

Matthias B. Lehmann, *The Baron: Maurice de Hirsch and the Jewish Nineteenth Century*, Stanford, 2022, Stanford University Press, 400 pp., 4 ill., maps; series: Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture

Matthias B. Lehmann's *The Baron: Maurice de Hirsch and the Jewish Nineteenth Century* is an important contribution to Jewish history, situating one of the nineteenth century's wealthiest philanthropists at the crossroads of European nascent capitalism, imperialism, and Jewish emancipation. Until now, Hirsch has remained a somewhat marginal figure in modern Jewish history, often overshadowed by more prominent leaders such as Sir Moses Montefiore. The few existing biographies are dated or limited in scope.<sup>1</sup> Lehmann's book is the first to synthesise an impressive range of archival sources, and in doing so, the author reframes Hirsch as a central actor in nineteenth-century Jewish politics and global philanthropy. In line with the 'biographical turn' in writing history, Lehmann demonstrates how tracing the life of one individual opens new perspectives on the entanglement of Jewish emancipation with empires, capitalism, and colonialism. Therefore, the book is far more than a biography; it offers a transnational history of Jewish modernity, showing how Hirsch's life illuminates broader questions about what it meant for elite Jews to become 'European' in the imperial times.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kurt Grunwald, *Türkenhirsch: A Study of Baron Maurice de Hirsch, Entrepreneur and Philanthropist* (Jerusalem, 1966); Samuel J. Lee, *Moses of the New World: The Work of Baron de Hirsch* (New York, 1970); Dominique Frischer, *Le Moïse des Amériques* (Paris, 2002); Serge-Allain Rozenblum, *Le baron de Hirsch: Un financier au service de l'humanité* (Paris, 2006).

Born into a newly ennobled Bavarian Jewish family in 1831, Maurice (Moritz) de Hirsch rose to prominence first as a railway magnate, constructing the Ottoman railways that earned him the nickname 'Türkenhirsch'. Yet Hirsch's reputation among Jews rested not on the railways project but on his philanthropy. From funding Jewish schools in Galicia to refugee aid and culminating in 1891 with the founding of the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), Hirsch used his wealth to confront what he saw as the 'Jewish question'. As Lehmann shows, philanthropy was not supplementary to politics: it *was* politics, the primary form of Jewish collective action before the rise of mass parties. Against the widespread assumption that Jews had no autonomous political history until the rise of mass politics, Hirsch's activities exemplify how philanthropy operated as Jewish politics. Its emphasis on modern education in the Jewish 'frontier', from the Ottoman Empire to Habsburg Galicia, was as political as the educational initiatives of national governments, while the colonisation schemes in Argentina represented ambitious attempts at Jewish self-emancipation. Lehmann thus places philanthropy alongside nationalism and socialism, not as their opposite but as a parallel and equally political mode of collective action. In this reading, Hirsch emerges not merely as one of the greatest Jewish philanthropists of his age but also as one of the central figures of modern Jewish political history.

Lehmann's narrative also convincingly highlights the transformation of the Jewish elite in the nineteenth century. Figures like Hirsch resembled the court Jews [*Hoffjuden*] of earlier centuries in their fortunes and their ability to act as negotiators between Jewish communities and European states. Yet there was a crucial difference: unlike the court Jew, whose power was contingent on the ruler's favour, Hirsch's wealth rested on the impersonal structures of modern capitalism. This independence from dynastic patronage endowed him with a new form of leverage. He could negotiate with governments as an autonomous actor and create his own networks of influence.

What is more, Lehmann powerfully argues that Hirsch's primary self-identification was as a European. His philanthropy was designed to facilitate that process by turning Eastern European and Ottoman Jews into what he regarded as proper Europeans, equipped with the skills, habits, and outlooks of modern bourgeois life. This is a theme that resonates with my own research on Polish-Jewish elites and intelligentsia in the interwar period, who likewise endured the long duress of thinking about themselves as Europeans. Hirsch's life illustrates an earlier phase of this phenomenon: elite Jews (not living in the frontier) who remade themselves Europeans, yet were never entirely accepted as such.

The decision to emphasise these broader contexts is not incidental: Hirsch himself had ordered his personal papers destroyed, leaving Lehmann with business correspondence, institutional records, and the traces of public activity. The absence of the private pushes Lehmann to reconstruct the Jewish

nineteenth century through the projects Hirsch shaped and the political realities he inhabited. The richest materials come from the archives of the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), preserved at the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem, and the records of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris. These are complemented by an extensive documentary collection assembled by Max Kohler, lawyer, board member of several Jewish organisations, including the Baron de Hirsch Fund in New York, and an amateur historian who had once planned a biography of Hirsch. Kohler's papers, now housed at the American Jewish Historical Society in New York, along with materials at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and the Leo Baeck Institute, further illuminate Hirsch's philanthropic endeavours. To reconstruct Hirsch's railway empire, Lehmann turned to the correspondence of the Ottoman Imperial Bank (today in the Archives Nationales du Monde du Travail in Roubaix), diplomatic and political papers in the Austrian State Archives in Vienna, and records from the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi in Istanbul. In Argentina, sources include the Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno and the Centro Mark Turkow of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), supplemented by published memoirs of JCA settlers and a wide range of press publications in French, German, English, Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, and Spanish. Family papers also survive in the Archives Générales du Royaume in Brussels (sequestered by the Belgian state after the First World War from Hirsch's granddaughter Lucienne, who had married a German banker) as well as the private correspondence of Hirsch's son Lucien with Lady Jessica Sykes, preserved in the East Riding of Yorkshire Archives. Taken together, this mosaic of sources explains the book's strong focus on Hirsch's public persona rather than his inner life.

On this basis, Lehmann structures the book in four thematic (mostly chronological) parts, each subdivided into three chapters. Part I, 'A European Family', situates Hirsch's family within the newly moulded Jewish aristocracy of Central Europe, exploring their social ascent and cosmopolitan networks. Part II, 'Ottoman Railways', focuses on the Ottoman railway projects, placing Hirsch at the centre of imperial rivalries and showing how railroads altered perceptions of space, time, and 'progress'. Part III, 'The Politics of Philanthropy', turns to Hirsch's philanthropic undertakings among the Jews (as well as non-Jews) in the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Europe (refugee relief, schools in Galicia), while the fourth, 'Argentina', examines the boldest experiment of all: the JCA's colonisation projects in Argentina. This architecture enables Lehmann to follow Hirsch across geographies, while also situating him in the *longue durée* of imperialism, Jewish emancipation, and antisemitism.

The Galician schools project described by Lehmann in the third part of the book illustrates both the ambition and the limitations of Hirsch's civilising mission. Lehmann rightly emphasises the scale of the endowment and its

significance among the educational initiatives of the period. Yet his account privileges the perspective of institutions, activists, and politicians, leaving aside the everyday realities of pupils, teachers, and parents. It also speaks more to Hirsch's projections about Galicia than to the local experience. In Galicia, where by the late nineteenth century over 80 per cent of Jewish children attended public (rather than philanthropic) schools, Hirsch's foundations were never the dominant site of Jewish education. Moreover, as recent scholarship has shown, girls in fact outnumbered boys in Galician public schools, yet they receive only a passing mention in Lehmann's treatment.<sup>2</sup> By focusing on Hirsch's vision and the politics of elites, the book risks overstating the transformative reach of philanthropy while underplaying how Jewish families on the ground negotiated integration in pragmatic ways.

Despite this, Lehmann's study is a landmark achievement. *The Baron* restores Hirsch's place in the centre of the nineteenth-century Jewish experience, situating him within the intertwined histories of capitalism and empires. The book succeeds in portraying philanthropy as a form of Jewish politics: both an assertion of solidarity and an effort to secure recognition through 'soft power'. Based on meticulous archival research, Lehmann's book offers an essential portrait of a figure whose projects embodied the hopes and contradictions of the Jewish nineteenth century. It is a crucial reading for anyone interested in modern Jewish history.

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<sup>2</sup> Alicja Maślak-Maciejewska, 'Sabbath and Sunday, Passover and Easter, Judaism in the Afternoon: Jewish Time in the Galician Public School', *Acta Poloniae Historica* 130 (2024), 33–54; ead., *Poza chederem. Żydzi w galicyjskiej szkole publicznej* (Kraków, 2025).