

FRANKISM, a Jewish religious movement centered on the leadership of Ya'akov (Jakub) ben Yehudah Leib Frank (1726?–1791). The term *Frankism* was coined in early nineteenth-century Warsaw and was initially a slur directed at the descendants of Frank's followers who converted to Roman Catholicism and attempted to conceal their background. It was only with the appearance of the first scholarly accounts of the movement in the second half of the nineteenth century that the term became to be used for the whole variety of phenomena connected by the authors to Frank's activity. Sources from Frank's era, however, provide several different perspectives. In Jewish accounts, his followers are normally not presented as a separate group but as an offshoot of preexisting heretical movements, most notably of Sabbatianism. The majority of Christian observers saw the Frankists as a Jewish sect opposed to the Talmud. The Frankists initially thought of themselves as a branch of Judaism opposed to the authority of the rabbis and rejecting some elements of rabbinic tradition. Subsequently, Frankists redefined themselves as a separate religious group, practically independent from hitherto existing forms of both Judaism and Christianity.

Ya'akov Frank was born in Podolia, according to some sources in Korolówka and to others in Buczacz. Shortly after his birth, his parents moved to the Ottoman Empire. There is some evidence that his father was involved in the spread of Sabbatian propaganda in the 1720s and it is likely that their migration to Turkey was connected to the campaign against the Sabbatians that swept through Polish Jewish communities after the discovery of heretical documents by Jewish authorities in 1725. Frank spent his youth in Czernowitz, Smyrna, Constantinople, and Bucharest. In 1752, he



married in Nicopolis, and on the night of his wedding was initiated into a Sabbatian group. A year later, he moved to Salonika and established contacts with the most radical branch of the Dönme (Sabbatians), founded by Berukhiah Russo (d. 1720), who was considered by his followers to be the next manifestation of the soul of Shabetai Tsevi and was pronounced as the incarnation of the God of Israel. From Salonika, Frank made a pilgrimage to the grave of Shabetai's prophet, Nathan of Gaza, in Skopje. During his stay in the Ottoman Empire, he became known as Ya'akov Frenk or Frank—an epithet denoting

a European in the Orient (for Ashkenazim in Poland, it could also denote Sefardim visiting from Turkey).

In 1755 Frank returned to Poland, where he associated with the Sabbatian leaders of Podolia and visited Jewish communities that had been known for their heretical leanings since the beginning of the eighteenth

century (Korolówka, Jezierzany, Busk, and Rohatyń). Presenting himself as a famous kabbalist and an emissary of the Dönme, he managed to unify splintered Sabbatian groups and attracted many followers throughout Podolia. On the night of 27 January 1756, Frank and a group of his followers were discovered conducting an antinomian ritual in Lanckoronie nad Zbruczem. At the request of the rabbis, the local Polish authorities arrested the participants. Frank, as a Turkish subject, was released the following day and returned to the Ottoman territories. He converted to Islam, went to Constantinople, and was given an estate in the Chocim province (now Khotin, Ukraine).

At the same time in Poland, the rabbis instituted an inquiry at the *bet din* (Jewish court) of Satanów. Those who had engaged in the ritual in Lanckoronie, along with their families, were found guilty of breaking numerous halakhic prohibitions. They confessed that they had committed adultery, engaged in wife swapping, studied banned Sabbatian books, and professed the faith of Shabetai Tsevi. The results of the inquiry were laid before a rabbinic assembly in Brody, which pronounced a *herem* (ban of excommunication) against the Sabbatians. The *herem* was confirmed at a session of the Council of Four Lands in Konstantynów in September 1756. The Council extended the ban of Brody over the other communities of Podolia and imposed heavy penalties upon the Sabbatians.

Following the advice of Rabbi Ya'akov Emden, the Jewish authorities also contacted the bishop of Kamieniec Podolski, Mikołaj Dembowski, in whose diocese the Lanckoronie case had taken place, and argued that since the rites of the Sabbatians involved the practice of magic and utterly immoral conduct, both Jews and Christians should condemn the Frankists equally and the Christians should burn them at the stake. However, the scheme of turning over the followers of Frank to the Catholic authorities backfired terribly. Once Dembowski was given a chance to meddle in internal Jewish matters, he immediately seized the opportunity. Frank's followers managed to turn the tables on their rabbinic opponents and forged an alliance with the priests instead. They presented themselves as the Contra-Talmudists, arguing that in the course of studying ancient kabbalistic books they had independently reached the conviction that God is one nature in three persons and that the real reason for their persecution by the Jews was the similarity between the Frankist creed and that of the Christians. The alliance between Sabbatians and the clergy resulted ultimately in a forced public disputation between Jews and Contra-Talmudists.

On 2 August 1756, the Contra-Talmudists submitted a manifesto to the Lwów consistory. Claiming to speak on behalf of similarly believing Jews in other countries, 23 representatives stated that the Talmud is blasphemous and contrary to reason and God's commands. They also demanded a disputation so that they could publicly prove the principles of their faith. The nine principles were as follows:

1. We believe in everything that was taught and commanded by God in the Old Testament.
2. The books of Moses and the other books of the Old Testament can be compared to a richly dressed maiden, whose face is covered and whose beauty cannot be seen. These books are full of the hidden wisdom of God; they speak of things mysterious and of the future, and therefore cannot be comprehended by human reason without the assistance of Divine Grace.
3. The rabbis of old times sought to expound the Old Testament. Their explanations are known as the Talmud and contain many lies, irrationalities, and much nonsense about and hostility to God and His teachings.
4. On the basis of the Old Testament, we believe that there is one God, without beginning or end, who is the maker of heaven and earth and all things known and unknown.
5. We believe that there are three persons within one God, without division within him.
6. We believe that God manifested himself in corporeal form, in all respects like other human beings, but without sin.
7. The city of Jerusalem will not be rebuilt until the end of time.
8. Jews have waited in vain for the Messiah to come to raise them above the whole world.
9. On the basis of the Old Testament, we believe that God would himself be clothed in human form and would atone for all the sins for which the world was cursed. At his coming the world would be pardoned and cleansed of all iniquity.

The disputation took place in Kamieniec Podolski from 20 to 28 June 1757. The participants included 19 opponents of the Talmud and 40 rabbis. Frank did not take part in the disputation and it is unclear if he had any influence on the formulation of the theses. Following the disputation, Dembowski issued a verdict in favor of the Frankists. The ecclesiastical court dismissed evidence supplied by the Jewish court of Satanów as slander. It imposed a number of financial penalties on the rabbis, ordered the flogging of Jews responsible for wreaking havoc in Lanckoronie, and condemned the Talmud as worthless and corrupt, ordering copies of it to be burned in the city square. The court decided that although Judaism offended the Christian faith and authority, it was for the civil authorities to decide if Jews should be tolerated in the Commonwealth. At that point it seemed that Sabbatianism would be legally recognized as a legitimate form of Judaism. Giving up the long-established tradition that the Christian state would recognize only one Jewish religion, the court decided that an individual Jew might change from one Jewish "denomination" to another. Drawing upon the precedent of the Karaites, the verdict of the court defined Sabbatians as Contra-Talmudist

Jews and equated their rights, privileges, and obligations with those of other Jews living in the Commonwealth.

Circumstances changed, however, with the sudden death of Bishop Dembowski on 9 November 1757: the sectarians unexpectedly found themselves in a sort of limbo between Judaism and Christianity, lacking support and protection from either side. The burning of copies of the Talmud stopped; the campaign against the heretics was renewed with double force; and many of them fled across the Dniester to Turkey, where they joined Frank. It seemed that the only viable option for the followers of Frank might have been to stay in the Ottoman Empire as one of many Sabbatian communities, overtly professing Islam while at the same time practicing a heterodox form of Judaism. But the climate in Poland changed again. Bishop Kajetan Sołtyk, who orchestrated the ritual murder trial of Żytomierz in 1753, faced widespread allegations of forging evidence, bribery, and murder. He decided to use the Contra-Talmudists to improve his public image. If Jews themselves independently confirmed the accusation of ritual murder, Sołtyk would be able to silence his critics. In order to “prove” that the Żytomierz accusations were true and that Jews indeed used Christian blood for ritual purposes, Sołtyk in 1758 published the brochure *Błędy talmudowe od samychże Żydów uznane y przez nową sektę Siapwscieciuchów, czyli Contratalmudystów wyiawione* (The Errors of the Talmud Acknowledged by the Jews Themselves and Revealed by the New Sect of Siapwscieciuchy [i.e., “Sabbatians”] or the Contra-Talmudists). The pamphlet aimed to confirm the statements concerning ritual murder using new evidence supplied by the Contra-Talmudists. Parallel to the publication of the brochure, Sołtyk managed to convince King Augustus III to bring the sect back to the Commonwealth. On 11 July 1758, the king issued a letter of safe conduct for the Contra-Talmudists who had fled to Turkey. Members of the sect (including Frank) slowly began to return to Poland and established themselves in the estates of Bishop Antoni Sebastian Dembowski, brother of the late protector of the Contra-Talmudists Mikołaj Dembowski and a close friend of Sołtyk.

On 20 February 1759, on Sołtyk’s instigation, the Contra-Talmudists requested permission for another disputation. They called for a unity of all faiths, and promised to prove that Jews used Christian blood for ritual purposes. They presented the following seven points for the debate:

1. All prophecies about the coming of the Messiah have already been fulfilled.
2. The Messiah is the true God, whose name is Adonai. He took human form and suffered for our redemption.
3. Since the advent of the true Messiah, sacrifices and ceremonies have been abolished.
4. Everyone should follow the teaching of the Messiah, for salvation lies only within it.

5. The cross is the sign of the Holy Trinity and the seal of the Messiah.
6. A person can achieve faith in the Messiah the King only through baptism.
7. The Talmud teaches that Jews need Christian blood, and whoever believes in the Talmud is bound to use it.

The disputation took place in Lwów from 17 July to 19 September 1759. Although Frank did not take part in the disputation, he came to Lwów and was recognized as the leader of the Contra-Talmudists. Pressure from the Vatican led to no decisive verdict being promulgated and the rabbis were obliged only to formulate a written response to the Frankists' accusations. During the disputation, Frank's followers became to be treated not as a Jewish sect professing tenets that were not recognized by mainstream Judaism, but as a group of candidates for conversion to Christianity. The first baptisms took place even before the formal end of the disputation, and they were attended by a large public, with many important noblemen acting as godparents. On 17 September, Frank himself was baptized in Lwów Cathedral and adopted the name Jakub Josef. Approximately 3,000 people converted in Lwów, Lublin, and Warsaw. Some of them were immediately ennobled on the basis of a Lithuanian statute of 1588, which gave the prerogatives of the gentry to baptizing Jews and their offspring.

The church devoted much effort to spreading news of the Lwów disputation. The primate of Poland issued a pastoral letter urging Catholics to support the converts with alms and ordered that an abridged version of the minutes of the disputation be sent to parish churches and read during Sunday sermons. Reports and manifestos from the disputations were translated into Latin, French, Spanish, Armenian, Portuguese, Italian, and German and disseminated in different countries. News of the conversions reached England and the New World.

After his baptism, Frank conducted himself ostentatiously. He moved to Warsaw where he was baptized a second time in a royal ceremony, with Starosta Bratkowski acting in the name of King August III as a godfather. He attended theaters and visited the homes of important magnates. However, several fresh converts in Lwów reported to their confessor that Frank's adoption of Christianity was not sincere. On 7 January 1760, he was arrested. Shortly thereafter, the ecclesiastical authorities issued an official proclamation concerning his case. The proclamation stated that an investigation had established the genuineness of belief of the Jews who had converted to Catholicism. However, due to the negative influence of their leader, Jakub Frank, the converts had strayed into erroneous beliefs about the Second Coming and the Last Judgment. As the followers gave excessive honor to Frank, the authorities decided to separate him from his disciples and to isolate him at a secluded location, where he was to remain while

awaiting a decision by the Holy See. On 24 February Frank was sent to the Częstochowa monastery.

Relatively little is known about Frank's thirteen-year stay in Częstochowa. Sołtyk continued to support his protégé, underwriting Frank's expenses in the monastery and allocating special funds for settling the converts in his diocese. Frank was given large and comfortable quarters for himself and his entourage, and was allowed to receive guests and to send envoys. His closest disciples gradually began to move to Częstochowa and its surrounding villages. Although Frank regularly attended Catholic services and studied the New Testament, he also conducted his own rituals on the walls surrounding the shrine. Both the monks and the pilgrims staying in the monastery noted these rituals, but there is no evidence of any efforts to prevent them from taking place. Frankist sources mention that in 1768 and 1769 envoys from Częstochowa went to Podolia, Moldavia, Hungary, Germany, and Moravia. Frank also embarked upon negotiations with the Russians and sent two emissaries to Moscow. In Warsaw, Frankists held talks with the Russian resident, Prince Nikolai Vassil'evich Repnin. In exchange for liberation from captivity, Frank promised that 20,000 Jews would convert to Greek Orthodoxy.

Although the Russians decided to turn down his offer, they did set Frank free when Częstochowa fortress fell into their hands after the collapse of the Bar Confederation in August 1772. Frank was supplied with passports, left Poland, and headed for Brünn (Brno) in Moravia. He was accompanied by 18 people, though none of the leaders of the Frankists during the disputations in Poland belonged to his entourage. The reason for his choice of Brünn (and perhaps even for the idea of moving to Moravia) was his connection with the Dobruschka family [*see Dobruschka-Schönfeld Family*]. There, he presented himself as a rich merchant forced to leave Poland due to the adverse effect on trade created by current political disturbances. Although he initially raised some suspicion among the authorities, he was ultimately given permission to settle. In March 1757, he visited Vienna and was admitted, along with his daughter Ewa, to audiences with Joseph II and Maria Theresa. On numerous occasions he visited Joseph II in military encampments. Frank had also dealings with Moravian aristocrats and was involved in various political and spiritual projects. He became a familiar figure of polite society, and some of his followers and associates made their way into the enlightened ranks while developing successful careers. Many also integrated into surrounding non-Jewish communities. The social and regional profile of his following increasingly began to differentiate, occasionally leading to tensions between old members of the sect from Poland and newcomers from Moravia and Germany.

As the prospects of an Austro-Turkish war loomed, the idea of utilizing the Sabbatian network of contacts in the Ottoman Empire was floated. Reportedly, Frank had conversations with Joseph II on arming Jews to fight

against the Turks. Frank then had a quarrel with Joseph II, who ordered him to send away all his followers and pay all his debts. After desperate fund-raising among followers in Constantinople, Warsaw, and Prossnitz, Frank paid all his creditors, left the Habsburg monarchy on 12 February 1786, and settled in Offenbach am Main. In Offenbach, Frank's health gradually deteriorated; in 1788 and 1789 he suffered two attacks of apoplexy and recovered, only to surrender to a third attack on 10 December 1791.

The last quarter of the eighteenth century saw the beginnings of the decline of Frankism. Although some of its communities survived long into the nineteenth century, the movement lost much of its homogeneity. Frankism was a particularly active movement in three cities: Offenbach, where Frank lived the last four years of his life and where he established the court that served as a pilgrimage center for followers from different countries; Warsaw, where the majority of the converted Frankists lived; and Prague, whose importance grew in an inverse ratio to Offenbach.

The Offenbach court was led by Frank's daughter Ewa. The majority of the town's citizens knew nothing about the sect's Jewish background. Ewa often ventured to local houses and established some contacts with Offenbach's polite society. She was always vague about her past, but her cultivated manners, piano playing, skills at embroidery, and fluent French encouraged the assumption that she had come from an aristocratic background. Offenbach's poorer community also praised her generosity: she gave alms and supported various charitable cases. Her contributions for ecclesiastical purposes were particularly generous and the first Roman Catholic chapel in Offenbach was established and decorated thanks to Ewa's assistance. These factors gave birth to a legend of the royal ancestry of the Frank family. It was believed that Ewa was in reality the natural daughter of Tsaritsa Elisabeth and Prince Aleksei Rasumovsky, and that Jakub Frank had been appointed by the Russian royal house as her guardian.

The leaders of the Offenbach court attempted to unify the splintering movement and dispatched circular epistles to various Jewish communities. The first of these appeared around 1798, but most of the letters can be dated to 1800. Some copies were written in red ink and came to be known as the Red Letters, particularly because their contents made extensive use of the symbolic connection between *adom* (red) and Edom (the land of Esau, Rome, and Christianity). The epistles included the full texts of two letters allegedly written by Frank during his imprisonment in Częstochowa, a short commentary thereupon, and another message signed by the leaders of the court in Offenbach. The letters predicted impending catastrophes and the spreading of hatred directed against Jews. They called upon Jews to convert to Christianity.

Although the epistles did not have a major influence upon Jews, they caused non-Jewish authorities to react anxiously. Prussian authorities conducted an investigation in Offenbach and issued a statement portraying

Frank as a bankrupt charlatan. Indeed, Ewa Frank incurred numerous debts with local merchants and was eventually put under house arrest. The court proceedings against her ended with her death in September 1816.

After Frank's funeral in 1791, the majority of the Polish followers had left Offenbach for Warsaw. The vacuum left by their departure was immediately filled by new arrivals from Prague. During Frank's lifetime, Frankism had spread in Moravia, though there is no evidence of a following in Bohemia. Nonetheless, the region, and especially Prague, had a strong, independent Sabbatian tradition that predated Frank's appearance and was connected to Yonatan Eybeschütz and his pupils. The Prague Sabbatians were not very numerous, but with their economic and social standing they held an influential position in the Jewish community. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the Prague group was led by the Wehle and Hönigsberg families. In contrast to the Polish Frankists, the Prague Sabbatians did not engage in open propaganda; Jewish authorities initially treated the issue as a kind of open secret, preferring to avoid confrontation.

After Frank's death, the Prague Sabbatians established connections with the Offenbach court and became Ewa's main financial supporters, and Offenbach itself was a pilgrimage center for the sons of the Prague families. The Jewish leaders of Prague decided that the matter could not be ignored any longer. In autumn 1800, the Sabbatians were excommunicated. In the same year, Rabbi Eli'ezer Flekeles delivered a series of sermons against the group. Soon after, riots erupted in the city and scores of anti- and pro-Sabbatian pamphlets were printed. Although the Prague group posthumously appropriated Frank, there is no evidence of any contact between the Prague Sabbatians and the followers of Frank during his life, and it is doubtful that this line of development grew organically out of his teachings. [*See Sabbatianism; Wehle Family; and the biography of Flekeles.*]

Even when Frank was imprisoned in Cześćochowa, Warsaw had become the most important Frankist center in Poland. Some of the people who played crucial roles during the disputations moved there, and although a few of them assimilated very quickly and severed their ties to the sect, others maintained close ties with Frank and continued to support his court first in Brünn and then in Offenbach. As the Warsaw community grew more established, it gained relative independence from the leadership of the sect in Germany. According to contemporary accounts, the Warsaw Frankists were very numerous (an anonymous pamphlet printed in 1791 estimated the total number of baptized Frankists living in Warsaw at 6,000 and in the whole of Poland at 24,000) and were said to monopolize certain trades and professions. This factor led to many conflicts between Polish burghers and the Frankists. In Polish brochures and pamphlets published in Warsaw in the 1790s, the Frankists were portrayed as neither Jewish nor Christian, and were characterized as managing to escape the control of both Jewish and Polish authorities, operating in a legal vacuum with a peculiar mix of Judaism and

Christianity. Although nominally Roman Catholic, the Frankists reportedly circumcised their sons, kept the Sabbath, had separate burials, and did not marry outside their religion. The legal vacuum gave the Frankists an unfair edge in economic competition. Although some of the brochures were openly antisemitic and attacked “Jewish” features of the Frankists, mocking their dress, awkward Polish pronunciation, and other mannerisms, there seems to have been a growing feeling that members should be treated as a group within Christianity rather than as an offshoot of Judaism. This perception became a commonplace in the early nineteenth century and gained official recognition in a special ukase on Israelite Christians issued by Tsar Alexander I on 25 March 1817.

Although there is evidence that the Frankists as a distinct social group existed at least until the 1880s, it is very unlikely that Frank’s doctrine was still taught in its original form. In nineteenth-century Warsaw, Frankism became a kind of a mutual aid association, in which the connections initially established within the sect were used to facilitate business enterprises. The gradual evaporation of the religious dimension of the movement made it possible for manuscripts expounding Frank’s teachings to begin to surface and become available to scholars.

The most important Frankist document, *Zbiór słów pańskich* (The Collection of the Words of the Lord) was most likely composed during Frank’s stay in Brünn and then supplemented with additional material during the Offenbach period. The text is in Polish with numerous Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino interpolations written in transliteration; each Hebrew quotation is accompanied by a Polish translation. The entire collection had at least 2,194 numbered fragments. Prior to World War II, there were at least nine different versions of this manuscript in circulation. The only known Frankist manuscripts extant today are housed in the Jagiellonian Library in Kraków and in the H. Łopaciński Public Library in Lublin.

Zbiór słów pańskich is an assembly of brief stenographic notes that document even the most casual of Frank’s utterances and gestures. The greater part of the texts takes the form of a recorded oral transcript, bringing together fairy tales, dreams, proverbs, and parables told by Frank to his followers. Although many of the tales paraphrase classical fables from the Zohar or midrashic literature, there is a conscious effort to step beyond a traditional Jewish frame of reference. Frankist tales are based on an exegetical principle of tendentious rewriting of traditional Jewish narratives so as to invert established hierarchies, discredit honored symbols, and reevaluate the negative characters of the Jewish tradition. *Zbiór słów pańskich* presents the Revelation on Sinai as a monstrous deception in which an evil power bestowed nonsensical and harmful laws upon the people of Israel. These laws can be countered by what Frank calls the “way to Esau” or the “way to Life.” The terms denote freedom from constraints and conventions. In some contexts, *Life* also means physical immortality. The

Way to Life also has a deeply apocalyptic character; it involves not only the destruction of established institutions but also absolute denial of the world of creation, in an attempt to destroy the very structure of the visible universe.

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