
Moses Jacob Ezekiel: Art and Celebrity

Stanley F. Chyet

Celebrity in the sense of a public character—today we scarcely use the term in any other sense—seems to have its origins in the nineteenth century. It is in the 1800's that fame transcends the confines of social eminence to become a species of popular notice, of publicity. Celebrity in that sense has elegant presence in the memoirs of Richmond-born Moses Jacob Ezekiel (1844–1917), the first American Jew to become notable as a sculptor. Ezekiel left a sprawling memoir of several hundred pages which Joseph Gutmann and I edited, annotated, and prepared for publication by the Wayne State University Press some years ago.¹

Ezekiel deserves celebrity (using the word in its older sense) as one of the champion name-droppers of his generation. He spent many years as an expatriate in Rome, and his memoirs constitute a rich treasury of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century aristocratic gossip. That indeed is probably their chief interest for most late-twentieth-century readers, though a more analytical scrutiny will find here additional documentation of the nineteenth-century struggle between modernism and tradition, between the *nouveau régime* of industrial capitalism and the *ancien régime* of feudal agrarianism, and something else, related and yet noteworthy in its own right: the emergence into public consciousness in Western and Central Europe of emancipated Jewish intellectuals, artists, writers, musicians—Lassalle, Heine, Joachim, Tausig, Munkácsy, Moleschott, Lombroso, Lewald-Stahr, Halévy, Friedheim, Rubinstein, De Vries, Volterra, to name only a few.

The list of names mentioned in the memoirs is awesome. A partial listing of the celebrated with whom Ezekiel reports having had personal contact includes, to begin with Americans, Robert E. Lee and his wife Mary Custis Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Bellamy Storer and his wife Maria Longworth, Theodore Roosevelt and his daughter Alice Longworth, Alfred Stieglitz, George Bancroft, William Corcoran,

Francis Marion Crawford, Jacob Schiff, Henry Mosler, Isabella Stewart Gardner, Julia Ward Howe, Isaac Mayer Wise, David Lubin, Elihu Vedder, John Pierpont Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, William Howard Taft, and Thomas Nelson Page—a partial listing, as I say. The European notables with whom Ezekiel claimed contacts include Mariano Cardinal Rampolla, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Emperor Wilhelm II and his empress Augusta Victoria, Queen Margherita, Sarah Bernhardt, Giosuè Carducci, Francesco Crispi, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Alessandro Fortis, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Franz Liszt, Gustav Adolf Cardinal von Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, Lord and Lady Sherbrooke, Pietro Mascagni, Mark Antokolski, Ernesto Nathan, Annie Besant, King Victor Emmanuel III, the Duke Caetani of Sermoneta, and King William II of Württemberg—again a partial list.

Ezekiel himself was something of a celebrity; he was decorated by the grand duke of Saxe-Meiningen in 1887, the German emperor in 1893, and the king of Italy in 1906, and was paid literary tribute by D'Annunzio, who wrote a poem about him, and by Carel Vosmaer and Mary Agnes Tincker, both of whom used him as a model for characters in their popular novels.² The age when celebrity could be professionalized and exist for handsome profit had yet to dawn,³ and so Ezekiel, gifted though he was from an academic, pre-Rodinesque perspective, and productive though he was, actually never achieved the level of recognition he craved and even knew something of want during his years in Rome.⁴ Even so, his studio in the Baths of Diocletian on the Piazza di Termini, not far from the railroad terminal, was for three decades, between 1879 and 1910, a rendezvous for the Roman haut monde—for royalty, titled aristocrats, artists, poets, musicians, politicians, and visitors to the Eternal City. As a Roman newspaper put it in eulogizing him, they frequented Ezekiel's studio "to admire his great works, receive his charming hospitality and listen to his wonderful musicales."⁵

Ezekiel and his friends lived in a world of dramatic gesture. It is probably not saying too much to characterize him as the nineteenth-century romantic par excellence, in love with what passed for aristocracy and the aristocratic flourish, though, as Henry James knew and Proust and Tolstoy, in truth the aristocracy of Western civilization had become at best a cryptobourgeoisie. Ezekiel, it may be, seeing the mythic South come to grief at Appomattox, founded a lovely new

mythos all his own in the Piazza di Termini—a mythos nourished not alone by the manners and traditions of European elitism but also by the dead South reborn in his imagination and by the Sephardic past as his fancy reshaped it. This was perhaps his preeminent charm, what drew the celebrated to the Baths of Diocletian, for they too needed a mythic existence, needed as he did to be secured against the recalcitrance of aborning democracy and technology, needed to preserve a simulacrum of conventional harmony in an age of spiraling social and economic abrasions. They needed to cling together, ancient bluebloods and new robber barons alike, to wrest a model of breeding and orderly authority from a world slipping away into turmoil. No threat awaited them under Ezekiel's roof, nothing awaited them there but the confirmation of their self-esteem. Still, there seems to have been minimal calculation on Ezekiel's part; no one would ever see in Ezekiel the conniving upstart Robert Herrick saw in Bernard Berenson.⁶ What Ezekiel did he did unselfconsciously, innocently, a touch of adolescence somehow never far from his ministrations.

Friendships with Franz Liszt and Cardinal Hohenloe

During his years in Rome, Ezekiel was befriended in particular by two genuinely eminent personalities, the Hungarian composer and virtuoso Franz Liszt (1811–1886) and Liszt's benefactor, the Bavarian Cardinal Prince Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst (1823–1896). With these two Ezekiel appears indeed to have been on intimate terms—his memoirs offer affectionate, detailed evocations of the time he spent with them in Rome at the Hotel Aliberti, the Villa d'Este, and the Santa Maria Maggiore Palace. Both Liszt and Hohenlohe sat for portrait busts.⁷ The strikingly realistic bronze Ezekiel did of Liszt in 1881 is surely one of his best works. A writer for *Il Popolo Romano* characterized the bust as uncommonly “expressive and life-like.”⁸ The bust Ezekiel did of the cardinal in 1886 has apparently been lost, but from a photograph of the clay model we can see the humor and geniality which Ezekiel experienced in Hohenlohe's company.⁹ Neither sculpture, I venture to say, could have emerged from a purely formal relationship between artist and subject.

Ezekiel was still a student at the Royal Academy of Art in Berlin when he visited Weimar to hear the Hungarian master conduct Bee-



The bust of Franz Liszt by Sir Moses Jacob Ezekiel

thoven's Ninth Symphony. It was there he "saw Liszt for the first time." The master "was very tall and thin and wore a long priestly garment, buttoned up to the throat. His immense features and his grey hair, very thick, falling almost to his shoulders, cut square all around, were very striking. He seemed to be worshipped by most of the people, by women especially."¹⁰

That evening, after the concert, Ezekiel was presented to Liszt, who invited him to "a little supper . . . at the hotel." He also met the celebrated pianist Carl Tausig on that occasion, but not Liszt's mistress, Carolyn, the princess of Sayn-Wittgenstein.¹¹ It was not until he had settled in Rome that he encountered the princess, whom he describes as "rather angular with a long nose . . . a long scoop bonnet, a very old-fashioned flounced dress, and an old India shawl."¹²

Ezekiel's Bust of Liszt

About 1880, some four years after his arrival in Rome, Ezekiel was commissioned by one of Liszt's students to make a bust of the master and went to Tivoli to call on Liszt at the Villa d'Este, Cardinal Hohenlohe's residence outside Rome.

There sat the old Master, his face jovial and lion-like, his grey hair brushed off his forehead and cut straight round his neck, his close-fitting clerical coat buttoned down the front. He was sitting at a desk in what seemed to me a poorly decorated, circular room. His genial smile gave me a ready welcome. He at once offered me one of his Tuscan cigars and said,

"I am just making some notes on one of my compositions, and you are not disturbing me in the least."

I told him that I had come to ask him to sit for a portrait bust which I had been asked to make by an American, the son-in-law of a lady he had known many years before. He said he would sit for me with the greatest pleasure.

"I have heard about you and your work, and although some busts have been made of me without my sitting for them, I have been made so often as I am not, I am glad of having an opportunity of being made once by you as God Himself made me!"¹³

The visit was also Ezekiel's first introduction to Cardinal Hohenlohe, "a martial-looking figure of a man in a black, red-bordered gown with red buttons down the front. He had grey-blue eyes, a priestly looking face rather German in cut, and a little red skullcap covering his close-cut hair."¹⁴

Ezekiel's charm clearly appealed to Liszt and Hohenlohe alike, and the cardinal suggested that the young American move into the Villa d'Este to model his bust of Liszt.¹⁵ Ezekiel was impressed by Hohenlohe:

His eminence was a man without any frills. He always looked at one directly in the eyes and seemed to see right through you. He detested hypocrisy of any kind. Altogether, his whole manner was so different from that of any man I had ever known that I wondered whether it would ever be possible that we should become real friends, but I earnestly wished it. The cardinal unceremoniously put his hand on the cigar box that was on the table, took out a handful of cigars, and handed them to me. When I wanted to take only one, he insisted that I should put the others in my pocket to smoke during the day. There was no way of refusing.¹⁶

The cardinal was in fact an extraordinary human being, a remarkable blend of the modernist and the traditionalist. At the time Ezekiel made his acquaintance, he was attempting to restore the Villa d'Este to its former grandeur. In earlier years, the Bavarian liberal had been one of the few prelates to oppose Pius IX's assertion of papal infallibility, and the Pope repaid Hohenlohe in 1872 by refusing to accept him as the new German Empire's first ambassador to the Holy See.¹⁷ Liszt revered him as possessed "to a rare degree of sound judgment, distinction, tact, and a princely mind, more complex and even more efficacious than that of . . . Voltaire"—all this in addition to Hohenlohe's "religious virtues, which are very sincere,"¹⁸ but did not impede his friendship with a man like Liszt, who was notorious for affairs with a number of high-born ladies. Hohenlohe could also show generosity to an infidel like Ezekiel—at a time when a vicious Judeophobia was still commonplace in Europe—and could even encourage Ezekiel's wish "to repopulate Syria and Palestine with [Jewish] refugees from [czarist] barbarism."¹⁹

Ezekiel thought his life at the Villa d'Este "immensely interesting."²⁰ Liszt, for instance, would speak rather acidly of his son-in-law Richard Wagner: "he has no regard for anything but himself," Liszt complained.

Liszt evidently had his patience worn out by the egotism and pretensions of the man he had helped both morally and materially—indeed had helped more than anyone else to make known to the world. Liszt, who was the broadest-minded, grandest cavalier I had ever met, could not naturally have any great

sympathy for a man who was so entirely wrapped up in himself that he thought all other people had to do was to sacrifice themselves for his benefit.²¹

Or Hohenlohe would denounce the Jesuits, whom he accused of scheming to revive the temporal power of the Papacy. He urged Ezekiel to take seriously Eugène Sue's satiric anticlerical novel *The Wandering Jew*: "Why, every intelligent person ought to have that book on his table and read it and believe in it!" he said. "It is the only true story of how a brotherhood works through centuries for its own power, and it is all done in such a dark and quiet way that not one person in a thousand believes that such things are possible."²² The cardinal himself would "never allow a Jesuit to cross his threshold," and if he ever became Pope, "the next day their brotherhood would be disbanded."²³

Liszt's pleasure in the bust must have been exhilarating for Ezekiel. Liszt pronounced the work "full of life."²⁴ But it was not only to the sculptor that he expressed satisfaction. To his friend Olga von Meyendorff, Liszt wrote in 1881 that a "young American sculptor named after a great prophet, Ezekiel, is spending this week at the Villa d'Este . . . working solely on a bust of poor me, larger than life and I hope more successful than the original."²⁵ A year and a half later he confided to Hohenlohe's sister-in-law his gratification that a major gallery like Goupil's in Paris was exhibiting the bust: "Despite some adverse criticism, I predict Ezechiel's [sic] final success."²⁶ Apparently the cardinal concurred: when he "saw the bust finished, he stood in front of it for a while and said nothing, but when he left the room, he ceremoniously took off his hat and bowed to the bust, just as if saluting a friend."²⁷ A copy of the bust was subsequently installed in the park at Schillingsfürst, Hohenlohe's Bavarian estate.²⁸

Even the formidable Princess Carolyn approved of Ezekiel's work:

When my bust of Liszt was brought to Rome after being cast in plaster, a great many people came to the studio to see it, and it was their unanimous opinion that it was a perfect success. One day after lunch Sophie Menter remembered that Liszt was very eager for the Princess Wittgenstein to see the bust. We took a cab and went together with my servant to take the bust for the princess to see. She had been bedridden for two months, but got up and came into the room so sprightly that it was a surprise to me. I had placed the bust on a stand in her candlelit parlor, and she went close up to it, put her nose as close to the bust as she could get it, and went in that way all over the work—in front, in profile, and behind—as though she was smelling it. She kept on saying, "C'est un très bon buste! C'est un très bon buste!"

I couldn't understand how in her dimly lighted room she could manage to see it all. Then she took a seat at a distance and began to discuss the decadence of art and the value of idealization. Notwithstanding the fact that my bust was neither an idealization nor had any resemblance to a Greek Apollo, she said that she was very much satisfied with the bust, that it was the best one that had been made of Liszt.²⁹

Ezekiel's memoirs portray Liszt as a man who would have been at home on a late-twentieth-century talk show. On one occasion in Vienna, Ezekiel writes, Liszt called on the Princess Metternich, who greeted him (in French): "My dear, how goes it with your business?" "Madam, it's bankers and diplomats who do business—I do music!" "But don't forget that nobility always imposes obligations!" "Not at all, madam, it's genius which imposes obligations."³⁰

Liszt, Ezekiel recalls,

smoked a great deal, generally the common Tuscan cigars, which he often offered me by the handful. I have heard it said that, when he was living in the Convent of San Francisco near the Forum in Rome, he sent up whole volumes of smoke walking up and down the room. A statue of the Virgin was in a niche and one of Christ also, in opposite corners of the room, and a friend once saw this and said,

"Maestro, don't you think that the tobacco smoke will give annoyance to those august personages?"

"I don't think so," Liszt replied, "they will think it is some new kind of incense!"³¹

Liszt's death at Bayreuth in 1886 came as "a sudden and a terrible blow" to Ezekiel:

I could hardly realize the truth and lay awake thinking about the Master and the many years of happy communion I had enjoyed with him. I went at once the next day to Tivoli . . . and made arrangements for a commemoration of Liszt in the Villa d'Este. I sent telegrams to all of his friends in Rome inviting them to come. I built up a kind of an altar in the Villa, draped it in mourning, and garlanded it with laurel. On the altar, I placed my bronze bust of Liszt. I sent a telegram to Bayreuth, to his granddaughter Daniela von Bülow, saying that the Villa d'Este was in mourning.³²

Ezekiel's friendship with Cardinal Hohenlohe survived Liszt's death and seems indeed to have deepened. Ezekiel found himself entrusted with confidential missions relating to the cardinal's interest in the Villa d'Este³³ and was made welcome at the cardinal's Santa Maria Mag-

giore Palace.³⁴ “If the cardinal had lived long enough, I think he would have been elected pope. He certainly would have made Italy the greatest country in Europe, as he was a firm advocate of religious freedom, and temporal power meant nothing to him.”³⁵ If he ever became Pope, Hohenlohe told his American friend,

“One of the first things I would do would be to make the priests get married. The next thing would be to take all of Michelangelo’s works out of the churches and put them in a museum built especially for them and not have them surrounded by candles and gilded crowns. And I would get *you* to build the museum for the great master’s works!”³⁶

Ezekiel was traveling in Spain when Hohenlohe died, in 1896. He tells us that he dreamed of the cardinal. “I saw how his face was changed by his illness, and I knew that he was dead, but he did not seem aware of it.”³⁷ Hohenlohe’s nephew reported that the cardinal had believed himself poisoned, presumably by the Jesuits and their Vatican allies.³⁸ Evidently the Italian journalist Primo Levi thought so too; Levi said as much in a work about Hohenlohe published soon after the cardinal’s death.³⁹ Ezekiel seems to have been rather skeptical, but in any case “rarely ever went to the Villa d’Este again, because it seemed like a graveyard.”⁴⁰

Ezekiel’s Jewishness

Not least noteworthy about Ezekiel was his ability to retain some sense of himself as a Jew. Surrounded by, on occasion even courted by, Christians of wealth and privilege, he nonetheless preserved some feeling of kinship with Jews and Judaism. When Cardinal Hohenlohe sent him to the Hapsburg Empire to secure the Archduke Francis Ferdinand’s agreement for the sale of the Villa d’Este, Ezekiel took advantage of the opportunity to visit the ghetto in Prague. There he was, as he says, “riding in a cab, an envoy to an imperial prince from and for one of the greatest princes of Germany and certainly the greatest cardinal in the Catholic Church!”⁴¹ Yet he was attracted to the ghetto, to “these poor descendants of the first wanderers from the Holy Land to this Prague, one of the oldest spots of their worship in this part of the world!”⁴² The ghetto reminded him of nothing so much as his own Richmond childhood. In the end, this collector of celebrities stood fast

against the temptation to celebrate his own superiority. His memoirs testify at one and the same time to the hierarchical pretentiousness of the world in which he lived and to his own essential innocence.

Stanley F. Chyet is Professor of American Jewish history at the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles.

Notes

1. *Moses Jacob Ezekiel: Memoirs from the Baths of Diocletian* (Detroit, 1975) [hereafter cited as E-M].

2. See E-M, pp. 15, 19, 65–66, 200, 459.

3. See C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York, 1957), p. 74.

4. E-M, pp. 307–308.

5. *La Tribuna*, March 30, 1917, cited in E-M, pp. 18, 66.

6. See Ernest Samuels, *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Connoisseur* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 267–269.

7. See E-M, p. 54.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 70.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 53–55.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 223–224.

17. See *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 8:268; Liszt, *The Letters of Franz Liszt to Marie zu Sayn-Wittgenstein*, trans. and ed. H. E. Hugo (Cambridge, 1953), p. 324; L. P. Wallace, *The Papacy and European Diplomacy, 1869–1878* (Chapel Hill, 1948), pp. 69, 109–110, 198, 269; J. B. Bury, *History of the Papacy in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1930), pp. 112–113, 128.

18. Liszt, *The Letters of Franz Liszt to Olga von Meyendorff, 1871–1886*, trans. W. A. Tyler (Washington, D.C., 1979), p. 50.

19. E-M, p. 460.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 230. See also Wallace, *Papacy and European Diplomacy*, p. 53.

24. E-M, p. 238.

25. *Letters . . . to Olga von Meyendorff*, pp. 393–394.

26. *Letters . . . to Marie zu Sayn-Wittgenstein*, pp. 260–261.

27. E-M, p. 241.

28. *Letters . . . to Marie zu Sayn-Wittgenstein*, pp. 260.

29. E-M, p. 242.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 270.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, p. 373.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 374.

39. See *Letters . . . to Marie zu Sayn-Wittgenstein*, p. 324. Some ideas die hard: at Jerusalem in the summer of 1981 an American priest told me of his suspicion that the short-lived Pope John Paul I had been poisoned for his presumptive liberalism.

40. *E-M*, p. 347.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 306–307.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 307.

CORRECTION

In the November 1982 issue biographical information for Judith Elkin's article "A Demographic Profile of Latin American Jewry" should have included the following statement: "An earlier version of this article appeared in Judith Laikin Elkin's *Jews of the Latin American Republics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980)."