Revolution and War, 1789–1805

The turmoil of the ancien régime in Europe, the Revolution in France and the Napoleonic wars left no kehillah untouched. The Anglo-Jewish community combined its patriotism with aloofness from overt political activity in its own specific interest. Anglo-Jewry would fight not for the rights of man but for the less politically loaded rights of Englishmen. A very rare if not unique example of political initiative was Abraham Tang’s pamphlet of 1770 in defence of John Wilkes and democracy, *A Discourse Addressed to the Minority*. The lasting memory of the débâcle over the ‘Jew Bill’ of 1753 (see above, p. 156) and the anti-alien agitation of the 1790s combined to still any overt pressure on the part of the leaders.¹ This quiescence certainly did not inhibit intervention on behalf of Jews abroad (for example at the Congress of Vienna). But not until 1829 did communal leaders prepare a petition calling for some relief from the Jews’ civil and political disabilities. It was then suggested (by Nathan Mayer Rothschild) that their petition should also call for ‘full protection in holding and conveying of Landed Property’.² This may well be interpreted as a step towards political emancipation, for if a man who possesses a stake in the country cannot share in its government, then who can? This was the rationale that justified attaching financial conditions to the franchise. In Prussia any notion of political activity in response to the French model would have to overcome the suspicious taint of revolution.³

Communities in France, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, were the first to confront the swift succession of events. The deepening financial crisis of the state led to the royal convocation of the Estates-General for February 1789; in June, the Third Estate in the Tennis-Court Oath refused to disperse until its demands for greater constitutional power were acceded to; in July, Necker, the Genevan banker and financial mainstay of the government, was dismissed; the troops summoned to Versailles to disperse the Third Estate refused to quell the mass revolt in Paris; on 4 August the Estates-General voted to abolish all the privileges of the different orders; the Estates-General converted themselves into a Constituent Assembly and on 26–27 August adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. ‘No person

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shall be molested for his opinions, even such as are religious’, proclaimed article x, ‘provided that the manifestation of these opinions does not disturb the public order established by the law’.4

No Jews participated in any of these events. But it is reasonable to suppose that they intently followed their course, all the more so in eastern France because here the local peasantry exploited the decay in authority to run riot in a series of anti-Jewish disturbances. Two Metz publications went some way towards keeping the Jewish population of Alsace au courant of developments in Paris. The first was a Beschreibung which provided a digest of events from the meeting of the Estates-General until 5 November 1789; it was followed by a weekly journal, called simply Zeitung. This appeared until April 1790. The language was a blend of Yiddish and German, printed in Hebrew characters. The author-editor-publisher of Zeitung was Abraham Goudchaux Spire, grandson of Moses May, the founder of a Hebrew printing works at Metz in 1764. May had intended to relieve the community’s dependence on Germany and Poland for works of scholarship. But he was overcome by debt and fled to Hamburg in c.1770. Spire, the grandson, restarted the enterprise some three years later under letters patent granted by Louis XVI.5 Zeitung had about 100 subscribers; with an estimated 15–20 readers per copy it is reckoned to have reached all the potential readers in Metz. (Still, to what extent this can serve as a measure of political awareness in rural areas, where of course most Jews were living, is unclear.)

In their cahiers de doléance the Christian inhabitants of eastern France, with rare and qualified exceptions, reviled the Jews as aliens, usurers and the bearers of a corrupting religion whose presence should be reduced if not removed. The nobility were less inclined to be hostile than the clergy and the Third Estate. The cahier of the nobility of Metz, for example, expressed the wish that ‘all régnicoles would enjoy the right of residence (droit de cité) in the kingdom, irrespective of their belief’; the cahiers from Metz made almost no mention of Jews; from the bailiwick of Toul the nobility, ‘desiring and demanding that the Jews be permitted to practise the liberal and mechanical arts’, deplored the enforced predominance of moneylending among the Jews. As for the purchase of land, this required further thought.6 The cahiers elsewhere made little, if any mention, of Jews. Of the c.40 000 cahiers de doléance only about 300 mentioned Jews. The ‘problem’ was localized, but for that very reason all the more intense. Events of the summer showed how intense. At intervals in July, August and September, during la grande peur, peasants attacked Jewish homes and property in Alsace and Lorraine. They caused ‘considerable damage’ and forced the inhabitants to seek refuge in Bâle and Mulhouse.7

The Revolution exacerbated existing differences among the communities of Alsace, the south-west and Paris. In Bordeaux there was little question but that the Sephardi and Avignonese communities possessed the right to elect their deputies to the Estates-General. The Jurat did indeed have reservations,