

HAMBURGER'S BANK IN THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

A Hundred years ago, the Shuk streets in the Old City teemed with Jewish merchants and shoppers, and there were Jewish homes, businesses, and Torah and charitable institutions in almost every corner within the Old City walls, particularly in the area now designated 'the Moslem Quarter'. Shabtai Zacharia has done intensive research on the history of the Jewish Yishuv within the Old City, a lawyer by profession, he has devoted himself to guiding tours of the area and published a few books and wrote many articles on the topic. He also clarified the legal status of Jewish property there.

The following article had, been translated from the Hebrew by Bracha Slae.

Like all other banks in Jerusalem, the Hamburger brothers' bank began as a money changing operation. In Jerusalem of one hundred years ago, the money changer was indispensable largely due to the great fluctuations in the official Turkish currency and the large influx of foreign currency from abroad. Jerusalem's economy indeed depended upon foreign currency, either brought by pilgrims to the city or sent as donations.

Natan Tzvi (Notteh Hersh) Hamburger and his brother Pincus began their careers as money changers, making the rounds of the shops in the Shuk (marketplace), providing "small change" for gold and silver coins. Later, in 1890, they rented their own shop in the Shuk - changing money, providing credit and accepting securities. Some of their "banking" business stemmed from their special relations with the post. At that time, each country with a consulate in Jerusalem had its own postal service. Due to his good relations with the Austrian Vice Consul who was also the postal director, Hamburger was able to receive his (and others') mail on Saturday night, just after Shabbat, instead of having to wait until Monday, as did ordinary people. (Religious Jews could not pick up their mail on Saturday, when it arrived, and the post office was closed on Sunday). The director trusted Hamburger to return on Monday to sign all the registered mail receipts. There was as yet no Russian post office in the country, but Russian ships brought mail to Jaffa, where the Hamburger brothers received it and delivered it to Jerusalem.

In Yitschak Shirion's memoirs, he mentions that there were three banks in Jerusalem when he first arrived in 1895. One belonged to Valero: the Sephardi Jewish financier of Austrian Kaiser Franz Joseph's Middle Eastern trip, whose main dealings were in and . The second bank

belonged to Frultiger, a German Protestant who also dealt in real estate and was one of the founders of Mahane Yehuda and Succat Shalom in the New City. The third bank or "half a bank", as it was popularly called belonged to the Hamburger brothers, Nottéh and Pinchas, of the Old Yishuv.

Hamburger's bank flourished, as it was the Ashkenazi bank in Jerusalem. In his book "Shlosa Olamot" (Three Worlds), ' Chaim Hamburger, Natan Tvi's son, writes:

"It was the only large bank for Ashkenazi Jews in Eretz Yisrael. Its credit was unlimited and it dealt with all the biggest banks of Europe. No matter how large the sum, its checks were honored throughout the world.

In the book- "Derech Shofet B'Yerushalayim", Justice Gad Frumkin takes us on a walking tour of the Old City and fills in more details regarding the location and financial transactions of the bank:

"Leaving Shuk Ha Basamim and heading right, or westward, we could walk straight up David Street to Jaffa Gate. Just after the corner, there was a spacious arched "bazaar" which served as a produce market, where we used to buy barley for father's donkey. Just across from the "bazaar" was a tiny cubicle of a shop, one of the greatest importance to our daily life in those days. It belonged to Reb Nettéh Hersh Hamburger, a wise and learned Torah scholar who diligently applied himself to three separate careers. From two he made his living, but the third was for the sake of the "mitzvah". Reb Nottéh Hirsh was first and foremost a money changer and small scale banker, his exchange table - half inside the shop and half outside consisted of no more than a box covered with a metal grid, through which one could study the "table" covered with local and foreign coins - neat piles of gold, silver and copper carefully arranged one on top of the other. Reb Nottéh Hirsh Hamburger's second vocation was his own private postal service (delivery of Russian and Austrian mail mentioned above).

From these two, Hamburger managed to make a comfortable living. His third and favorite calling was "for the mitzva". Like his brothers Pinchas in Jerusalem and Meir in Jaffa, Nottéh was an expert Mohel. If Reb Nottéh failed to appear in the shop one morning, everyone knew that he was at a "Brit Milah" - sufficient reason to close the shop (i. e. move the table inside) and let the customers wait. He knew his clients would wait for him and not go anywhere else. There was nowhere else to go. "

Unfortunately, the story of Hamburger's bank has a sad ending. The story goes that after about 10 years, in the fall of 1900, one of the bank's clients passed away, leaving a debt of one thousand pounds. According to Hamburger's son Chaim, in the aforementioned book, this afforded one of Hamburgers' enemies, an opportunity to sow panic in the Jewish Quarter by urging his clientele to withdraw their accounts quickly before the bank "went bankrupt". In vain did the brothers try to assure the public that their money was safely invested in loans due at a fixed time and that all claims were amply covered.

No one was willing to wait - everyone wanted to withdraw his money at once. The bank's debtors took advantage of the turmoil and stopped paying back their debts. Finally, the bank did indeed declare- bankruptcy. The two brothers did their best to pay off all their debts, and lived the rest of their lives in poverty. Upon Notteh's death in 1912, the following eulogy, composed by Eliezer Ben' Yehuda , appeared in "Ha'Or".

"All of Jerusalem - that is all the financial transactions of Jerusalem- were once in the hands of the Hamburger brothers. It was through their agency that funds were distributed, each in its own tone, to the various institutions. The name "Hamburger" was honored, not only in Jerusalem, but all over Europe. Then the good days passed and days of poverty came upon them. All their own money, as well as that of others, was lost and they were left penniless.

In their last years, the brothers lives were marked by privation and suffering. There were days when they hadn't even enough money to buy bread. They were no longer dressed well, as in days gone by. Had Reb Notteh Hersh passed away a few years ago, while still affluent and "dressed in furs" all work would have come to a standstill and all the children would have been excused from school to recite Psalms at the funeral procession. But Hamburger died a poor man, and who ever honors a poor man?

This was the tragic end of Hamburgers Bank in the Old City. Nevertheless, to this day "old-timers" still point out the place, on the corner of Chabad and David streets where a Jewish bank once flourished in the narrow alleyways of the colorful Old City Shuk.

There was nowhere else to go...

Author's address: Shabtai Zacharia, 22 Pinsker St., Jerusalem 92228

www.shabtai.jerusalem-old-city.org