

## World History Commons - Analyzing Personal Accounts Full Transcript

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### **1) Who are Glikl of Hameln and Catharina Schrader? (2:42)**

I'd like to read parts of two documents that come from roughly the same time period written by two women who lived in roughly the same part of the world, northern Germany. I came to both of these documents because of my interest in women's history. I'm a historian of the early modern period, which means the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries, in which the voices of women are very difficult to find and to hear.

Both of the documents are memoirs that come from women who are not members of the elite. They're not members of the nobility, they're not from ruling families. Yet they're from women who are well trained. Women who are economically active, who support themselves and their families by their own activities. So they come from urban women who are in the middle ranges of society. There are very few memoirs, or personal narratives, from women who are not members of the elite in the era before 1800. You can practically count them on one hand.

They're both documents that people have looked at carefully. The one by Glikl has been examined very carefully because it comes from a period when we have very few documents by Jewish people of either sex. It reflects on her situation as a Jew as well as her situation as a woman, and has a wonderful personal voice. Glikl has a life that's sometimes up and sometimes down. She reflects on this and what God has given her, and she tells us a lot about family relations. She is a person we can sympathize easily with today.

Glikl doesn't have a title for her memoirs because she didn't think of them as memoirs. We think of Glikl's memoirs as memoirs, but she thought of them as a way to explain her life, mostly to herself and to her family.

The second document is from a less well-known source, midwives' memoirs, by a woman named Catharina Schrader, who lived in Frisia, an area that is now partly in Germany and partly in the Netherlands. Schrader's husband died when she was in her 30's and she had children to support. The same thing happened to Glikl.

Schrader had been an assistant midwife and she decided that that is what she could do to support

her children was to be more active as a professional midwife. This is around 1700, and she's almost exactly contemporary in terms of the date of her birth with Glikl, the middle of the 17th century. She lives to be almost 100 years old, somewhat older than Glikl, but their lives are parallel to the extent that they were both supporting their families through their own professional activities.

Using two personal narratives raises questions about comparison. They live in roughly the same area. How are they different because one is Jewish and one is Protestant? How are they different in other ways? How would you compare two narratives written by people with different class status? Or a man and a woman—how are their lives different because they're male and female? How would the narrative be different if a member of the royal family suddenly lost her husband?

## **2) Why did these women write personal accounts? (3:10)**

I'd like to start with the memoirs of a woman who has come to be known as a "Glikl of Hameln." She would not have called herself that. Her first name was Glückel or Glikl. She was a Jewish woman living in northern Germany, born in the middle of the 17th century. She died in 1724. She would have called herself, probably "Glikl, wife of so- and-so." She had two husbands in her life. Or she would have been known by her father's name, Glikl bas Judah Leib, so Glikl, the daughter of Judah. She was from a middle- class, certainly middle-status, Jewish family in Hamburg.

She was a person who had great despair involving her children, which is reflected in her work. At midlife, when she was around 50, she decided to write her life story in order to help herself through a difficult patch. She didn't write it, though, for a wider audience. She wrote it for her children and her family. It remained unpublished, in Yiddish, the language that German Jews spoke at the time, until the 19th century. So for a century and a half after it had been written, nobody knew about it except her family.

In the late 19th century, though, people became very interested in memoirs and autobiographies and this memoir was discovered. The family, who still had it, recognized that this was a very unusual document from their great-great-grandmother, or great-great- aunt, and they looked for an agent to publish it. It was published first in Yiddish and then in English, later in German and many other languages.

In thinking about personal narratives, you have to ask yourself first why were they written? What was the person trying to accomplish with this? Western personal narratives, especially those by non-elite authors, and even more rare, by women, are often written at the direct order of a

religious advisor. An advisor said, “You’re having a lot of difficulties and you’re doubting yourself: what you should do is write down your own relationship with God, your own understanding about religion, your own feelings of how you came to this point in your life.”

And people took this as not only a chance to reflect on their relationship with God, but also their relationship with their mother, their relationship with how they came to be there, and what was going on in their lives. They have a religious thrust to them, a sense of “how I came to be this kind of soul at this point.” When we’re looking at premodern personal narratives, though, we may not be as interested in their souls. We’re interested in the side things that the person tells us about daily life in some earlier time.

Catharina Schrader, who is literate, decides to keep a daybook of all of her cases of midwifery. She saw more than 100 cases a year. In the course of her very long career, she saw over 3,000 deliveries. She kept a record of every single one: what happened, who called her, what the situation was. In her early 80s, she figured she was at the close to the end of her life and decided to write about her most unusual, most difficult cases. These were often cases of twins or triplets or breech births, where the baby was presenting feet first.

Catharina Schrader was known as a person who could handle difficult births, so she saw many unusual cases. She was often called when a first midwife was not able to help the mother, when it looked like the mother and child were going to die. In the late 17th century, midwives handled all births, from peasants to royalty.

### **3) How did the accounts reach us? (1:24)**

If you’re dealing with older works such as these, written in the early 18th century, you have to deal with how the memoir or diary reached us. It is a physical document. What are the circumstances in which it was written? What are the circumstances in which it was translated, if it was translated from one language to another?

Personal narratives that come from illiterate people, or people who could not read or write, are often dictated and recorded, creating another layer of interpretation. You also have to think about what language the narrator speaks, what language a recorder speaks. And whether a narrative was translated at the time or later.

Did the author physically write it with a pen and paper? Who kept the original? Was a copy made? Was it published? Was it published during the author’s lifetime? This would be more common if the author was famous or somebody recognized that the memoir had merit or that

there might be an audience.

What was the motivation of the person publishing the personal narrative? Did they publish it because the author was a great member of their family? Or because it was something unusual and, therefore, worth publishing? Did it have literary merit? Do they think that as a document, the language, the writing, the concepts are worth reading simply as literature? That's not very common for older works. They were usually published because of a family connection or unusual topic.

In Glikl's memoirs, the first publisher was a German Jew who found it very interesting that a Jewish woman had written something so good. He saw it, in a way, as something that supported his religion.

#### **4) What can we learn from reading Glikl's writings? (3:54)**

I'm going to read from the opening section of Glikl's memoirs in which she talks about her childhood. It opens with a description with praise to God. Then she talks about her childhood and her mother. This is a section about her mother. She says:

*My mother had already learned the trade of making gold and silver lace, and God in His mercy saw to it that she received orders from the Hamburg merchants. At first Jacob Rees, of blessed memory, went surety for her; but when the merchants found that she knew her business and was prompt in her deliveries, they trusted her without surety. Next she taught the trade to a number of young girls and engaged them to work by her side, so that finally she was able to provide a living for her mother and clean, decent clothes for herself. Little enough, however, remained over, and often my dear mother had nothing*

*but a crust of bread the livelong day. She never complained, but put her faith in God who had never forsaken her. . . .*

What can we learn from just this one paragraph? Her mother had learned a trade, apparently independently of her husband. The husband does not seem to be, at least from Glikl's recounting of this, involved in the making of gold and silver lace, and that is interesting. And is, in fact, reinforced by the fact that her mother teaches this trade to a number of young girls.

What we know most about the training of people working in this era, about the middle of the 17th century, is that boys often learned a trade through formal apprenticeship to men. In this case, girls seem to be apprenticing, at least something like an apprenticeship, to her mother and

they learn to make gold and silver lace. This talks about an informal apprenticeship among girls that may not show up in any other document. This is the side information, or accidental information, we can learn from a memoir like this.

Glikl is not writing her memoir to talk about how young girls train in the early modern period. Her goal is to see how God works in her life. But the point of this particular section is, in fact, not about that. She is talking about how her mother supported herself, apparently after her father had died. And we learn about surety—a person who is just starting out in business, as today, had to have somebody stand surety for them, meaning that they would cover the debts if the new business failed.

So at the very beginning of her career, Glikl's mother had to have somebody who was a merchant—a male merchant—to stand surety for her. But later, when people knew that she was reliable, she didn't have to have someone do this. They trusted her mother enough so that she could get gold and silver from goldsmiths, who would have it, in order to make lace.

What I think just this one paragraph can bring to us is a sense about the work that women might be doing on their own. This doesn't show up in any official records because these young girls trained by Glikl's mother didn't sign any form of apprenticeship contract.

But it shows that women engaged in independent activity, even though it's an activity that involves luxury trades—making and selling lace. Her mother still doesn't make very much money, or at least Glikl says she doesn't make enough money to support herself very well. But she does provide decent clothes for herself, for Glikl, and for her own mother. There are a number of small things that you can see in that.

You can see larger issues when you read more of Glikl's memoirs. In this one paragraph, she blesses God twice. She says that God, in his mercy, started her mother on her road to success. And then she ends this paragraph about her mother by saying that her mother had faith in God, who had never forsaken her. So the religious purpose of her mother's understanding of things comes through as well.

If we want to extrapolate, to read a little bit more into it, we might say that Glikl thinks highly of her mother. That she sees her mother as a model for what she wants to be or what she already is, which is a successful businesswoman.

We might also ask how Glikl's mother can have apprentices and deal with luxury goods, yet, still, "have nothing but a crust of bread the livelong day." That may not, in fact, be completely

accurate. What Glikl really wants to clearly say is that she makes a good enough living, but she doesn't make a luxurious living. It is important to her that she not appear to be bragging about her own mother.

### **5) What can we learn from reading Catharina Schrader's writings? (4:15)**

This is from the memoirs of Catharina Schrader, a midwife. She wrote a daybook, a diary, a book of all her deliveries, more than 3,000 over her long career as a midwife, so 130 average a year. She decides late in life to pull out the unusual ones and write them up. But this book of unusual cases gets published, and she titles it not "My Memoirs" but *Memoirs of the Women*. She dedicates it to the women who gave birth, to whom she delivered either safely or not safely. She was still delivering even in her 84th year of age, though not as frequently.

She says:

*...I sat and thought over what miracles The Lord had performed through my hands to unfortunate, distressed women in childbirth. So I decided to take up the pen in order to refresh once more my memory, to glorify and make great God Almighty for his great miracles bestowed on me. Not me, but You oh Lord be the honour, the glory till eternity. And also in order to alert my descendants so that they can still become educated. And I have pulled together the rare occurrences from my notes.*

She tells us a little bit of autobiographical detail. She says:

*In my thirty-eight years living in Hallum in Friesland I saw my good, learned and highly esteemed, and by God and the people loved husband, go to his God to the great sadness of me and the inhabitants, leaving six small children in my thirty-eight years of age. But then it pleased God to choose me for this important work: by force almost through good doctors and the townspeople because I was at first struggling against this, because it was such a weighty affair. Also I thought that it was for me and my friends below my dignity; but finally I had myself won over. This was also the Lord's wish.*

So this is her opening. In other words, "I was a middle-class woman and maybe only lower-status women should be midwives." But finally, the doctors who she'd been assisting and townspeople said, "You should really do this." And she decides, because it's the Lord's wish, too—she of course sees things in a religious context—that she should do this, and decides to go ahead and be a midwife for the rest of her life.

This is the first case. You can get a sense about what cases she highlighted:

*1693 on 9 January fetched to Jan Wobes's wife, Pittie, in Hallum. A very heavy labour. Came with his face upwards. A dangerous birth for the child and very difficult for me. The afterbirth had to be pulled loose. But everything went well.*

What are the expectations of somebody who's reached over 80? Might they be the same as somebody who's reached over 100 today? Do we expect them to reflect on their life? How have things changed? She has a sense of self that comes through in here that is, in part, probably because she lives to be so old. She has a sense of self that is rooted in her faith, rooted in religion, as people tended to do in the 17th century or early 18th century. She talks about the miracles that God has performed.

She was a Protestant woman. The sentence also talks about God calling her to do these kinds of things. What does this tell us about the sense of understanding about God's calling or God's purpose for people who were raised in Calvinist backgrounds?

But is she typical? Is she atypical? Would other people be talking about their God calling them to be in their particular profession the same way? What were their ministers telling them? You can research this by reading Calvinist sermons, many of which have been translated and made available.

What comes through in this document about why these terrible things happened? People in the premodern era, like today, think that the death of children is a horrible thing. Why does God allow this to happen? This is a good theological question and she wrestles with it, although she's not a trained theologian. How much do her words reflect what we know from more learned sources about people's understandings about good and evil, or about unfortunate things in the world?

We get clearly that this is a woman who is placed in circumstances where she needed to support herself and her children. If you were a woman with small children, or a widower, what could you do in the 17th century? What were your options? How would she have supported herself?

How would her life have been different had she been a man whose wife died? And he was 38, and he had six kids? What would he have done? He would have married again, right away. And he may very well have married a woman who had two or three children. So I think that this gets students into issues of blended families, which students tend to think of as a very modern phenomenon.

## **6) How do you place these writings in a larger historical context? (2:53)**

I think to provide the context for either of these women, you should look at the lives of women. What were the possibilities for women in this period? But also you need to know a little bit about the larger context, about what's going on in the economy. What would have been the options for Glikl's mother or for Catharina Schrader? Or for Glikl later in life when her own husband dies. What political situation on the smaller scale are these people experiencing that would have shaped their possibilities for action?

I think one of the things that is intriguing about personal narratives is that the people who write them or who dictate them have a strong sense of self. Strong enough to think that their story is worth telling. They're not simply people on whom things were acted; on whom the forces of history or politics or economics acted and they were caught in the middle and didn't do much. But they were people who were subjects of their own lives. In the reflective sense of writing memoirs but also they were people who were, perhaps, more active than others in terms of trying to make the best of what life dealt them. We're interested often, I think, in women who did things, women who had agency, or showed us, to use a literary term, showed a sense of subjectivity, of being a person who had an influence on the world around them, including their own situation.

But you still need to understand the parameters of their life. Neither one of these women decided to go to America. Neither one of these could have become a major merchant. For Glikl, you need to understand the situation of Jews in the early modern era.

Catharina Schrader's memoirs can lead you into the history of medicine, a natural entrée into world history and medicine. What are the possibilities at this time? What did this mean? Childbirth is something that is highly political and contested today and I think understanding something from earlier centuries can be insightful.

Religion permeates everything about their lives. In both of these narratives God shows up all the time. In Glikl's narrative, she's never blasphemous. She doesn't say, "Why in God's name does this happen?" She asks, "Why in God's name did this happen?" But in an unblasphemous way, in a way that she's really asking why God let something happen. Her older son is particularly bad in business and trusts everybody and gets her deep in debt. And then her second husband does the same thing, and in fact, bankrupts them after she's worked so hard. So she's trying to wrestle with those issues.

But because God enters into their thinking about everything that happens in a very natural way, I



think that it's a good way to help students to understand the religious view that people have about how you interpret the world. And how you interpret your work world and your family relationships and their calling, which is, of course, a word we now use in the secular sense, but it really meant God called you.

There's no sense about the self, understood in a psychological sense, because there isn't any psychology on the subject; it hadn't been invented yet. Nobody thinks like a Freudian. Nobody talks about drives or obsessions, words we use today to describe things that 17th-century people describe religiously. God called me to do it, and we would say, "Well, I was obsessed and I decided I had to do this."

### **7) What can we learn from personal accounts? (3:15)**

In these documents, there are two kinds of things that I look for. One is the document as a whole and this sense of the person that comes through. What was this person like? And I think that one of the reasons that biography and autobiography are so fascinating is that we want to know what people were like in earlier times. And what better way to find that

out than to listen to them speaking. It's important to know what people did, but also to listen to them speaking. I think that's what is intrinsically fascinating about personal narratives.

Another thing that I'm interested is the side issues. I've been a historian of women's work for a long time and I'm very interested in midwives. When Schrader's memoirs emerged, it was especially exciting because she was not a midwife to royalty. The words of midwives to royalty were translated more frequently. This was a document that wasn't very well known until 15 years ago. So when I came to it, I was fascinated by what she had to say and by the fact that it's complete.

The memoirs are only the most elaborate cases but her own personal daybook, also available, had everything. There are so many cases that you could do quantitative work— 3,000 for people who work in the premodern period, to have 3,000 of anything that you can count is remarkable. You could ask how many were breech presentations? How many were twins? How many were abnormal presentations of one kind or another? Schrader tells us who the father and mother are, so we can ask how many involved illegitimate births? Would a person who wasn't married have called a midwife? And what does the midwife have to say about this? What are the factual details about the cases?

We find similar things in Glikl's memoir. It provides insight into her as a person and she's a

fascinating person. But it also provides a lot of detail about everyday business procedures of people who are not major merchants. She deals in gold. She deals in pearls. She deals in other high-cost goods, such as fur. You can get a sense from this. How does she travel? Where does she travel? Where does she stay? Does she stay in a stage coach? Does she stay in inns? What was available for a Jewish woman traveling? She's a woman in a world that's largely made up of men. She is a middleman, or middlewoman, between major importers and retailers. And she has very good business sense. How much business is she doing? What does this mean to her in economic terms?

Glikl is writing in the convention of spiritual autobiography. It's Jewish, but it's still spiritual autobiography, trying to talk about God in her life. Maybe the fact that she talks about God twice in one paragraph is because that's what is expected. And you have ask, when you approach a personal narrative, what conventions of this kind of writing would the person know. And I think even people who are not highly learned know those conventions.

Delving into the document for the first time you see certain kinds of things. Many times personal narratives are repetitive because they're written for a certain purpose and because our lives are repetitive. We do the same thing day after day. And if you're writing a personal narrative or a diary or a memoir, you do the same thing day after day so you can get bogged down in the details. If people are writing for a specific purpose, like a spiritual justification of their life, they will return to statements over and over because it fits their intent.

I usually ask students to first read a narrative when they know nothing about the period. And I ask what they see. Then, when they know something about the period or culture, they look at it again and I ask "What do you see that you didn't see the first time?"

### **8) What are some limitations of personal accounts? (1:18)**

One of the dangers when using personal narratives, especially in a course or research project, is that you're only using one personal narrative and a range of other kinds of information. That personal narrative tends to become stereotypical; it tends to speak for a larger group than a personal narrative really can. A personal narrative is personal. It is one person's opinion about something. We often interpret them as representing a range of people, but they really are only personal.

How much can we trust personal narratives? How can we tell if something really happened? When someone is writing a personal narrative for a particular purpose, it's hard to imagine why they would lie about unrelated information.

For instance, Glikl is writing about her activities as a merchant. We can't judge that they are true or not, but it's very difficult to figure out what would be the point of lying, because the purpose of this memoir is not to talk about her mercantile activities. She's not trying to justify herself for a merchant's board when there might very well be a reason for somebody to lie—how many pearls they've sold or the exact trade that one conducted. That's not her purpose here. Her purpose is to think about her own situation with God and she writes a lot about God.

She tells long stories that aren't really her stories. They are stories that have been handed down to her and she hears them orally and repeats them, about God and God's handling of things and little vignettes. Her 19th-century editors weren't interested, so they don't include it. But now her complete memoirs are available.