

SAMUEL FRÄNKEL

A Berlin Jew as a Financier of Polish Industrialization in the Early 19th Century

by Markus Nesselrodt

<https://doi.org/10.25355/ahe8-5869>



Photo credit: Grabstätte der Familie Fränkel in Warschau. K. Wójcicki: Cmentarz Powązkowski pod Warszawą, Band II, Warszawa 1855, [CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Citation recommendation

Markus Nesselrodt (2023-12-07): Samuel Fränkel. A Berlin Jew as a Financier of Polish Industrialization in the Early 19th Century. In: Copernico. History and Cultural Heritage in Eastern Europe. URL: <https://www.copernico.eu/en/link/64cbab124d6318.64240062> (2025-12-02)

License

Published under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) (illustrations see picture credits)

To the german language version: <https://www.copernico.eu/de/link/64cbab124d6318.64240062>

The Berlin Jew Samuel Fränkel (1773-1833) settled in Warsaw in 1798 as a representative of a large bank. Within a few years and across numerous political breaks, Fränkel rose to become the most important banker in a divided Poland. In doing so, Fränkel always successfully drew on his transnational connections to Jews and non-Jews in Prussia, Austria and Russia.

Warsaw experienced numerous political changes in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. After the [third partition](#)

Partitions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth

also: Partitions of Poland, Partitions of Poland-Lithuania, Polish Partitions

In the course of three partitions in 1772, 1793 and 1795, the aristocratic Republic of Poland-Lithuania was divided between the Russian Empire, Prussia and the Habsburg Monarchy and disappeared from the political map of Europe as a sovereign state until 1918.

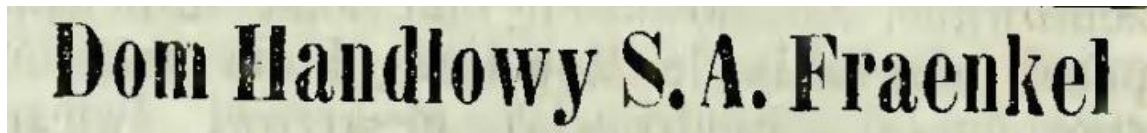
of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth – often referred to as the noble or aristocratic republic – (1795), a decade of Prussian rule over the city began. In the course of his campaign towards the East, Napoleon conquered Warsaw and made it the capital of a vassal state. After the defeat of the French army in Russia, Warsaw fell to the Russian Empire in 1815 and became the capital of the Kingdom of Poland. This period of political upheaval also offered new economic opportunities which many immigrants took advantage of. Samuel Fränkel, a Jew born in Berlin in 1773, arrived in Warsaw during the Prussian rule and rose above all political breaks to become one of the most important bankers in the divided Poland. For his services to the Polish economy, he was recognized by the Polish government and awarded medals by the Russian tsar. How had Fränkel managed this? How had he, as a German-speaking Jew, been able to develop into one of the central figures of the economic system in the Kingdom of Poland?

From Berlin to Warsaw

As a result of the Third Partition of Poland-Lithuania, the Prussian state expanded at the expense of the disintegrated noble republic. Warsaw was now in Prussia, only a few kilometers away from the [border with the Habsburg Empire](#) ↗. With their rule, which spanned almost ten years, the Prussians instigated a number of developments that would continue to shape Warsaw beyond 1806. Among these was undoubtedly the reorganization of Jewish immigration to the city. Until 1802, Jews were essentially forbidden to settle permanently in certain parts of the city. Instead, they were either pushed to the outskirts of the city or

allowed only a short-term stay in the center. The prohibition of settlement *De non tolerandis judaeis* (*On the non-tolerantion of Jews*), in force since the 16th century, created the legal basis for this and was only finally lifted by the Prussians. The Prussians pursued a policy strongly determined by economic considerations. They saw the Jewish inhabitants of Warsaw as sound taxpayers who were to contribute to the state budget with separate levies. In return, they received the right to settle permanently in Warsaw.

Samuel Fränkel from Berlin also made use of this right. Fränkel came from a respected Jewish banking family in Berlin. Thanks to the mediation of his father Benjamin Fränkel, the young Samuel Fränkel completed a commercial apprenticeship in the banking house of his cousins Moses and Salome Levy. After his successful graduation, he was sent to Warsaw in 1798 as a representative of the banking house "S.M. Levy". Fränkel's first place of work was in the building of the Prussian State Bank in Bielańska-Straße. Sixteen years later, Fränkel was to make the same building the headquarters of his own bank. Banking between Berlin and Warsaw was still a relatively recent phenomenon at the beginning of Prussian rule on the Weichsel [Vistula]. The Prussian State Bank, founded in 1772, primarily handled the salt and zinc trade as well as loans with the Polish aristocracy through its branch in Warsaw. The economic crisis of the aristocratic republic following the Second Partition of 1793 led to the collapse of almost all existing banks. Numerous Berlin financial institutions took their place under the new political conditions. These included numerous private bankers, among whom were again many men of Jewish origin who had converted to Christianity. Their experience in the provision of debt instruments, their cross-border networks and their willingness to break new economic ground enabled them to rise to become Warsaw's new financial elite. Fränkel also owed his professional advancement in no small measure to his skillful marriage policy. His wife, Atalja Teresa Józefina, was the daughter of Samuel Zbytkower and Judyta Jakubowicza, the wealthiest Jews in Warsaw. Although he himself was not yet one of the city's leading bankers, Fränkel managed to establish himself in Warsaw's social circles. This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that he was one of the founding members of the Musical Society in 1805, which was co-initiated by the Prussian composer and writer E.T.A. Hoffmann, among others. However, the withdrawal of the Prussians from Warsaw and the beginning of Napoleonic rule marked the actual beginning of Fränkel's rise to the top of Warsaw's financial elite. The prelude was his conversion. Fränkel had come to Prussian Warsaw as a Jew, but converted to Christianity immediately after the French invasion and took the middle name Anton (or Antonin in Polish). It can be assumed that Fränkel took this step in order to circumvent the numerous social hurdles for Jews. After conversion, he founded the S.A. Fränkel banking house in 1808.

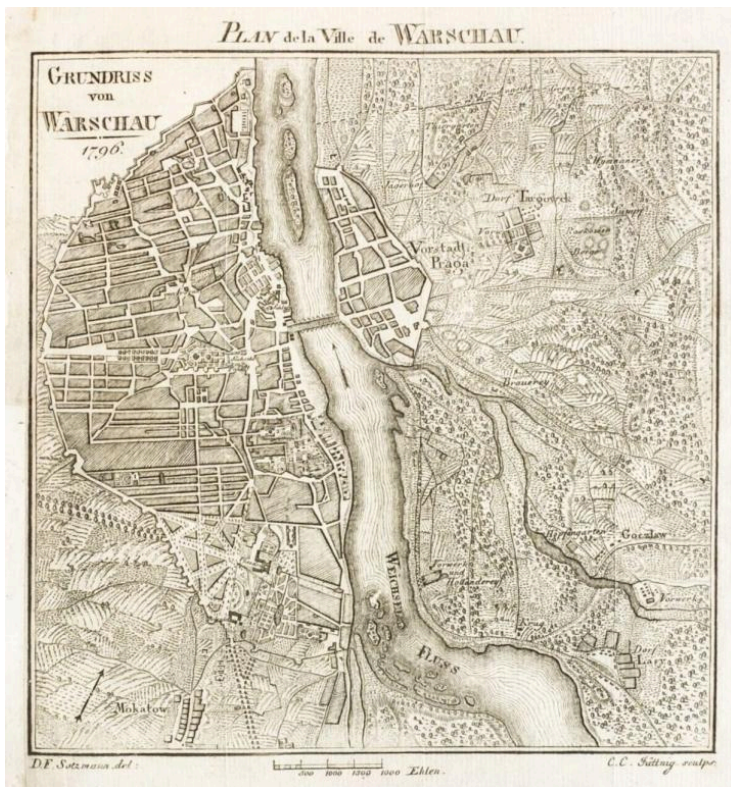


Company logo S.A. Fränkel in a Warsaw daily newspaper, 1830s. [CC0 1.0](#)

Auf dem Weg an die Spitze

Fränkel's excellent connections in the Berlin banking industry lasted beyond the political break of 1806. Because of his good contacts and the lack of solvent competition, the government of the newly created Duchy of Warsaw turned to him in 1807 with the task of reorganizing financial relations with Berlin. Previously, Fränkel had risen to the small circle of those bankers who possessed the "confidence of the government." In fact, Fränkel succeeded in arranging several major loans for the new state, earning the trust and gratitude of the new political rulers. He also expanded his network in Warsaw by joining the Warsaw Merchants Guild – henceforth as a Christian. Firmly anchored in Warsaw, Fränkel cultivated his contacts in Berlin. In 1812, for example, his banking house organized a major order to equip Napoleon's army. Two years later, Fränkel, together with the Krakow merchant L. Mendelsohn, acquired the state leasehold monopoly for the salt trade in the duchy, once again using his contacts in Prussia. The monopoly position thus created for the entire salt trade in the country proved to be extremely lucrative and laid the foundation for Fränkel's later fortune.

Even after the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the establishment of the Kingdom of Poland, Fränkel was one of the most important bankers. The country, severely scarred by the war, was looking for means to finance its industrialization and repeatedly came back to the financial institution S.A. Fränkel.



Map of Warsaw from 1796. Polona.pl, [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

On the way to the top

The new political conditions also opened up opportunities for business. In 1816, Fränkel and other merchants founded the first stock exchange in the Kingdom of Poland, with its headquarters in the Saxon Palace in Warsaw. A year later, he ascended to the Exchange's Council of Elders. Fränkel was also active in the local Masonic lodges and thus once again found himself in illustrious company. One lodge popular among the leading figures of business life in the kingdom, to which Fränkel also belonged, was the "Hall of Consistency in the Orient

at Warsaw," founded in 1810. Its members included numerous German-speaking industrialists, merchants and real estate owners from Warsaw. Fränkel thus belonged to higher social circles, which enabled him to steadily increase his importance for economic development in the country.

Again and again, Fränkel used the cooperation with his son-in-law, the Berlin banker Friedrich Magnus, to his advantage. In 1828, after the Polish director of the newly founded Bank Polski had been unsuccessful in his search for international buyers for Polish government bonds, the S.A. Fränkel banking house stepped in. Only after Fränkel's stepson Aleksander Laski, as the bank's representative, had used his contacts in Berlin did the deal materialize. A Berlin consortium specially founded under the leadership of Banking House F.M. Magnus purchased a government bond in the amount of 42 million zloty from the Bank Polski. The money raised was to be used to build up and expand local industry. Fränkel's decisive role in mediating state financial policy interests testifies to his position as one of the leading financial managers in the Kingdom of Poland.

In addition to his activities in the financial sector, Fränkel was, at the same time, also active in the textile industry. From 1823, his drapery factory in Powązki near Warsaw produced primarily for export to Russia. The following year, together with Konstanty Wolicki, Piotr Steinkeller and others, Fränkel founded a company for coal and zinc trading. In the view of his contemporaries, this made Fränkel one of the "wealthiest capitalists" in the Kingdom of Poland.

Late in his life, Fränkel served as a judge at the Commercial Court of the Mazovian Voivodeship [an area administered by a voivode or governor]. As a commercial councilor of Bank Polski from 1828 until his death in 1833, the Berlin native showed that he was concerned with the financial well-being of the Polish state. Fränkel's economic activities earned him the recognition of the Polish government. As early as 1825, his services to the Polish state had been recognized with the Order of Saint Stanislaw. Like other wealthy people, Fränkel was also involved in philanthropy and donated money to the Warsaw Merchants' Association, the Jewish hospital and the Protestant community in Warsaw, among others.

When Samuel Anton Fränkel died in Frankfurt am Main on February 17, 1833, he was described in an obituary published in the "Kurjer Warszawski" (or Warsaw Courier) as a businessman who was always honorable, unselfish and had moral integrity. Born in Berlin in 1773, Fränkel's path to becoming an esteemed Warsaw citizen exemplifies the close economic ties between Berlin and Warsaw as well as Prussia and Poland. With the help of his transnational network and his economic skills, Fränkel succeeded in staying in Warsaw through all political upheavals. The fact that he continued to maintain close contacts with his Jewish environment even after his conversion, which took place under social pressure, shows

the importance of Jewish transnational networks for Polish economic history.

English translation: Coady Buckley

Literature

Aust, Cornelia: Merchants, Army Suppliers, Bankers. Transnational Connections and the Rise of Warsaw's Jewish Mercantile Elite (1770-1820). In: Dynner, Glenn (ed.): Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis. Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday of Professor Antony Polonsky. Leiden 2015. p. 42–69.

Pufelska, Agnieszka: Die erzwungene Nähe. Warschau als zweitgrößte Stadt Preußens (1795-1806). In: Kodzik, Joanna/Zientara, Włodzimierz (eds.): Hybride Identitäten in den preußisch-polnischen Stadtkulturen der Aufklärung. Studien zur Aufklärungsdiffusion zwischen Stadt und Land, zur Identitätsbildung und zum Kulturaustausch in regionalen und internationalen Kommunikationsnetzwerken. Bremen 2016. p. 188–299.

Schipper, Ignacy: Dzieje handlu żydowskiego na ziemiach polskich. Warszawa 1937.