his stay in Copenhagen, he apparently finished the engraving of the well-known seventeenth-century Danish alchemist Lorens Weiskopf (whom he called Lorenz Werskoss), perhaps Bennett’s earliest extant work (Figure 1.3), based on an original painting by Henrich Dittmers (ca. 1625–1677). The painting is still located in Copenhagen in the National Gallery of Denmark.²⁶

Bennett departed Copenhagen in 1795, some two years after his graduation from the academy. His exit was precipitated, so he claims, by the great fire of that year that left the city a desolate “heap of stones.”²⁷ The next stop on his journey was Berlin; now armed with professional credentials, he took full advantage of his new artistic surroundings to launch his career as an engraver. His engravings were quickly noticed by the artistic elites of the city, especially his copper engraved portraits of the late king Frederick the Great (Figure 1.4); Louisa Augusta, the wife of King Frederick William III (Figure 1.5); Frederick William III himself; Field-Marshal Moellendorf, the governor of Berlin; Ewald Friedrich von Hertzberg, the Prussian statesman; and Daniel Chodowiecki, the famous artist and head of the Royal Academy

25 Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 221–222. Keren, “From Berlin and Amsterdam to Copenhagen,” points out that there were 1,901 Jews in the city in 1801, comprising 341 households. The first Jewish immigrants were Portuguese who maintained ties with other Sephardim in German areas. The Jews of Copenhagen also maintained strong connections with the Berlin Haskalah. Two significant leaders of the movement, Hartvig Wessely and Isaac Euchel, both had Danish roots—especially Euchel through his younger brother Gottlieb Yehiel, who was active in Copenhagen in cultural and educational activities just after Bennett’s departure from the city. But during Bennett’s three years in the city, the Jewish community was already split between reformers and defenders of the old order of Jewish ritual life and education. In 1795, in Bennett’s last year in the city, a government committee was formed to investigate the administration of the Jewish community in the light of this internal conflict; and in that same year of the horrible fire that destroyed much of the city, including the synagogue, the rabbinic leadership was weakened.

26 An image of the painting is available on Wikipedia: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Heinrich_Dittmers_-_The_Alchemist_Lorens_Weiskopf_-_KMSsp818_-_Statens_Museum_for_Kunst.jpg. The engraving is located at the Kupferstichkabinett [Museum of Prints, Drawings, and Fine Manuscripts], Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, no. 213–130.

27 Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 222.

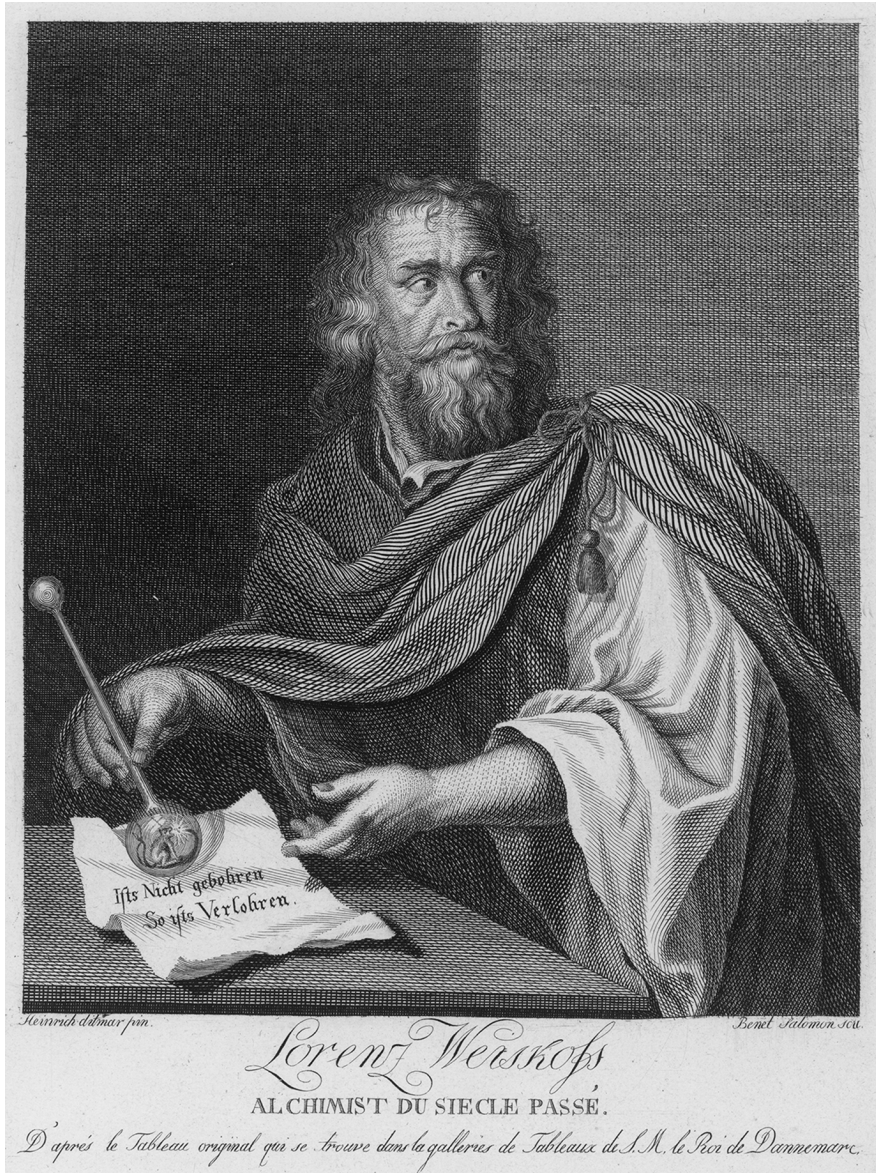


Figure 1.3: Bennett's engraving of Lorens Weiskopf (Lorenz Werskoff).

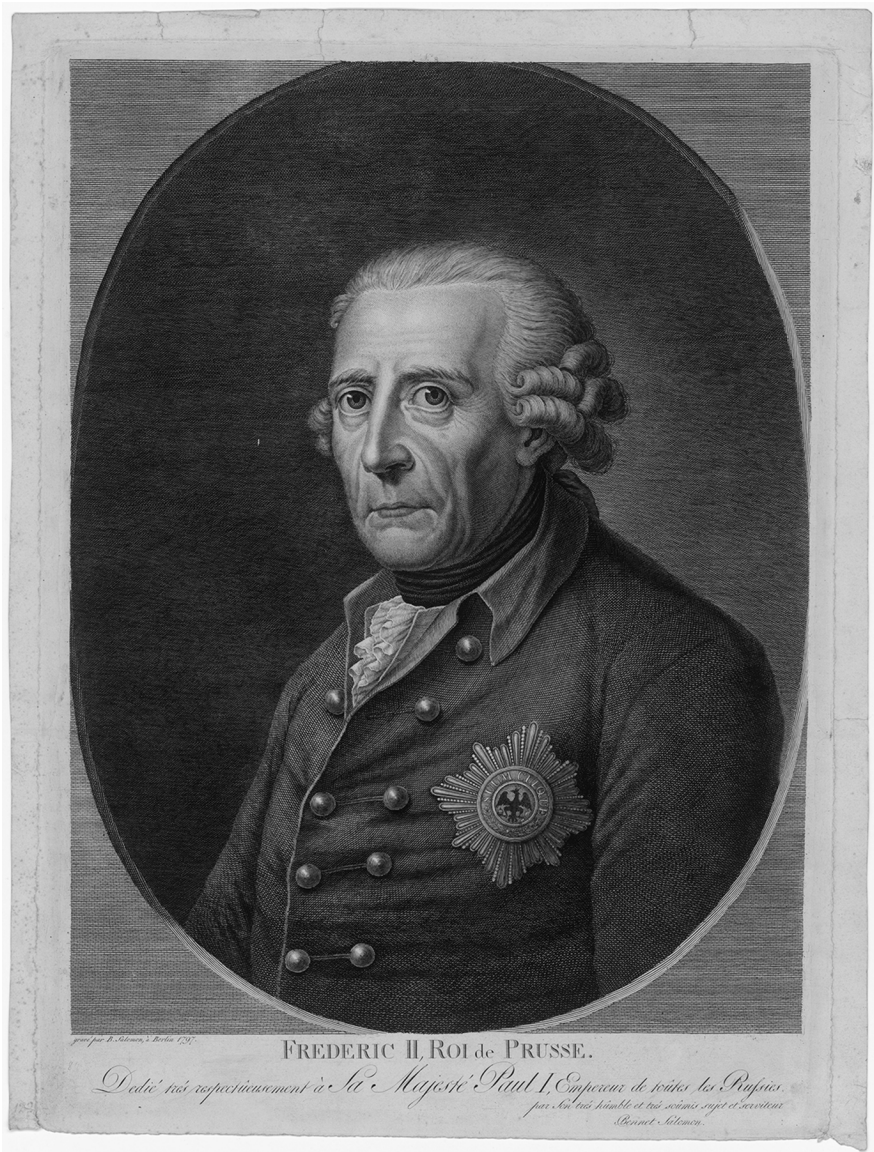


Figure 1.4: Bennett's engraving of Frederick II dedicated to the Russian Tsar Paul I.



Figure 1.5: Bennett's engraving of Queen Louisa Augusta.



Figure 1.6: Bennett's engraving of the artist Daniel Chodowiecki, president of the Royal Academy.

(Figure 1.6). He became a fellow of the Königlische Akademie der bildenden Künste und mechanischen Wissenschaften zu Berlin [Royal Academy of Fine Arts and Mechanical Sciences of Berlin] in 1796 and is listed in their records as a *Kupferstecher* [copper engraver]. On October 14, 1797, he was granted a patent by the Royal Academy that was signed by Daniel Chodowiecki (the director), Johann Christoph Frisch, Johann Wilhelm Meil, and Daniel Berger, all prominent artists in the Academy. He also received complimentary private letters and promises from Queen Louisa Augusta and King Frederick William III, along with a monetary gift.²⁸

Among these engravings, that of Frederick the Great received the greatest attention and led to Bennett's affiliation with the elite artists of the Academy.²⁹ Among the curiosities of the painting is the dedication written in French: "Dédié très respectueusement à Sa Majette, Paul I, Empereur des toutes les Russies, par son très homble et très soumis sujet et serviteur – Bennett Salomon." Barnett, who first noticed this line, speculated that Bennett, writing in 1797 (only five years after leaving Polotsk), still regarded himself as a Russian subject and still might have been considering a return home. Barnett adds apologetically that this might be further proof that Bennett had no intention of deserting his first wife.³⁰ Paul's short rule as emperor (1796–1801) ended abruptly with his assassination but coincided

28 Bennett's Berlin documents are in MS Jews College 116. Several of his engravings created in Berlin are printed and discussed by Salli Kirschstein, *Juedische graphiker aus der zeit von 1625– 1825* (Berlin: Der Zirkel Architektur-Verlag, 1918), 15–27. See also the comments of Barnett, "Solomon Bennett," 95–96. They are still located in the Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. The engraving of King Frederick the Great is listed as no. 776–93; additional copies are 109–101 and 775–95. The engraving of Louisa Augusta, based on a painting by Nikolaus Lauer (1753–1824), is listed as no. 686–121; additional copies are 727–96, 110–101. The engraving of King Frederick William III, based on a painting by Nikolaus Lauer, is listed as no. 97–1883. The engraving of Field-Marshal Moellendorf, based on a painting by Jean Marc Pascal (active 1784), is listed as no. 212–130 as well as 211–130. The engraving of Ewald Friedrich von Hertzberg, based on a painting by Johann Heinrich Schröder (1757–1812), is listed as no. 210–130. The engraving of Daniel Chodowiecki, based on the painting by Johann Christoph Frisch (1738–1815), is listed as no. 209–130. On Bennett's membership in the Academy, see Historisches Archiv, Preussischen Akademie der Künste, Berlin, PrAdk 0137, "Salomon Benet Kupferstecher," p. 6.

29 One additional letter Bennett preserved for posterity, found in MS Jews College 116, relates to his engraving of Frederick the Great. On November 9, 1797, he had sent copies of the celebrated engraving to two professors at Copenhagen's Royal Academy: Johannes Wiedewelt, its former director and then secretary, and Peter Meyn, a new director. They responded on March 10, 1798, in a letter addressed to Bennett in Danish; in it they thanked "Bennet Salomon," as they called him. They were also pleased by Bennett's evident progress "in the art you practice, the foundation of which was laid here at the Academy." My gratitude to Professor Finn-Einar Eliassen of the University of South-Eastern Norway for translating this text, and to my colleague Carsten Wilke for connecting me with Professor Eliassen.

30 See Barnett, "Solomon Bennett," 95–96.

with Bennett's years in Berlin. It is indeed interesting that Bennett demonstrates a kind of political loyalty ("sujet et serviteur") to Russia and its czar (as distinct from Poland, to which he later associates himself as "Native of Poland"). But what seems most bizarre is dedicating an engraving of the heroic Prussian emperor to a Russian one! How might his German associates have viewed such an irreverent gesture?³¹

Despite his professional success and relative prestige, Bennett's view of Jewish life in Berlin was markedly negative. He remarks that Jews had few liberties there and were excluded from the natural rights of "mankind." Rich Jews admittedly had privileges of keeping "Manufactories of Silk, Cotton, Leather, and Manchester Goods but cannot employ any Jewish workman in their Fabricks." Moreover, their birth rate was limited, and they were heavily taxed. "Notwithstanding their oppressed state," Bennett wrote, "yet their sagacity of mind, industry, and application to Classic Studies, made them worthy of acceptance among the most refined class of mankind."³²

Bennett was also not impressed by the level of Jewish learning in Berlin; as he puts it, they were "not very partial to theological study." Jews nevertheless were attracted to universities, where they could study with the support of rich families. Bennett was certainly familiar with some of the Jewish celebrities of eighteenth-century Berlin, beginning with Moses Mendelssohn and including the physicians Marcus Hertz and Marcus Bloch, a certain Professor Leoneny at the Cadet School in Berlin, the Hebraic scholars Joel Brill (Löwe) and Aaron Halle-Wolfssohn, and someone named Abrahamson, the king's and government's *Mada-lier* (i.e., *médaillier* [medal maker]). Without mentioning them by name, he also singled out Jewish artists as well as scholars "in the various branches of academical performances, ingenious Jews in Geometry, Algebra, Mathematics, Geography and Philosophy."³³

Bennett's lack of high regard for the rabbinic learning of the city was surely influenced by the following incident involving its chief rabbi, who happened to be the father of his later chief nemesis in London, Rabbi Solomon Hirschell:

31 On Bennett's apparent loyalty to Russia, compare Rohdewald, "Durch Mikroskop und Fernglas," 190.

32 Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 223–224. In Bennett's notes on *The Holy Bible*, MS Jews College 105, note his comment on Ezekiel 20:25, which refers to "the oppression of the house of Israel by our modern cultivated barbarians of Europe, deprived of their own laws but subjected to the laws of the different nations of their abode, as if the house of Israel are ignorant and void of any law peculiar to human welfare, deprived of liberties, even marriage are restrained from them in some countries and what more! (this latter I experienced during the 4 years of my abode at the Royal Academy of Berlin from 1796–1800). How this liberal act stands in that country, I cannot tell" (2:725).

33 Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 225–226.

Know therefore! While I was at Berlin in connection with my work at the academy, I nevertheless mixed with the Polaks, learned in Torah, and took an interest in their affairs. During all that time I did not hear one word that the Rav of Berlin, Rabbi Zwi [Zevi Hirsch Berlin, or Hirschell Lewin (1721–1800)], had a son by the name of R. Solomon [Hirschell], capable of holding a rabbinic position or a scholar. It happened that I had some dispute with R. Yitzchak Satanov and R. Moses Slotover which compelled me to appear before the Rav, R. Zwi, the local spiritual head. But, because this family, when they speak, do so in a haughty manner, the Rav, R. Zwi, frightened me and spoke harshly about me, contrary to the facts. However, as my name was known and noted in Berlin among both the Jews and the Princes and the distinguished in the land, and I had the advantage in this matter, I kept away from the Rav. There arose also some discord and controversy between us and this caused the rupture of our relations.³⁴

After four years in Berlin, Bennett exited the city in 1799, explaining that “the oppressed state of the Jews in that kingdom caused me to abhor staying there any longer, and far less from thinking of a settlement in that kingdom; I then prepared for my journey to England.”³⁵ Thus ends his rather sketchy description of a Jewish community in which he spent four years of his life, enjoying the privilege of a successful career as an engraver while seeming to have maintained minimal social contacts with fellow Jews. The only exception, he tells us, was that he socialized with Polish Jews like himself, learned in Torah, and took an interest in their affairs.

To what might we attribute his lack of enthusiasm for the other members of this distinguished Jewish community? Note again the list of Jewish cultural luminaries he offers his readers. Mendelssohn was first, although he had died a decade earlier. Was Bennett familiar with his writing, especially his biblical translation, since Bennett would devote himself to a similar project years later in London? This is the only time he mentions Mendelssohn and never brings up his writings; rather he seems to have known him by name only. Marcus Hertz and Marcus Bloch were distinguished physicians, while Joel Brill and Aaron Wolfsohn were Hebrew scholars and the co-editors of the Hebrew journal *ha-Me’asef*, which had ceased publication by the time Bennett was in Berlin. These four were all legitimate cultural figures of their community, although the other two, the Jewish professor and government *Madalier*, as well as the unnamed Jewish artists and academics, appear unconnected to Jewish life and learning. Also mentioned is Isaac Satanov, another luminary of the German Haskalah, but Bennett’s relationship with him appears to be negative. As an inventory of the major intellec-

³⁴ Solomon Bennett to David Meldola, March 6, 1817, quoted in Richard Barnett, “Haham Meldola and Hazan de Sola,” *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 21 (1962–1967): 15–17. Satanov is the well-known Polish-Jewish *maskil* and poet. I have not yet identified Moses Slotover. See also chapter 3 below.

³⁵ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 226.

tuals of what had been the major center of the German Haskalah, Bennett's list is incomplete and provides little indication that he knew any of these men personally, except Satanov. Might one be entitled to conclude that he had little or no knowledge of their writings as well?

The dichotomy between his relatively successful professional career and his generally negative assessment of Jewish life raises the obvious question of why Bennett soured on Berlin Jews so quickly and why their intellectual life seems to have left almost no impression on him. I can offer only two observations that might partially answer this question. The first is his explicit complaint about the social and economic restrictions of Jewish life in Berlin and his genuine desire to seek a refuge where he could live more freely as an artist and Jew, a desire ultimately fulfilled by his settlement in London. Second is the timing of his sojourn in Berlin. By the time of Bennett's arrival, the moderate Haskalah of Mendelssohn had passed, Hebrew scholarship had declined, and signs of social and cultural stress were readily visible in the period of the so-called radical German Haskalah – a period of enhanced assimilation and intermarriage, a period perhaps less attractive to a Polish Jewish outsider who still felt more comfortable with Polish Jews and their traditional community of his childhood, whether a practicing Jew or not.³⁶

Whether these explanations are persuasive or not, one thing is clear. Bennett lived and worked in Berlin, and before that in Copenhagen, in pursuit of his artistic craft. With the exception of his one reference to working in Polotsk on drawings of the Temple of Ezekiel, he was never explicitly involved in Jewish matters until his arrival in London in 1800. According to the available evidence on his life and thought, he never wrote a word on the Bible and Judaism until 1809, nine years after arriving in London. His “Jewish (re-)awakening,” so to speak, was generated exclusively by the English environment to which he immigrated. The home of Mendelssohn and his learned disciples seems to have left little impression on Bennett's Jewish soul!

Bennett arrived in London in November 1800, after traveling through Dresden, Leipzig, and finally Hamburg. In England, he felt more connected, as he later wrote, “with Arts, literary subjects, and mankind at large.” He was also humbled by his newly adopted country and its traditions of liberty, tolerance, and civility.³⁷ Finally, it seemed, Bennett had arrived in an environment where he could flourish as a Jew while fully identifying with the political, literary, and artistic culture of the society.

³⁶ For an overview of the “crisis” of Berlin Jewish culture and society in the 1790s, see Steven Lowenstein, *The Berlin Jewish Community: Enlightenment, Family, and Crisis, 1770–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), parts III and IV, and Shmuel Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), part IV.

³⁷ See Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 227, and chapter 2 below.