

Chaim Zelig Slonimski: Unknown Attempt to Takeout a Patent on a Calculating Machine in Washington¹

By Jacob Shatzky

In 1838 Chaim Zelig Slonimski (1810-1904) settled in Warsaw and immediately became a regular guest in the home of Abraham Jakub Stern (1768-1842), the popular mathematician and inventor of various machines². In the same year Slonimski's work on astronomy, The History of the Heavens, appeared in Warsaw with introductions in Polish by two prominent Polish astronomers. This occurred for the young author and scholar who had recently been divorced, thanks to Abraham Jakub Stern, who wanted him as a son-in-law for his youngest daughter, Sarah (1824-1897). The match was finalized at the beginning of 1842, one month before Stern's death.

Slonimski inherited his father-in-law's inventions, and with the help of his wife he began to present them as his own. He had a competitor by the name of Abraham Staffel (1810-1880), a watchmaker from Warsaw, who had publicized in 1845 his own calculating machine built on the same principle as Stern's. There is no doubt that Staffel was a relative of Stern's. According to family tradition Stern kept his machines a secret from Slonimski because he was afraid that the latter might copy them and declare them as his own achievements.

Staffel took out patents for his calculating machine in several west European countries. Slonimski tried to do the same in 1847 in the U.S.A., although he did not succeed probably because of a secret report from the one who is the real inventor, but the attempt itself is of significant historical interest.

First of all, one finds out from Slonimski's application that in 1847 in New York there was a company of two Jews from Warsaw named Neustadt and Barnett who were interested in financing his invention and they apparently paid \$300 – at that time a very large sum of money – in order to get a patent.

Slonimski felt very safe in Warsaw. The governor-general Paskiewicz granted him powerful patronage. In 1845 Paskiewicz even asked the banker Mattias Rosen to acquire for Slonimski an amount of money in order for him to make a trip to Petersburg³. In Warsaw there was no American consulate yet. In the conditions of a strict police regime no one would dare to request for a patent in a foreign country without the permission of Paskiewicz. Evidently Slonimski did this with the governor-general's approval.

The application itself is of cultural-historical value, but the detailed description of the calculating machine itself with the remarks of the clerk in Washington is more an antiquarian issue.

We give here the original text of Slonimski's application according to the YIVO archives. Since a detailed biography of Slonimski still does not exist it is worth mentioning a few articles that contain sizeable material for such a monograph.

Translation from Yiddish courtesy of Leo Weinstock and Nathan Gottlieb

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² Jacob Shatzky, "Abraham Jacob Stern", The Joshua Starr Memorial Volume, New York, 1953, pp. 203-218

³ YIVO Bleter, VI, 80, 1934.