



Frankism

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Introduction

Frankism was a spiritual movement that flourished in the second half of the eighteenth century in central Europe. Its founder, leader, and supposed messiah, Jacob Frank, was born around 1726 in Podolia (in today's Ukraine). Frank grew up in the **Sabbatean** religious community and later incorporated its teaching into his own belief system, inspired by Jewish Kabbalah and Catholic Marian mysticism. Like the Sabbateans, the Frankists saw the messiah in the figure of Sabbatai Zevi (1626–76), sometimes referred to as Amira in the writings of the **Prague** Frankist circle. The leader of one of the branches of the Turkish Sabbateans, Baruchya Ruso (1695–1740), known as Señor Santo, was considered another incarnation of the messiah. The final incarnation of the messiah was thought to be Jacob Frank, or the 'Holy Father' (Scholem 1991, 641–43). After his death in 1791, the role of the messiah (or rather the role of the messiah's mother; discussed below) was taken over by his daughter, Eva Frank (1754–1816), whom the Prague texts refer to as **Gevirah** or the Virgin: 'She is the Messiah who did not come to mind. No one thought of it, but it is this Virgin, who is Gevirah, who will bring redemption!' (Scholem 1991, 644).

The Prague texts are a great source of theological concepts of the last stage of the Frankist movement. Their main author, Löw Enoch von Hönigsberg (1770–1828), was a Jewish **Haskalah** thinker and preacher. In his work, it can be seen that he welcomes the political limitations on religious powers and the resistance against long-privileged social classes of his time. He rejoices over the demise of the old empires, which began to crumble under the weight of the French Revolution and following the Napoleonic Wars. The preacher assures his listeners that there is no need to fear the revolution, as it is a 'sign of the times' that encourages hope for the imminent arrival of the messiah (Wessely 1845, 142–145). The Prague phase of Frankism was very productive of millennial notions. The millennial thinking was very evident in the life of the Frankist community in Offenbach, Germany, where Frankists tried to embody the cosmic story of Kabbalah—the idea of reunification of male and female.

The Final Refuge

During his life, Frank was active in a number of different locations. At first, he started to gain followers in

his homeland. In 1760, he was imprisoned in the Polish fortress of Czestochowa, and after his release in 1772 he moved to Brno. From there, Frank repeatedly visited the imperial city Vienna, where he negotiated with Emperor Joseph II (1741–1790). In 1787 Frank moved further west to Offenbach. Here he bought Isenburg Castle from Prince Wolfgang Ernst II of Isenburg and Büdingen (1735–1803). Thus, he gained a new refuge for his family and his followers:

He bought from a German prince, the one from Homburg-Birstein, a castle in Offenbach, together with the sovereign right of its own jurisdiction and police. The new German landowner titled himself as Baron von Frank. (Mauthner 1918, 304, trans. from German by I. Kohout and M. Vinklát; see also Beer 1823, 325)

This sixteenth-century Renaissance chateau still stands in the town of Offenbach in the state of Hesse on the left bank of the river Main. It became the base of Frank's spiritual movement for almost thirty years. Behind its walls his believers could fulfill their spiritual life without persecution. Just before 1800, the movement began sending many so-called Red Letters from nearby administrative centres to Frankist communities scattered throughout central and eastern Europe. Contemporary witnesses describe this as follows:

They helped write letters in red ink that the Czestochowians sent to all the places where Jews gathered. ... Letters had to be submitted at the post offices in Frankfurt, Hanau and other nearby places. They acted so that no one would know they had written so many of these letters. (Back 1877, 191, trans. from German by I. Kohout and M. Vinklát; see also Scholem 1991, 646)

The letters from the Czestochowians called upon European Jews to convert to Christianity and warned of impending disaster.

The community nicknamed Isenburg Castle the 'Polish Court' and sometimes the 'Holy Camp'. The latter designation referred to the biblical camp of Jews travelling through the desert (Porges 1993, 8). In the chateau, there was a darkened 'Holy Room', where the clothes of the late Jacob Frank were stored. Here, pilgrims prayed and prostrated themselves:

Jacob Frank, who died some time ago, was considered a God. They have a certain room with a bed, a red velvet cover and some trousers. Whoever enters the room must fall to the ground and worship Jacob Frank. All the Praguers who stayed in Offenbach did this. The room was also incensed. (Back 1877, 232, trans. from German by I. Kohout and M. Vinklát; see also Porges 1993, 11)

The castle served as a place of pilgrimage. Because of the Red Letters, adherents of Frank's teachings came from all over Europe, and they brought valuable gifts from which the Offenbach community financed its activities. After the death of Frank in 1791, his daughter, Eva, became the prominent personality of what was known as the 'House of God'. Among the Prague Frankists who visited the court in Offenbach with financial contributions were the following: Salomon Zerkowitz; Jonas Wehle and his sons Abraham, Jontef, and Ekiba and son-in-law Löw Enoch von Hönigsberg; Aron Beer Wehle and his daughter Amalia and niece Louisa Klarenberg; and Gabriel Porges and his sons Moses and Leopold.

Preparing for the Ultimate Conflict

Thanks to reports from a large number of visitors, testimonies and information about what happened behind the walls of Isenburg Castle have been preserved. Some sources state that there was military discipline and that the residents were subject to a strict hierarchy (Mauthner 1918, 111). Military training took place in the courtyard of the castle. Over time, the community gained power and resources sufficient to maintain its independence and armed forces. They had so many weapons that it was necessary to hide them when the French troops arrived in Offenbach during the War of the Second Coalition (1798-1802) (Porges 1993, 10). In time, Jacob Frank succeed in realizing a plan formed in 1759 to acquire land on which a battle-ready settlement could be established (Maciejko 2011, 159-61). The designation of the Frankist court as the 'Holy Camp of the Israelites' did not remain a mere self-denomination and a spiritual aspiration; by their actions, the inhabitants of Isenburg Castle also emulated the military character of the original community of Israel. According to the **Tanakh**, the Israelites made their way through enemy troops after leaving Egypt. They conquered the territory promised by the Lord thanks to their military organization.

It can be presumed that the Offenbach community prepared for the final apocalyptic military clash between the forces of good and evil. This theme can be observed in spiritual movements inspired by a specific interpretation of the Hebrew Bible throughout history. Among the first were **Essenes**, a Jewish community inhabiting a fortress in Qumran, north of the Dead Sea. Their vision of the end of the world consisted of a final war they would wage by the side of God and thus save the world from the clutches of evil. It is also possible to identify a combination of Jewish religious ideas and efforts to create military force in two Renaissance leaders operating in southern Europe and claiming to be messiahs. Shlomo Molcho (1500-1532) and David Reubeni (1490-c. 1535) negotiated with Emperor Charles V (1500-1558) to create a Jewish army to help the Christians fight the Ottoman Empire and regain the Holy Land. Jacob Frank had had similar ambitions when he offered Emperor Joseph II military aid against the Turks in 1786.

According to one of the witnesses, military discipline linked to esoteric knowledge was a part of religious life in the Offenbach community: 'But in the castle, where no unauthorised person dares to enter, mystagogical customs prevail, the newcomers are acquainted with Kabbalistic and probably alchemical secrets. The faith blends with military obedience' (Mauthner 1918, 304). This reference to alchemy by Fritz Mauthner (1849-1923), a philosopher of Frankist descent, may be elucidated by a statement by Peter Beer (1758-1838), Jewish educator and researcher, who wrote of hundreds of combat trainees who also attended lectures on chemistry and even carried out chemical experiments (Beer 1823, 325). There is a significant question, however: why were the Frankists motivated to study this natural science? Another, more recent religious movement, **Aleph Shinrikyo**, is famous, tragically, for its interest in chemistry. It has been terrorizing Japanese cities with homemade poison gas for several years (Reader 1997, 85-87). However, it is not clear whether the community in Offenbach had similar intentions. They may have performed chemical experiments to produce harmless substances or they may not have had any specific reason.

Just as the well-known American movement **Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ** prevented its members from leaving Jonestown in the 1970s, the Frankists in Offenbach also guarded the borders of the community. Moses Porges von Portheim (1781-1870), his brother Lepold Porges von Portheim (1785-1869), and their friend Johann Hofsinger were able to flee but had to do so during their night watch

(Porges 1993, 12). The violent regime at the Offenbach court is also demonstrated by a report about community members being beaten and imprisoned in the castle dungeon for disobedience (Back 1877, 235; Porges 1993, 10). However, the life of the community was not filled only with threats and violence but also with acts of love.

Sexuality

Issues relating to gender and sexuality are frequent in the Prague Frankist literature. The community's perception and evaluation of these issues can be characterized as contradictory because the ideas expressed in doctrinal texts and the events at the Frankist court in Offenbach were significantly at odds. The mystical movements of the most prominent monotheistic systems are imbued with issues of, and language about, gender and sexuality (McGinn 1993). In this respect, Prague Frankism is no exception. The frequent use of sexual imagery among Prague Frankists can be understood as a means of depicting the intensity of bliss that members of the movement were to receive in the coming messianic era, as well as a declaration of the messianic era's impending arrival. For the purposes of further interpretation, this section will first discuss the Prague Frankist view on gender and sexuality in general, so that it is later possible to focus on the specific situation at Offenbach, which can be seen as a strikingly paradoxical embodiment of the Prague Frankist mystical teaching.

The Prague Frankist literature represents sexuality as the source of all virtues. The sexual union of the genders gave rise to a family, which facilitated morality and all imaginable virtues that humans can ever possess. The family was a 'bond of love' (Beer 1823, 375), while love, philanthropy, and tolerance were seen as 'the greatest principle of religion' (Scholem 1974, 801). The more virtues that humans achieved, the more they began to resemble God, for, in him, 'on the highest place' all the virtues dwell and exist. Moreover, the relationship between God and humans was depicted as a sexual union. The God-human union was called *zivugim*, literally 'mating'. The more virtuous a person became, the more pairing with God they experienced (Beer 1823, 374). For this reason, Prague Frankism rejected any denigration of Kabbalah based on its sexual imaginary. The sexuality encountered there was understood to be entirely positive and condemned only by the uninitiated, who did not realize its true nature. In fact, the Kabbalah was 'an energetic manifestation of power, where a single word contains more than one can express with hundreds' (Beer 1823, 375). According to the Prague Frankists, the full development of sexuality was actually one key to salvation. Following this idea, they turned to the contemporary situation of female inequality, which was proclaimed to be the cause of the [Sitra Achra](#) and its evil. Hönigsberg expressed this idea in his commentary on the famous words from tractate [Niddah](#) 31a, which he interpreted as a call to liberate oppressed female sexuality and to unify the male and the female. In his view, as soon as women became able to freely exercise their sexuality—as soon as femininity developed its full potential—full masculinity would be born and 'true life' would emerge (Rapoport-Albert 2015, 332–34).

The attitude of the Prague Frankists towards sexuality must be placed in the context of the antinomianism of [Raya Mehemna and Tikunei Zohar](#). The author of the aforementioned works envisions a future radical transformation of humans, who will no longer need the prohibitions and commandments of the Torah, because they will be imbued with the will of God instead. As a result of this transformation, the true form of the Torah will emerge: the 'Torah of Heaven', the 'unblemished Torah of the Lord', free of any regulations (*Tikunei Zohar* 4b–5a). The Prague Frankists expressed their connection to the author of *Raya*

Mehemna through declarative transgressions of the Torah law. Alongside their attitudes to people's intimate lives (discussed below), there are references to men cutting their beards on Shabbat (Back 1877, 232–33, 236) and conversions to the Catholic faith (Scholem 1991, 639). By violating the ritual law, members of the movement expressed their sense of belonging to the revolutionary era of the Torah of Heaven—that is, their self-conception as those whose behaviour and sexuality did not need to be restricted by any prohibitions, since it could only benefit others. Nevertheless, the events at the Frankist court in Offenbach show that unrestricted sexuality caused harm to several of the movement's female members. On Yom Kippur 1800, Jacob Frank's son Rochus, also known as Ruach (1865–1813), ritually abused three girls and interpreted his actions as an effort to achieve 'salvation from the adverse fate of these years' (Back 1877, 192).

The doctrine of the transformation of the Torah was set in the context of the biblical story portraying the dual giving of the Law. The original Torah, which Moses shattered after the sin of the golden calf (Exodus 23), offered protection from the 'angel of death' and could be studied 'without distress or oppression'. In contrast, the current (second) form of the Torah contained 'distress, coercion, difficulty, and regulations' and offered no protection from the angel of death whatsoever (Scholem 1991, 639). The legalistic second Torah, in reference to *Tikunei Zohar* (also called the 'Torah of the World of Creation'), was declared to be abolished. According to Hönigsberg, it was abolished by the messiah Jacob Frank (Scholem 1991, 641–42), whose second coming the community awaited (647). While the present form of the Torah, which restricts sexuality, was admitted a certain limited educational function, at the same time it was also stated that in comparison with the Torah of the future it was 'only a mockery' (Beer 1823, 387). The Torah of the World of Creation was supposed to give humanity a brief introduction to the themes that—one day—would be taught by 'God Himself', who would also establish a 'new covenant' with Israel (Jeremiah 31:31–33); see also Beer 1823, 387). The Prague Frankists asserted that sexuality should play a very large role in human society, should not be limited to marital intercourse, and could also find a place in the relationships between family members (Rapoport-Albert 2015, 338). The content of the Frankist 'new covenant' is primarily a radical transformation of the role of sexuality in human society—an attempt to recognize sexuality as a means of common interpersonal communication.

The Frankist Court in Offenbach

According to the recollections of Porges, the situation at Offenbach did not closely correspond to the above-presented doctrine. Contrary to the dominant social norms, marriage was forbidden and 'there was no contact with the opposite sex at all'; moreover, men who felt desire for a woman were encouraged to ask for a beating (Porges 1993, 10). Sexual signalling and roles, although in a rather unrealized form, were nevertheless present in the community. There was the so-called *Liberie*, a group of young men who served the 'Three Supremes' (Eva Frank and her two brothers), to whom divine character was attributed (Back 1877, 191). The members of the *Liberie* wore uniforms; Porges, for example, wore a *Jäger* uniform (Porges 1993, 13), an expression of masculinity. The Frankist court also included a group of young woman who guarded the entrance to the dining hall where the Supremes ate. The girls chosen were 'mostly pretty and young' and wore 'the clothes of the Amazons' while on guard duty (Porges 1993, 11). Attiring the girls in the garb of warrior Amazons can be interpreted as a means of masculinization (Rapoport-Albert 2015, 171–72) and was also an echo of Hönigsberg's urge to unify the masculine and the feminine (331–33).

The sexual inflection of Offenbach's communal life was also captured in Bettina von Arnim's (1785–1859) letter to Goethe, where she wrote of 'beautiful youths and boys in gold-lined, close-fitting coats' who resembled 'exuberant stallions' (Von Arnim 1835, 126). Yet, the real axis of all sexuality in Offenbach was undoubtedly Eva Frank, whom Porges 'worshipped and loved'. The 'Lady' received him the day after his arrival, and the main impression he took away from the audience was her beauty: 'She had a lovely face that radiated goodness, kindness, and benevolence. Her eyes, what a holy enthusiasm! Despite her advanced age, she had a lovely appearance. She had graceful hands and feet' (Porges 1993, 9; see also Stein 1868, 157). Similarly, Mauthner recollected how his mother described Eva's beauty as 'miraculous' and how 'only a king could become her husband' (Mauthner 1918, 313). In our opinion, the platonic love of young men for Eva Frank played an important role in Offenbach's communal mystical fantasies. We believe that the imagination of the Offenbach inhabitants tasked Eva with giving birth to her own late father, who was expected to return in divine form. Our hypothesis is based on the well-known Kabbalistic doctrine of the reincarnation of souls, the 'gilgul'. The idea of reincarnation was deeply connected with Jacob Frank's life and reappeared after his burial. For instance, some speculated that after his death, he would incarnate in his nephew Moses Dobruschka (1753–1794) (Maciejko 2011, 196–97). However, it was Eva who took hold of the leadership.

Eva Frank, Mother of Her Own Father

In the year 1770 in the the fortress of Czestochowa, Jacob Frank declared Eva to be a 'Redemptive Maiden' and 'Mother of God'. Thus, Jacob Frank bestowed upon her the status originally attributed to the miraculous icon of the Black Madonna held in the fortress, where Frank and his followers had been imprisoned since 1760. The icon and daughter became one and Eva started to be perceived as a physical manifestation of the **sefirah Malchut**—redemption was about to happen through the embodiment of the divine feminine, hitherto absent on earth, in a real woman. (Rapoport-Albert 2015, 174–186). In Frank's imagination, the androgynous concept of God from the Book of Zohar gave rise to a vision of the future perfect couple Adam and Eve, who would defeat the Other Side. This was a vision of himself and his daughter correcting the sin of Adam and Eve of the Book of Genesis and bringing full divinity into the world. It is likely that some of Frank's ideas were also drawn from the Old Believers movement, Eastern Orthodox Christians who rejected the reforms of Patriarch Nikon of Moscow (1605–1681). Among them, persons called 'Mother of God' are attested as well. The contacts with Old Believers are evidenced by Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697–1776) and Aleksander Kraushar (1843–1931) (Rapoport-Albert 2015, 237–57).

The Prague Frankists perceived Eva Frank as the Virgin of God and the **Shekhinah**, an idea that is a synthesis of Mariology (Maciejko 2011, 27, 150, 170) and Zoharic mysticism. In both cases, the role of the Shekhinah and the Virgin is the supernatural parturition of the messiah. According to Zohar 2:7b–8a, the messiah is 'in the womb of Shekhinah', from where he will be taken out by the activity of the righteous. The role of the Virgin Mary in the New Testament is very similar. Mary's husband, Joseph, is a descendant of the royal dynasty (Luke 1; Mark 1) and Mary gives birth to the messiah. The expectation of the messiah, or even incarnated God himself (Beer 1823, 350), was the basis of the Prague Frankist communal faith. Frederika Dembitz Brandeis (1829–1901), a member of Prague Frankist family that emigrated to the USA and mother of the renown American lawyer Luis Brandeis (1856–1941), recollected, 'it was considered a pious act not to marry, but to await the Messiah', to which Dembitz's aunt Amalia had 'sacrificed the happiness of her youth' (Dembitz Brandeis 1943, 8). Porges's memoirs support this claim. When he came

to Offenbach, Porges was told to expect the 'third of the sefirot', which would appear as 'the redeemer of the world'. He was also motivated to 'serve' and thus become one of the 'elect' (Stein 1868, 158). The Prague Frankists hoped to be those among whom the last messiah would be born (Scholem, 1948, 211).

The death of Jacob Frank in 1791 was a severe blow to the community (Beer 1823, 327–29). The corpus of Prague Frankist literature is largely an effort to reflect this new situation theologically. Although Frank himself had died, belief in the events he had predicted did not perish. On the contrary, gained a life of its own. The community concluded that one day Frank would return (Scholem 1991, 647). It can be assumed that Eva, whose reputation as 'Mother of God' was spread even after her father's death (Stein 1868, 157), was supposed to be the instrument of Frank's reappearance. One of the key pieces of this hypothesis is Hönigsberg's assertion regarding a conception of a human being 'without the admixture of sinful fleshly substance', of someone who 'may have just been born' and 'arose from pure love' as 'the most perfect creation of nature' (Beer 1823, 350). These words should rightly be regarded as a promise of the coming of the 'third of the sefirot', or the reincarnation of Jacob Frank, who, similarly to ideas in the New Testament and the Book of Zohar, was to be born supernaturally—without sexual intercourse, which was forbidden in Offenbach. The imagination of the sexually frustrated young men who loved Eva Frank platonically was to impregnate Eva and ensure the coming of the God-human.

The Embodiment of the Divine Drama of Kabbalah

The inhabitants of the Offenbach court viewed themselves as the righteous who, according to Zohar 2:7b–8a, would stimulate the Shekhinah to give birth to the messiah. Eva Frank, referred to as the 'shell' containing the 'fruit to be raised' (Rapoport-Albert 2015, 335–36), should have been 'raised' (i.e. impregnated) by the members of the community and thus prepared to ensure the messiah's second coming—the rebirth of her father, Jacob Frank, whose behaviour towards his daughter was described by some as incestuous (Maciejko 2011, 177). We recognize our hypothesis as an important element of the Prague Frankist faith. Eva Frank's task was to forever connect the world with God. The newly born God-human, or 'human being united with God', was expected to wage war against the Other Side and overcome it (Beer 1823, 388–89). The Prague Frankist teaching had elements of transgender thinking. The Frankists hoped to establish an androgynous reality of physical love where 'true masculinity' would be revealed through 'femininity' (Rapoport-Albert 2015, 334). In addition to the masculinization of girls through the clothing of warrior women, a transgender element can be found in the local Kabbalistic discourse, which echoed Porges's narrative. The sefirah Malchut, commonly seen as a feminine entity, was designated as the masculine 'Ancient One', while the **sefirah Tif'eret**, usually perceived as masculine and active, was ascribed a non-characteristically feminine role (Stein 1868, 158). Members of the court sought to herald the arrival of the androgynous world through deeds and reflections, which in linguistic terms constituted an elaboration of the semantic gender incongruence found in the Aramaic of the Zohar (Kohout 2012). The Offenbach court inhabitants enacted the cosmic drama of the Kabbalah. Eva Frank acted as the divine Shekhinah and the members of the court acted as the associated divine forces. They lived the story of the Book of Zohar.

Glossary

Aleph Shinrikyo A Japanese apocalyptic and millennial cult founded by Shoko Asahara (1955–2018) in 1984. It has been responsible for several terrorist gas attacks in Tokyo and Matsumoto.

Gevirah 'Lady' in Hebrew. An honorary and mystical title of Eva Frank (similar to the Christian term 'Madonna').

Haskalah A Jewish Enlightenment movement in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that strengthened Jewish nationalism and allowed the emergence of Jewish studies.

Niddah A tractate of the Babylonian Talmud. Hönigsberg explains the following words from the tractate: 'The gender of the foetus is determined at the time of conception. If the woman seeds first, she gives birth to a male, and if the man seeds first, she gives birth to a female, as it is written: "If a woman becomes pregnant and gives birth to a male" (Leviticus 12:2)' (Niddah 31a)

Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ See [Jim Jones, Jonestown, and the Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ](#).

Prague The capital city of the historical Kingdom of Bohemia and now the capital city of the Czech Republic. The city is known for its rich cultural and spiritual history and its strong Jewish community.

Raya Mehemna and Tikunei Zohar Later additions to the Book of Zohar with stronger millennial content. The Book of Zohar is a central work of the Kabbalah. It reinterprets the Bible as a description of events in the divine realm.

Sabbatean A messianic religious movement established around the Jewish theologian Nathan of Gaza (1643–80) and the Kabbalist Sabbatai Zevi (1626–76), a Jewish mystic who was proclaimed to be a messiah in 1666. The movement originated in Turkey and also flourished in the neighbouring countries.

Sefirah Malchut A Jewish mystical concept. Sefirot are God's powers, which constitute the divine realm. Some of them are seen as feminine and some as masculine. The sefirah Malchut is the lowest point of the divine realm, standing close to the physical world. It is often influenced by the Other Side and separated from the higher sefirot. It has a strong feminine character.

Sefirah Tif'eret A Jewish mystical concept. Sefirot are God's powers, which constitute the divine realm. Some of them are seen as feminine and some as masculine. The sefirah Tif'eret is the central point of the divine realm. It is often separated from its feminine counterpart, the sefirah Malchut. The goal of Kabbalah is their eternal unification.

Shekhinah A Jewish mystical concept meaning divine femininity. Often identified with sefirah Malchut.

Sitra Achra (the Other Side) A Jewish mystical concept. A demonic caricature of the divine realm that violently separates divine masculine and feminine powers.

Tanakh A canonical collection of Hebrew religious scriptures, also known as the Hebrew Bible or the Old

Testament. The term Tanakh is an acronym since the collection consists of three parts: Torah, Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Scriptures).

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