2 Moses Dobruska: Rise and Fall of an Alternative Hero

2.1 The First Years: From Brno to Vienna

Throughout his life, Moses Dobruska took on a number of different names. Each change of name corresponded to a transformation, even an abrupt one, in his environment and social status. Born on July 12, 1753 into a Jewish family based in Brno, Moravia, Moses was educated in the Hebrew language. Of course, he also learned Yiddish, which was used at the time among Ashkenazi Jews in everyday life. His parents, Solomon and Schöndl, née Hirschel, enjoyed considerable economic prosperity, and allowed him to have a private teacher. A relatively unusual case among the Moravian Jews of the time, he also received a good education in European languages and literatures. He began to write poems in German very early, and even published his first literary attempt at the age of twenty, after which many more compositions followed. His first collection of verses, *Etliche Gedichte zur Probe*, was judged quite harshly by the learned reviewer Johann Enrich Biester, but Moses eventually made a name for himself gained a reputation among German literati, with some of his poems still being included in anthologies as late as 1812.\textsuperscript{35}

In 1775, Moses published the *Sefer sha'ashua'*, a commentary in Hebrew on the first part of *Sefer Behinat 'olam* by Jedaiah ben Abraham Bedersi (1270–1340).\textsuperscript{36} In this work, he quotes extensively from rabbinic and philosophic literature and repeatedly quotes Moses Mendelssohn. The *Sefer sha'ashua’* is dedicated, with


\textsuperscript{35} Ladislaus Leopold Pfest, *Die Jahreszeiten. Eine Liederlese für Freunde der Natur* (Salzburg: Mayrschen, 1812), 460 (Der Winterabend).

\textsuperscript{36} The Italian Hebraist Giovanni Bernardo De Rossi, who quotes the booklet by Dobruska in his *Dizionario storico degli autori ebrei e delle loro opere*, 3 vols. (Parma: Stamperia Reale, 1802), vol . 1, 167: “Mosè Dobruski stampò nel 1775 in Praga una nuova esposizione del I capitolo [of the *Behinat 'olam*] col titolo di *Libro delle Delizie*”.

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high praise, to Hayyim Popper of Bresnitz, or Joachim Popper, later ennobled as Edler von Popper. Such an enthusiastic dedication was motivated by the fact that Dobruska had married Popper’s stepdaughter Elke (Elkele) Joß on May 20, 1773. Popper was a wealthy merchant and banker, and his adopted daughter Elke was “probably the best Jewish match in the Czech lands.”

Soon, however, the young couple, who had in the meantime moved to Prague, converted to Christianity, together with their little daughter Maria Anna on December 17, 1775, in St. Vitus Cathedral. As Popper, who opposed the baptism, decided to withdraw the donations he had made to Elke, a lawsuit followed, which went on for quite a long time. In 1778, Moses and his wife signed an agreement in which they renounced any further claim, having been satisfactorily compensated. This was the first fundamental break in the life of Moses Dobruska, which allowed him to leave the Jewish environment in which he was born and to begin a long, fruitful social ascent. It must be said that Moses’ mother, Schöndl, certainly belonged to the sect of the Sabbatians, a heretical movement that had developed in the mid-seventeenth century around the pseudo-messiah Sabbatai Zevi. In 1666, Zevi was forced to convert to Islam by the Ottoman sultan. However, despite this conversion, which was justified in cabbalistic terms, the Sabbatians, in opposition to rabbinical orthodoxy, honored Zevi as the true messiah and believed in his reincarnation. Schöndl was a cousin of Jacob Frank, a protagonist of Sabbatianism in the eighteenth century, who presented himself as the messianic heir of Zevi. The documents of the time attest to the commitment of Moses’ mother to support the cause of the Sabbatians, and it is likely that her husband, Solomon, also shared Sabbatian views. In Sabbatian circles, at the confessional margins of Judaism, conversion, more or less instrumental, was very frequent. As early as 1764, Moses’ eldest

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37 Popper was the first Jew to be ennobled by the Austrian Emperor, 1790, without having converted to Christianity. See Samuel Kraus, Joachim Edler von Popper. Ein Zeit- und Lebensbild aus der Geschichte der Juden in Böhmen (Wien: Selbstverlag, 1926).
brother Carl, born in 1751, left home against the will of his parents.\textsuperscript{42} He then took baptism, entered the military service, and became an officer in the Imperial army. Carl was also the first Dobruska to adopt the name Schönfeld. His example influenced his brothers and sisters: on November 17, 1775, two younger brothers of his, Blumele and Gerson, were baptized in the Vienna Cathedral of Saint Stephen, in a lavish ceremony. Blumele, aged sixteenth, was named Theresia Maria Josepha and Gerson, who was eighteen, became Joseph Carl.

Three further brothers – Jacob Naftali, Josef and David\textsuperscript{43} – went to the baptismal font a few hours before Moses, in a separate ceremony. Within a couple of months, six members of the younger generation had abandoned Judaism. Thanks to Carl’s efforts, the young converts, including Moses, obtained a license of nobility from Maria Theresa.\textsuperscript{44}

While Carl had been crucial in obtaining the collective ennoblement, Moses, now Franz Thomas Schönfeld, had also contributed to the reputation of the family. Among other things, he reproduced a German translation of the \textit{Exercices de l’âme}, a book of devotion written in French by the Jesuit Denis-Xavier Clément (1706–1771) and first published in 1758.\textsuperscript{45} Dobruska’s translation, the only translation of the text into German, opens with a dedication to Maria Theresa, and a short preface, signed “Schönfeld”\textsuperscript{46}.

During the first years following his conversion, Dobruska managed to be appointed at the Garellian library in Vienna and even worked as a censor for books, first in Prague and then in Vienna.\textsuperscript{47} He was also actively involved as an entrepreneur in various fields: tobacco manufacture, army supplies, banking. He did invest in his own name, but mostly he did so in partnership, his best partner being his mother Schöndl. The Austrian National Archives in Vienna


\textsuperscript{43} They were called Maximilian Friedrich, Leopold Prokop, and Emanuel Neopomuk, respectively.

\textsuperscript{44} Joseph, Maximilian, Leopold, Emanuel, and Maria Theresia.


\textsuperscript{47} Wölfle-Fischer, \textit{Junius Frey}, 77.
preserve several business proposals Dobruska addressed to the administration and to the Court, some of which were rejected while a few were approved. It is clear that our Dobruska/Schönfeld was highly regarded within the most powerful circles of the Habsburg court.

2.2 Freemason in Vienna (and around Europe)

The social rise of Dobruska, and his inclusion in the elitist circles of imperial Vienna was certainly helped by his commitment to Freemasonry, which he entered while he still young, probably immediately after his conversion to Catholicism. Maria Theresa had initially opposed the Masonic phenomenon and had forced the closure of the Vienna Lodge in 1745. In the following decades, however, Freemasonry had gradually gained influence and established itself as an important social and cultural factor. In 1781, the Bavarian nobleman Hans Heinrich von Ecker and Eckhofen founded the order of the “Asian brothers”, and Dobruska played an important role in shaping its Kabbalistic-esoteric background. Jacob Katz and Gershom Scholem have meticulously compiled the scattered evidence of Dobruska’s involvement, a task made more difficult by the use of multiple secret names. It seems that he began his Masonic activity among the Asian brothers as Scharia, then switched to Nachem, and finally adopted the alias Jacob ben Josef (or Josef ben Jacob). At some point, however, Dobruska withdrew from active membership, while maintaining some kind of “silent” role in the organization. Although the reason for this decision...
remains uncertain, Dobruska’s withdrawal was very timely, as in December 1785 Emperor Joseph II limited by decree both the number of Masonic lodges and their activity, which led to the relocation of the Asian brothers to northern Germany and Denmark. In the following years, Dobruska occasionally played the role of covert adviser, and was in close contact with Ephraim Joseph Hirschfeld, who had inherited leadership in Kabbalistic matters among the Brothers. It is worth mentioning that Hirschfeld accompanied Dobruska to Strasbourg in 1792, as the latter went to Alsace and began to participate in French political life. Here they separated: Hirschfeld returned to Germany while Dobruska moved to Paris.\(^{50}\) We have no other evidence of his relationship to Freemasonry during the last two years of his life. Although he probably also took advantage of his connections with the French capital, he must have done so very covertly.

2.3 The Plunge into Revolution

In March 1792, Moses Dobruska arrived in Strasbourg, France, together with his brother Emmanuel and their younger sister Léopoldine. Since Moses was the predominant figure among them, it is to him that we must attribute the abrupt decision to change both place and lifestyle. Perhaps it was a decision influenced by changes at the court of Vienna, after the death of Joseph II on February 20, 1790, and the rise to the throne of his brother, Leopold. It seems that Dobruska lost, at least in part, the favor he enjoyed in the highest circles of the empire, and therefore tried to transfer his economic interests elsewhere, choosing revolutionary France, where it seemed possible, in the excitement of the time, to conduct remunerative speculation and ambitious economic enterprises. It is certain, however,

that Moses Dobruska had deep revolutionary sympathies, which led him to commit himself, body and soul, to political life, although this would prove disastrous for him in the end. France, which he described in a letter to his friend Voss as a “paradise”, would become his tomb.

The question that hovered over him from the beginning of his activities in France concerned his true origin and his “sincere” goals. Doubts were raised quite soon, but it was only in late 1793 that the doubting party took the lead and eventually caused him to be arrested and put to death.

When Moses Dobruska arrived in Strasbourg, the city was plagued by social tensions and libertarian turmoil. Situated at the border between two cultures and traditions, Strasbourg was equally divided between the French-Catholic and German-protestant populations.

Since the beginning of the Revolution, quite a number of intellectuals had flocked from German-speaking countries to Alsace, driven by the dream of liberty. The inner-French and the German immigrants had even taken the lead within the revolutionary movement, pleading for radical views and reforms.

While a pronounced cosmopolitanism thrived within the Strasbourg Jacobins, the local élite was inclined to oppose the newcomers and to defend its privileges. Head of the moderate party was the mayor of Strasbourg, Philippe-Frédéric de Dietrich. A scion of an old and notable family, Dietrich played a pivotal role in the new political system after having held high offices under the Ancien Régime. A baron by birth and a distinguished scientist in his own right, Dietrich was a friend of General La Fayette.

The radical faction was led by Jean-Charles Laveaux and Eulogius Schneider, both of whom arrived from Germany in 1791. Laveaux, a native to France, had lived in Basel and Berlin, and held a chair for French literature in Stuttgart; Schneider had entered the Franciscan order before becoming a preacher at the Court in Stuttgart and a professor at the University in Bonn. In Strasbourg, Laveaux founded the “Courier of Strasbourg”, while Schneider directed “Argos oder der Mann mit hundert Augen”. Besides being involved in a hectic trade as a journalist, Laveaux was elected president of the Société des amis de la constitution after the moderate wing had left it in February 1792.

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It was only natural that Dobruska, imbued with German culture, entered France from its eastern gate in Alsace. What might seem less obvious is the fact that a high-profile businessman like him, who even had been the fixer in some substantial deals involving the Court of Vienna, could support wholeheartedly the radical wing against his wealthy opponents.

Dobruska, or Junius G(ottlob) Frey, as he used to identify himself in Strasbourg, spared no effort in sustaining Laveaux. In April the conflict between the two factions escalated, and Dietrich had Laveaux arrested (April 22, 1792)\textsuperscript{54} with the charge of sedition. Frey vociferously supported his friend in jail and offered a sizeable amount of money in order to assist him during detention. As Laveaux was freed on May 17,\textsuperscript{55} our former Austrian baron minted a commemorative medal that he had carefully conceived for the occasion.

But Strasbourg, with its provincial framework, was not enough for our ambitious Moses. It was time to make the great leap, and to aim for the nerve center of the Revolution and of French economic and cultural life. The road to Dobruska now turned decisively towards Paris.

\subsection*{2.4 From Jacobin Fervor to the Guillotine}

On June 2, 1792, at the end of a meeting of the Strasbourg Jacobin club, Dobruska presented a precious sword to prince Carl von Hessen-Rheinfels-Rotenburg (1752–1821), a German noble who served in France as a General during the Revolution.\textsuperscript{56} Immediately afterward, he left Alsace for Paris, together with Laveaux. On June 10, the latter gave a short speech at the Parisian assembly of the Jacobins, excusing himself for being tired because of the long trip.\textsuperscript{57} Dobruska also attended this meeting,\textsuperscript{58} which was chaired by François Chabot (1756–1794), a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54} Gough, \textit{Laveaux}, 134.
\item \textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibidem}, 43.
\item \textsuperscript{56} \textit{Les sociétés politiques de Strasbourg pendant les années 1790 a 1795. Extraits de leurs procès-verbaux publiés par Friedrich Carl Heitz} (Strasbourg Fréderic-Charles Heitz, 1863), 216 (Juin 2, 1792): “A la clôture de la séance, le citoyen Frey offre au Général patriote un sabre d’honneur de la valeur de cent louis d’or”.
\item \textsuperscript{57} François A. Aulard, \textit{La Société des Jacobins. Recueil de documents pour l’histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris}, vol. 3, \textit{Juillet 1791 à juin 1792} (Paris: Joaust – Noblet – Quantin, 1892), 674, nr. CCXXXVII (Séance du dimanche 10 juin 1792) : [Laveaux monte à la tribune, au milieu des applaudissements universels, et s’excuse sur la fatigue que lui a fait éprouver le voyage de donner aujourd’hui les détails de son arrestation at de sa délivrance”.
\end{itemize}
politician whose fortune and, later, disgrace, was going to be ominously linked with Dobruska’s fate. Our Austrian émigré, now universally known as Monsieur Frey, first rented accommodation in Rue Traversière St. Honoré and then moved to a luxurious mansion in Rue d’Anjou-Saint-Honoré, No 19. Together with his brother Emmanuel, he took part in the assault on the Tuileries palace on August 10, 1792 and became increasingly involved in the political life of the capital. In late 1792, he began writing his Philosophie sociale, which appeared in print in June 1793 and gained him a reputation as a revolutionary thinker. In summer 1793, a second work by Dobruska was published, under the title Les aventures politiques du père Nicaise. Parallel to his political involvement, Dobruska engaged in intense business activity, which ostensibly brought him substantial profits. He later declared to have invested the sums his wife had sent him from Vienna, while his opponents suspected that he was provided with

59 Among the documents confiscated to Dobruska and now kept at the Archives nationales de France, see the card by Laveaux addressed to “Monsieur S. G. Frey logé près Madame de la Seine, Hotel du grand Balcon No 19, rue Traversière St. Honnoré [sic]”. It is surely no coincidence that three representatives of the “Departement du Bas Rhin” at the National Convention (Laurent, Louis, Simond) were domiciled at the same address The Political State of Europe for the Year 1793, vol. 3 (London: J.S. Jordan, 1793), 26.


62 [Moses Dobruska alias Junius Frey], Les aventures politiques du père Nicaise, ou l’Anti-fédéraliste (Paris: l’imp. De J. Grand, 1793) (fol. 1b : [A Paris, ce 20 juillet, l’an deuxième de la République française une et indivisible]. The booklet is anonymous, but is clearly ascribed to Dobruska, alias Frey, by François Chabot, in Gazette nationale ou le Moniteur universel, No 19, October 10, 1793, 75: [Junius Frey, homme de lettres estimable, connu par deux ouvrages très patriotiques, l’Anti-fédéraliste et la Philosophie sociale]. Already on August 4, 1793, Chabot had praised both works by Dobruska, even if the name of the author is not mentioned in the record of Chabot’s speech in the Journal des débats et de la correspondance de la Société des Jacobins 464, August 6, 1793, 2 (also in Journal de la Montagne 66, August 6, 1793, 424): see below, 7. 1. 1.
money by the Habsburg government in order to act as an undercover counter-revolutionary agent. In fact, a few documents, hitherto unnoticed, prove that, during his stay in Paris, his house in Vienna was forcibly auctioned for unpaid debts. Were such losses carefully staged? It seems hard to believe it, even if we already know Dobruska’s lack of scruples and his ability in adapting himself to new situations. As had been the case in Strasbourg, where he lavishly spent in order to gain the favor of the Jacobin party, Dobruska kept mixing business affairs and politics, and probably rose through Parisian public life through bribery. The most daring attempt of social ascent he made involved the already mentioned François Chabot, a former Capuchin friar who had become a powerful member of the National Convention. In summer 1793, Dobruska offered to Chabot, who gladly accepted, the hand of his sister Léopoldine, a woman of reputed beauty, together with a remarkably high dowry. Glamorous as it was, the marriage proved fatal for both parties. In November 1793, Chabot was accused of

63 Dobruska refers to the money coming from his wife during his trial for conspiracy, in April 1794. See Bulletin du tribunal révolutionnaire s. 4, No 26, 1794, 102: [Mes revenus m’ont été arrêté pendant plusieurs années; mais ma femme, fille adoptive d’un homme opulent, avoit à sa disposition des fonds pour près de deux millions, et m’envoyoit de l’argent à mesure que je lui en demandois, ce qui doit prouver que je n’étois point l’agent de l’empereur, c’est que j’ai été chassé de Berlin comme émissaire de la propagande des jacobins].

64 See Wiener Zeitung, No 589, March 7, 1792, 617: “writ of summons by the Tribunal of Vienna, to which the present domicile of Thomas von Schönfeld is unknown (“das Gericht, dem der Ort seines [i.e. of Schönfeld] Aufenthalts unbekannt [ist]”), regarding a debt of 5,187.10 florins towards “Baptist Malfatti”; ibidem, No 1113, April 25, 1792, 1151, writ of summons by the Tribunal, regarding a debt of 6,000 florins towards “Nathan Adam Arnsteiner”; ibidem, No 2525, September 15, 1792, 2,547: forced sale auction of a house belonging to Schönfeld in Vienna, “Rittergasse zu Erdberg No 25”, because of an unpaid debt of 6,000 florins towards “Anton Petziger von Weissenberg”. These legal lawsuits seem to have remained unknown to all previous biographers of Dobruska.

corruption while Dobruska was arrested for having corrupted him and for conspiring against the Revolution in favor of foreign powers. On April 5, 1794, Moses Dobruska, his brother Emanuel and François Chabot were guillotined in Paris, together with a host of other politicians, the most illustrious among them being Georges Jacques Danton.

66 Moses was arrested, together with his brother, on November 23 1793: Tuetey, Repertoire, vol. 10, p. 187, No 973. For the official act of accusing against the two, dated “8 germinal an II (March 28, 1794), see ibidem, vol. 11, 250, No 822: “Acte d’accusation de Fouquier-Tinville, accusateur public du Tribunal révolutionnaire, contre [. . .] les frères Junius et Emmanuel Frey, beaux-frères de Chabot [. . .] ex-barons étrangers, agents de l’Angleterre et du cabinet de Vienne, masqués du voile du patriotisme, que Chabot prétend avoir été pendus en effigie, afin de faire croire à leur amour pour la Liberté, et malgré la confiscation de leurs biens, trouvant le moyen de donner à leur sœur une dot de 200,000 livres, corrupteurs et conspirateurs, qui ont ourdi leurs trames avec autant d’audace que de scélératesse [. . .] les individus en question prévenus d’avoir cherché à détruire par la corruption le gouvernement républicain, en achetant et trafiquant de l’opinion de Chabot, BASIRE, Julien de Toulouse, Delaunay d’Angers et Fabre d’Eglantine, en devenant auteurs et complices des manœuvres et intelligences pratiquées à prix convenu pour opérer la suppression et la falsification du décret du 27 vendémiaire concernant la Compagnie des Indes, à l’effet d’y substituer un faux décret, promulgué sous la date du même jour, ce qui est contraire à la loi du 16 ventôse, avec ordre d’écrou de Gusman, d’Espagnac et Frey, frères, en la Conciergerie”. On the supposed conspiracy in which the Dobruskas were involved see Albert Mathiez, La révolution et les étrangers. Cosmopolitisme et défense nationale (Paris: Renaissance du Livre, 1918); Arnaud de Lestapis, La ‘Conspiration de Batz’ (1793–1794) (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 1969); Michel Benoît, 1793 La République de la tentation. Une affaire de corruption sous la 1ère République (Précy-sous-Thil: Éd. de l’Armançon, 2008).