Introduction to The Letters of Bella Perlhefter

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Notes: Bella Perlhefter's (d. 14 Elul, ת"ע = Sept. 9, 1709) literary effects of Johann Christoph Wagenseil, a Hebraist scholar at the University of Altdorf.[1] The Jewish letters appear among other collections of ephemeral texts (such as Hebrew tombstone inscriptions) apparently to serve pedagogical and scholarly purposes.[2] Wagenseil had previously devoted one immense tome to contemporary Jews.

The literary legacy of Bella bat Jacob Perlhefter (born c. 1650) provides a rare glimpse into the life of a seventeenth-century Jewish woman (other than Glikl). An accomplished writer, instructor of music and rhythm, and entrepreneurial seventeenth-century businesswoman, Bella was born to a prominent Viennese Jewish family and appears to have received an excellent education. After the expulsion of Jews from Vienna in 1670, the family resettled in Prague. Bella's husband, Ber Eibescheutz, took her family name after their marriage.

The central source of anguish in Bella's life was the death of her seven young children. She commemorated them in an innovative way that ultimately serves as an eloquent memorial to her own life. She urged Ber to compose in Yiddish a work of moralistic literature to which she penned the introduction. Be'er Sheva (Seven Wells) contains a chapter named for each of their deceased children. It has never been published, but was copied many times as a source of consolation to parents similarly afflicted.

Bella's surviving letters are preserved in the Wagenseil collection (Ms. 80 in Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig). They date from the winter of 1674-75. From these letters we learn that Bella lived in the small south German Jewish community of Schnaittach while her husband travelled as a Sabbatian maggid or worked in the atelier of Johann Christoph Wagenseil, eminent scholar and Hebraist, in Altdorf. Bella corresponded with Wagenseil directly. Her ornate Hebrew writing exhibits a high level of Jewish learning. In addition to her own letters, she served as composer and writer of Hebrew letters for other Jewish women. Her own letters and her role as a letter writer for others allow us to raise the question of epistolary as a somewhat neglected primary source for the early modern period.

Astonishingly, despite decades of scholarly interest in social history, the history of daily life, and the interest in Jewish women's history, various troves of correspondence that have been
located, identified, and even published, have generally been used for other purposes such as philology, rather than for the window into these aspects of the past that they open. Correspondence is a complex genre with many limitations. Without the survival of complete two sided exchanges over significant stretches of time it is difficult to construct a narrative. Letters tell us nothing about the development over time of the self that writes, distinguishing them from even the most primitive and cursory autobiographies. Formulaic model letter collections, *brivshteller*, which Bella likely employed, allow letter writers to appropriate entire segments, from salutations to closings, obscuring the individual voice.

Yet, letters have strengths as historical sources that even autobiographies cannot match. By their nature, letters address concerns of the moment of writing. While writers surely adopt poses to impress the recipient, granting or withholding information depending on their relationship, their letters were certainly never intended for publication and often for no other eyes than a single reader. We cannot overemphasize how vital a means of communication they were, how central to the maintenance of family, of community, of commercial ties in an age when distance and travel shaped Jewish life to a great extent. Letters generally touched upon matters of immediate concern, events not yet altered to suit the concern with posterity. Social and cultural historians of early modern Europe have been using correspondence for decades to enrich their studies of family history and the history of private life.[1] A *geniza*’s worth of private correspondence from the early modern period remains scattered in collections, unjustly neglected by many historians of early modern Jews.

**Endnotes**

The Letters of Bella Perlhefter
Bella Perlhefter, 1674-75

Translated by Elisheva Carlebach, Queens College, CUNY, New York, USA

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I
From Bella Perlhefter to Johann Christoph Wagenseil, Dec 11, 1674.
(Weinryb, 338-339. Letter III.)

With the permission of my husband I come before him with apologies

To his shining countenance and his esteemed greatness, exalted and praised for his praises are never done, he is the dear and venerated one, a Torah master who has ten measure of Torah and counsel...I compare and name him but I have never seen him, I call his name without knowing him, but I have heard that he is called in German Eure Excellenz Herrn Doktor Wagenseil, may the Lord guard him, and may peace be with all of his. I honor him above the dearest thing; I will write to him some lines and some letters. Before I begin to speak and to compose my words I bow before his Torah honor. And although I am not worthy to speak to his honor, not to say to write to him, a humble and young woman such as myself, and I am not even as one of the maids who attends my master to wash his feet, but necessity is neither praiseworthy nor contemptible and I reply to honor you. It is my husband, my master, who lives with my lord in his quarters, who wrote to me last week how my lord desires that I come to join my husband in Altdorf, on a particular day, Tuesday the 13 of kislev.[12 December 1674] to join his celebration and to attend the party that he is arranging for the gentlemen who come before him. My witness is in Heaven and my support above that it is impossible for me to come to my husband in Altdorf now, for I have a small child, with whom would I leave him, and who can I appoint to watch over him, and if I take the child with me, the cold is great, and there is very much snow and a small child cannot tolerate the cold because she has not left the house since her birth. And the third reason, even if I were able to get there, I said to myself now is not
the ideal time for this, for my child is small and she often cries in the manner of small children who cry, and I know that my lord is accustomed to restful calm, and how can I come before him with the cries of the child, may she live. [Bella switched genders of the child in mid-discussion.] Therefore I decided I will not come at this time, but when God decides to broaden my boundaries at some future time, for everything has its time under the heavens, and there is no person who does not get his time to celebrate, and when that time arrives, I shall come to my husband who is with my lord, to see how he is faring in the house, if he is still hale and healthy, as he writes me constantly of the generosity that my lord constantly bestows upon him and upon all the members of the household. May God reward him in accordance with his deeds, along with his wife and children after him, may they live, and may he succeed in all his endeavors, as King David has said in the first Psalm, "he shall be as a tree planted near a water fount..." These are the words of the woman of lowliest spirit, tender in years, speaking with impediment of lips and writing with dark hands and with broken pen, and the look of it will testify that I have written in haste. Isabella, called in the Hebrew language Bella (or Bila), daughter of the noble and generous Mar Jacob Perl hefter z"l from the holy community of Prague. Written on Monday, 12 Kislev [5]435= December 11, 1674.

II

From Bella to Wagenseil. 28 January 1675.
(Weinryb, p. 339 no. IV; Ms Leipzig folio 90)

I bow in homage to your glorious Lordship who is adorned by every wisdom, strength and beauty. Who is expert in all the Torah, the exalted Sir, Rabbi Johanan Wagen Seil, may the Lord guard him. I am the woman who stands before my lord because my husband and master does not have the leisure to inquire after my lord's welfare because he is always busy with his writing, as my lord well knows. Therefore I have come instead of my husband to inquire after his welfare and the well being of all the members of his household and to inform him that here in this village there is a farmer who has good wheat, that is, one sheaf [zimra] for eight and a half gold coins. Therefore, if my lord wishes to purchase wheat, please inform us through the villager who brings you my letter and then we will send the local farmer with his wheat to the house of my lord, and you can purchase according to your desire. Yesterday I sent you veal, tender and good weighing 15 1/2 liter; in German, fifteen and a half "pfund" [pounds], at one half liter for three kreuzer [she says tselemer, Yiddish substitute for Kreuz], and indeed yesterday I received the payment for the above-mentioned veal. Aside from these matters, I will not burden him with my ugly script, for I do not have the leisure to write to him appropriately in accordance with the honor due him, as I am constantly busy with my daughter, may she live, for a woman has no other purpose than her children. Therefore I will conclude now, and may you receive and accept peace and blessing from the Lord of all hosts and from myself and my husband a thousand times, in accordance with the soul of a woman who prays for the well being of his scholarship and the well being of his household, may God bless them with peace and blessing forever, the humble woman who writes with the permission of her husband, Bila, also called Isabella, daughter of Rabbi Jacob of the Perl hefter family of Prague. First of the
Peace and life to you, now and forever, noble lord, my beloved husband, great scholar, R. Ber, may the Lord guard him. I inform you of my health and that of our daughter, and I likewise hope that in all your 248 limbs, nothing is amiss. Know that I have received your letter and I rejoiced to read that you are well, and the exalted lord Eure Excellenz and his household are well. I will notify you concerning the matter that you wrote about, the rabbi of the holy community of Wertheim. This week, two men from the holy community of Wilhermsdorf arrived this week, and they told me that the rabbi of Wertheim was not at home, but his wife told them that surely if her husband were to arrive home she would beseech him to write a response to you as he promised you in Kreilsheim. And that you have further written to me about coming to your place, to teach meholot to the wonderful only daughter of your master the great scholar, her name escapes me, may God watch over her, it is puzzling to me that you add, "and to teach her to play the zither," for you know that from the day of my mother's death, I took an oath not to play any musical instrument, and now how an I violate my oath? But it is possible that during my free time I will come to teach her meholot, if I will be accepted there. Concerning the compromise you made with those people, they are screaming that you should write for them a compromise contract [shtar pesher], and it would be worthwhile for you to come here one of these days if you can. Know that your beautiful daughter, may she live, you would not recognize her if you saw her. I will not linger now, for I am tired of writing Hebrew for humble women like myself; I have done all this to please your master, and please send my regards to his wife and children and to all the members of his household, and to each master for himself, from your loving wife Bellla, daughter of Mar Jacob Peril Hefter z"l of the holy community of Prague. (written Sunday, parshat Vayera, Nov. 1674?)

Illuminator of the eyes of the sages in Halakha, with the taste of his sweetness, blessed is He who has chosen him and his learning. For he is none other than my beloved, my dear and wise husband, prince of Torah, R. Ber, may the Lord watch over him. The first matter is fear of the Lord; the second, I will apprise you of our health, thank God, and other such matters, so that they will not be unknown to you. Know, my beloved, my husband, that I received your letter on the first day of the week of parhsat Va’yetze. I rejoiced over your letter as one who had found great treasure, when I heard of your good standing and condition. The merchant you wrote about, who my brother David does business with all the time, lives in the city of Nurnberg and his name is Avraham Zut. And know that I've given the cantor the kast money for the month to
come, may it be a good one. And know that this very day, letters arrived here from Prague, from my second brother, Mar Zalman, and he wrote that I should not worry about our clothes and furniture, for he is safeguarding them closely as though they were his own. He wrote further that your brother in law, Mar Hirsch took your contracts [shtarot] from R. Hayim Lichtenstadt without your knowledge, and came to R. Hayim demanding payment for them, and he [R. Hayim] refused. Then he brought witnesses to the lay leaders [ketzinim], may the Lord protect them, that more than half the money from these contracts belongs to him, "of the partnership that I contracted with my brother-in-law, R. Ber now living in the holy community of Schnaittach. The lay leaders adjudicated that he [R. Hayim] should pay him [Hirsch] half, while the other half should remain until you come here yourself and explain matters to the lay leaders, so that they can know the nature of your partnership. And know that there has been a quarrel between the former lay leaders and the new leadership, each laid the previous [communal] debts on the other, until an order came from the ministers of the court that they should be jailed until they paid. And one of the apostates denounced them, saying that Simhah Winiberg the apostate who was killed here in Prague in 1666, the [Jewish] community had bribed one Gentile to kill him. That Gentile was not here at this time. What did the lay leaders do? They investigated in the place to which the Gentile had relocated, and they fell upon him at night and brought him here to Prague, where the ministers got hold of him [or jailed him, tofsu], and the Gentile cried out "you are falsely blaming the Jews, for they did not ask me to kill him, and I did not kill him, and who knows who the real killer is?" Therefore, the ministers, y"h, sent to the Kaiser, y"h, and I heard from reliable sources that an order came from the Kaiser yh that the local ministers should release the Jews, since the Gentile falsifies and the apostate denounces, and an apostate is not trustworthy. Regarding other matters, I cannot elaborate now for lack of time. And know that Moshe was not here to deliver your letter, a householder from Schnaittach brought it to me. Once again, may you receive blessings from the Master of the world, and from me, your wife, your beloved, Bila, daughter of R. Jacob Perl Hefter, may his memory be a blessing. And spread the canopy of peace to the illustrious gentleman, the sage and master Johan Wagen Seil, and to his wife, her full name and those of the children elude me, and to all the gentlemen individually. Parshat va-Yeitze. [December, 1674?]

[Added in the margin: If you could come here one of these days, for some business, how lovely that would be. May my ugly script not displease you, for I had no leisure because of my daughter, may she live, who always wants to be with me. [From] the holy community of Schnaittach.]
[the apostate is infamous Wenzel Winbersky, on which see Putik and others]
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IV. Bella Perlhefter an Johann Christian Wagenseil

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[Dezember 1674]

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