

A History of the Jews of Rochester

By Rabbi Horace J. Wolf

Read before The Rochester Historical Society at
a meeting held in the Assembly Hall of
Temple Berith Kodesh, Monday evening,
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Longfellow, walking through the old Jewish Cemetery at Newport and musing over the strange Jewish names on the ancient tombstones, murmured:

How came they here?
What persecution, merciless and blind,
Drove o'er the sea—that desert desolate—
These Ishmaels and Hagars of mankind?

The principal factor in the tremendous growth of the Jewish population in the United States was old-world oppression and bigotry. The first explorers and discoverers of America came from Spain and Portugal and Jews from those countries naturally followed in their wake when the iron hand of the Inquisition was stretched towards them. The broad, tolerant attitude of Holland, practically the only Jewish refuge in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was extended to her colonies in the New World, and attracted Jews from those parts of Europe where the Jew was the helpless victim of economic and political discrimination. The total Jewish population according to the first census of the United States taken in 1790 was three thousand. The first extensive wave of Jewish immigration came in the first half of the nineteenth century. The early forties of that century had witnessed the rise in Germany of liberal forces clamoring against the feudalistic system which had dominated Germany for so many centuries; the downfall of the liberals after a temporary victory over the reactionaries, sent thousands and thousands of Germans to America; among them were many Jews who chafed against the persecuting spirit which denied them liberty of conscience and freedom of worship. The two most distinguished of these political refugees

were Karl Schurz, a Gentile, and Abraham Jacobi, a Jew. Between 1848 and 1880, when German Jewish immigration on a large scale came to an end, probably not far from 200,000 Jews had arrived. These German Jews of the late forties did not congregate in vast colonies in the seaboard cities. The fact that the German Jew was not a factory worker or a laboring man, but a small tradesman, necessarily caused him to distribute himself pretty generally throughout the country. Some few came to Rochester and it is with their arrival that the communal history of the Jews of Rochester has its real beginning. They were not the first Jews in Rochester, however; the first city directory, published in 1834, shows no Jewish names; the directories between 1834 and 1843 are missing, but the one published in 1844, when the city's population was 23,553, shows five Jewish names; their names, residences and occupations may be of interest:

Mire Greentree, 6 Front Street, B. Lafayette Hotel.

Sigmund Rosenburd (Lace Merchant), 5 Curtis Block, B. Lafayette Hotel.

Joseph Altman (Dry Goods Merchant), 42 Main Street, E., B. Lafayette Hotel.

Henry Cone (Tailor), 33 North Street.

Mary A. Noah (Actress), Glasgow cor. Exchange.

By 1848, the Jewish population had increased sufficiently to permit the organization of a Congregation; prior to that year religious services had probably been held in some private home. But the services for the Day of Atonement, October 7, 1848, were followed by the decision to establish a permanent organization, conduct regular services, engage a Rabbi and thus continue in their own lives and the lives of their children the faith of their fathers. At the meeting at which this important step was taken twelve men were present, Joseph Wile, Samuel Marks, Henry Levi, Jacob and Joseph Altman, A. Adler, Elias Wolff, A. Weinberg, J. Ganz, Gabriel Wile, Meyer Rothschild and Joseph Katz. On the occasion of the Jubilee Celebration of Berith Kodesh Congregation, October 7, 1898, one of these twelve pioneers, Mr. Gabriel Wile, described the establishment of the first Jewish Congregation in Rochester: "We were gathered in a little room at the corner of what was then known as Bowery (now Cumberland), and North Clinton Streets; individuals who had come from a remote land and from widely separated places. We felt that we had a trust to fulfill:

'Thou shalt teach them to thy children.' The congregation increased slowly and in the year 1851, sought larger quarters at the corner of Front Street and Main; between 1848 and 1851 the services had been conducted by laymen but with the removal to Front Street and Main, Rabbi Marcus Tuska was engaged as its spiritual leader; he served in this capacity until 1856, when he was succeeded by Dr. Isaac Mayer who officiated as Rabbi from 1856 to 1859."

The editors of those slim little volumes, the early directories, seem to have had considerable difficulty with the spelling of Rabbi Tuska's name; it is spelt variously Tusker, Tuskey, and Tuskly. In the directory of 1853, he is described as "Jewish Rabbi" though I do not understand the motive of the editor in placing the word Jewish before Rabbi. Dr. Aaron Ginsberg was the minister from 1863 to 1868. After an intermission of two years, Dr. Max Landsberg became the spiritual leader in March, 1871.

It may be of interest to record that the first Jewish marriage was that of Berrie Weinstein and Yedda Rothschild, solemnized in February, 1849. The first burial plot was bought for the community in Mt. Hope in 1846, being purchased by the five married men in the community. The first Jewish child born in Rochester was Bertha Altman, born on January 24, 1845. The first Jewish male child born in Rochester was Henry Seligman, born in 1848, whose father, Morris Seligman, came to Rochester in 1843. The first real estate conveyance to a Jew in this city and county was the deed to Morris Seligman from Benjamin B. Robinson, dated January 21, 1850, which conveyed property on Main Street, near Clinton, adjoining the present property of the East Side Savings Bank. The first book written by a Jew of Rochester was a modest little volume published by Simon Tuska, son of the first Rabbi of the congregation, and entitled: "The Stranger in the Synagogue" or "The Rites and Ceremonies of the Jewish Worship, Described and Explained." It bears on the first page a testimonial, written by Henry W. Lee, Rector of St. Luke's Church, dated Rochester, December 20, 1853, which reads as follows: "Having been favored by Mr. Simon Tuska, with the Mss. of 'The Stranger in the Synagogue,' I take pleasure in saying that I regard the work as being worthy of publication, and of an extensive circulation among both Jews and Christians." The purpose of the author may be gleaned from the introduction: "The main design of this work is to explain the rites and cere-

monies observed on the Sabbath and other festivals of the Jews, to those who are led either by interest or curiosity to attend the Synagogue on such days. Without such an explanation, they will rarely be able to receive a clear idea of the services from mere sight, especially as these are wholly conducted in Hebrew." The author further says, and this is of special interest to those who are always contending that "Things were different in the good old days" that "The children of Israel would become a people of far greater importance, were they to devote themselves habitually to the reading of the Pentateuch and the Prophets." The preface is signed by the author, "University of Rochester, November, 1853;" if my data are correct, the author of the first Jewish book published in Rochester was about 19 years old when he ventured into print. It is probable that the motif of the book was the frequent visiting of the Synagogue by non-Jews who came away extremely puzzled and considerably unenlightened by the worship and services of this "peculiar people" whose language in the Synagogue was still that of the Old Testament. In a city of 30,000 population, a Synagogue was undoubtedly a magnet to the curious. The first city directory, that of 1853, to list the Synagogue, describes the organization as follows: "Jews Synagogue, No. 2 Front Street, in the third story. Priest, Marcus Tuska."

The first philanthropic organization among the Jews of Rochester was the Hebrew Benevolent Society, called into existence when the Congregation was only two years old. Unfortunately, the records of this society were lost in the conflagration which destroyed Temple Berith Kodesh in 1910. The little community, in all likelihood, found itself constantly called upon to help newcomers, transients, and unfortunates and the organization of a society tended to systematize the disbursement of charity and separate the worthy from the unworthy applicants. There were few, if any, men of means in the community in the early fifties; the occupations attached to their names in the early directories indicate that the overwhelming majority were peddlers of jewelry or clothing; some were retail clerks; three bore the imposing title: "Clothing merchants;" one young lady entitled herself, "Cook;" no one of them had a profession. Undoubtedly, the organization of both the Synagogue and the benevolent society spelt self-sacrifice and self-denial to the little community.

One method of approach for learning something of the

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pioneers is through the study of the advertising columns of the early newspapers. The *Rochester Daily Democrat*, July 1, 1844, carries the following:

"Splendid Balzorines and Balzordine muslins
Now just received with care selected
And every day more are expected;
In quality they're extra nice
And unrivalled as to price.
In fact we sell so very low
(As all who've bought of us well know)
That those who once a purchase make
Of us, this store will ne'er forsake.
Silks for the ladies, too, we've got
A splendid and extensive lot
Of every quality and shade
That fashion offers to the trade;
Patterns truly rich and neat
At prices, too, that can't be beat.
Delaines, we have some truly splendid
By fashion highly recommended.
Prints, we have, too, a numerous stock
Both cheap and rich; nor do we lack
In all the Dry Goods line to show
Everything that's elegant and new,
Fine cassimeres—if any wants—
They're just the nicest things for pants;
And other stuff, gents, for your wear
Just call; we'll show you what they are!"

JOSEPH ALTMAN,

42 Main Street.

On September 11, 1844, there appeared the less prosaic but probably equally effective advertisement of the firm of Samuel & Seligman; it bore the startling headline:

"25% SAVED."

"Ready made clothing. The subscribers, having received *this day* a large variety of clothing from their wholesale establishment, 20 Cedar Street, New York, which has been manufactured expressly for the Rochester City Trade, enables them to lay before the public, such an assortment of fashionable clothing as was never before offered to the city customers. The subscribers manufactory in New York being in the principal cloth market, they can save 25% by purchasing wherever a good oppor-

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tunity is offered, and whoever will favor us with a call, shall be dealt with accordingly, i. e., 25% below city prices.

"Their stock consists of fashionable frock and dress coats, of all colors.

"Summer sacks, of plain and figured, linen, gambroon and tweed cashmeres.

"Pantaloons of plain and fancy cassimere, satinet, gambroon and linen and cotton drilling.

"Vests, fancy, plain and plaid, of every description.

28 Buffalo Street, Arcade Building.

"Garments warranted not only not to fade, but also not to rip."

With the phrase *this day* included, this advertisement ran daily for six months.

The *Rochester Democrat*, January, 1848, contains the following advertisement:

ASHER BEIR

"Wholesale and retail dealer in laces, ribbons and millinery goods of all kinds—shawls, cravats, suspenders, tapes, threads, needles, hooks and eyes, beads and buttons, pins, ivory, shell and horn combs, together with a general assortment of pedlar's goods, to which he solicits the attention of all in the trade. Persons wanting goods of the above description will find them @ No. 1 Front Street cheaper than any other store in the city."

It is interesting to note that some of the more daring spirits among the small merchants believed that directory advertising was a profitable investment. One of the first directory advertisements is that of the firm of Michaels & Sloman; it reads as follows:

MICHAELS and SLOMAN

Wholesale and Retail Dealers

in

READY MADE CLOTHING

36 Buffalo St. & 7 Main St. Bridge,

Rochester, N. Y.

H. MICHAELS

I. SLOMAN

Constantly on hand a good assortment of Shirts, Wrappers, Cravats, etc., etc.

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Another published in 1853 reads:

HENRY LOWENSTEIN

Wholesale and Retail Clothing Store

No. 13 Main St.

Also agent and dealer in real estate.

But despite his versatility, Mr. Lowenstein evidently did not meet with success; for in 1855, we find him engaged in another occupation. His name now appears above the following:

HENRY LOWENSTEIN

Wholesale and Retail dealer in Silks, Millinery, and Fancy Goods. Also, an extensive assortment of dress trimmings & Yankee Notions always on hand.

No. 46 State St.

A more human and attention-arresting advertisement is that of W. Goldsmith in the 1855 directory:

W. GOLDSMITH . . . WORKING JEWELER

Repairs all kinds of jewelry and fancy goods, spectacles, etc., in the best possible manner on the shortest notice, at his shop, Cor. of Exchange and Buffalo Sts.

N. B. Up first stairs from corner of Exchange St.

The Congregation, of course, was originally orthodox in its principles; the ritual, as we have seen, was entirely in Hebrew; men and women occupied separate parts of the place of worship during the services; the men wore their hats at services and the organ was conspicuous by its absence. But the Reform Movement, which was growing rapidly in the United States at that time, had its influence in Rochester and its philosophy which spelt the death of outworn symbols and century-old but meaningless customs was dominant in the Congregation in the late fifties. The movement, however, met with some opposition; the climax came in 1869 when it was resolved to introduce

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family pews; led by Meyer Greentree, a small faction seceded and established another Synagogue on Hyde Park; this Congregation, however, only lived a few years.

The Congregation was incorporated, November 4, 1854. In 1856, a church was purchased on North St. Paul Street, which was displaced by a new Temple in 1876. The present Temple, corner Gibbs and Grove Streets, was erected in 1893, and dedicated June 1, 1894. It was re-dedicated, after the conflagration, on October 3, 1910.

Various philanthropic activities sprang up in the wake of the Temple as the community continued to grow. In 1856, the Jewish women of Rochester, who until then had worked individually with the Benevolent Society, established a society of their own called the Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society. In 1870, a Jewish Ladies' Aid and Hospital Society was formed by thirty women; the object of the society, as stated by the constitution, was "To assist poor and needy women and orphans, and to maintain an interest in the Rochester City Hospital, to visit the Jewish Ward at the Hospital and to report its condition from time to time." In May, 1871, they furnished a room in the new wing at the Rochester General Hospital which is still maintained by their successors.

Rabbi Tuska was succeeded in the office of Rabbi of the Congregation by Rabbis Mayer, Sarnet and Guinsberg; in 1871, Dr. Max Landsberg became the spiritual leader of the Congregation and served as its Rabbi for more than forty years. Under his leadership, the Congregation took its place as one of the leading Reform Congregations of the United States; deeply interested in the dispensation of charity, he made the United Jewish Charities, organized in 1882, act as a clearing-house for local Jewish philanthropic work, one of the most scientifically managed societies of the country; liberal in his religious outlook, he rendered a great service to the Jewish community in bringing about a fine understanding between the Jews and non-Jews of Rochester.

In 1877, a Jewish Orphan Asylum was founded to care for the orphaned, not only of Rochester, but of Buffalo and Syracuse. This institution, now known by the less harsh name of the Jewish Orphan Home, occupies three spacious buildings on Genesee Street.

If I have seemed to center the history of the Jews of Rochester around Berith Kodesh Congregation, it is because until the end of the seventies, it was the only communal center or

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place of worship; virtually every Jew in the community was affiliated with it and every institution originated within its gates or was sponsored by its members. But a great change in the character and personnel of the community came in the early eighties and to understand the tremendous changes in the local community brought about since, we must travel overseas for a few moments.

Between 1848 and 1881, most of the Jewish immigration to the United States had come from Germany, Bavaria and Poland; between 1881 and the present time, most of the Jewish immigration came from Russia, Roumania and Galicia. This generalization applies to Rochester as well.

The motive that first started the great western exodus was not economic. The Russian Jews were not primarily immigrants looking for jobs; they were rather political refugees: "The crazy Nihilist who hurled a bomb at Czar Alexander II was the man who added 3,000,000 Jews to the American population. For the direct result of that act was to put the reactionary party into power in Russia. The murdered Czar had been liberal in his tendencies; he had emancipated the serfs, and at the moment of his assassination, he was about to issue a Russian Constitution. His death ended all that. It caused a national revulsion against everything resembling free institutions—or, as the Russian votaries of autocracy put it, the "Rotten parliamentarism of the West." Anything suggesting democracy became anathema in the eyes of these new forces. One of the strangest figures in modern history now became the supreme power in Russia. This was M. Pobiedonstseff, the Procurator of the Holy Synod. In his philosophy the greatest evil of modern life was the thing usually known as "progress." Popular education, freedom of speech and of the press, religious toleration, representative government—these modern ideas were the inventions of the devil, and, as such, would necessarily bring destruction to Holy Russia. Pobiedonostseff, therefore, set himself to bringing the darkest period of the Middle Ages back to Russia—though most observers believe that Russia had not emerged very far from that period. In his new and purified Russia there were three great pillars—autocracy, Greek orthodoxy, and nationalism, and anything or anybody that interfered with these three great aims was to be ruthlessly destroyed. Naturally, among the most formidable obstacles in his way were the Jews. They were the enemies—or were so regarded—of Russian nationalism—for they were not Russian, and ac-

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According to the accepted idea, never could become such; neither were they members of the Greek Orthodox Church, and not likely to be converted. Necessarily, any complete Russification of Russia must dispose first of all of the Jews. When asked how he was to get rid of them, Pobiedonostseff replied—"One-third will be converted, one-third will be massacred and one-third will emigrate." To just what extent the first item in this programme was carried through is not definitely known; the indications are that it was not particularly successful. The persecutions and pogroms which now began all over Russia, and which have continued up to the present time, represented a sincere effort to make good on the second detail. These onslaughts on the Jews were of an atrocious character. The earliest manifestations took the form of expulsions from other parts of Russia into the Pale of Settlement. The residential laws had largely fallen into abeyance during the mild rule of Alexander II, and thousands of Jews were illegally living in prohibited areas. The May laws of 1881 required all these unfortunates to pull up stakes and withdraw to the Pale, and when they did not move fast enough, the Cossacks fell upon them and drove them from their homes with every conceivable form of brutality."

These expulsions and these massacres had another purpose—and one which was chiefly interesting to the United States. When the Jews protested against these proceedings to Count Ihnatieff, the author of the May laws, he made this laconic answer: "The western borders are open to you Jews." Up to this time Russia had had vigorous laws prohibiting emigration but now she began to relax these laws. One privilege was extended to the Jews that was withheld from all other denizens of the Czar's dominion: they were not only permitted but invited to leave the country. Such was the original impetus of the movement that, in forty years, increased the Jewish population of the United States from 200,000 to 3,000,000.

Rochester was one of the cities which attracted the newcomers. It was beginning to develop as a center for the manufacture of men's clothing and as garment-making was one of the few trades which Jews were allowed to pursue in the backward countries of the old world, it was natural for them to seek work in this industry in the new. The result was a rapid growth in the local Jewish community.

The newcomers had a different national background, a different religious tradition, a different tongue from their fore-

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runners; they were indeed "strangers in a strange land." The pioneers and their sons did much to bridge the gap for the newcomers between the old world and the new. But as the new arrivals increased in numbers and strength, as they found themselves more at home, they began to develop their own institutions. These are too numerous to list in any way but that of summary. The first orthodox Synagogue was Beth Israel, established in 1879.

A general outline of the present-day local community will best serve our purpose and will illustrate the remarkable growth of the community since the arrival of the first pioneers.

The Jewish population is estimated to be 14,798 or 5 per cent of the total. The Jewish population first settled in the Seventh and Eighth Wards, and considerable of the more congested portions of the population still remain in this section of the city. The population, however, has spread east, south-east and north of this area, as it has grown in affluence; but the bulk of the Jewish population is still in the Seventh and Eighth Wards. There are to-day fourteen Jewish Congregations in our city, twelve of which are Orthodox, one Conservative and one Reform. The Jewish organizations participating in the Community Chest are the Jewish Young Men's Association, the Associated Hebrew Charities, the United Jewish Charities, the Jewish Children's Home, the Jewish Home for the Aged and the Vacation Home.

Other organizations are the Council of Jewish Women, the Young Men's Sephardim Association and the Hebrew Library; there are, in addition to these, lodges, social clubs, etc.

What part have the Jews of Rochester played in the development of the city? Here the writer must bear in mind the Biblical admonition: "Let others praise thee and not thine own tongue!" Their role may, with all sincerity, be said to be one of which they need not be ashamed. Many have held and hold public office. The first officeholder was a Mr. Nathan Newhafer who was appointed Doorkeeper of the Assembly at Albany, in 1857. Jews have served since then as members of the Board of Aldermen, the Board of Supervisors and the Board of Education; in appointive offices, Joseph W. Rosenthal served as Police Commissioner, Joseph Cauffman, Simon Stern and Morley Stern as Park Commissioners. Jews have also served in the Assembly at Albany and the recent election saw Dr. Meyer Jacobstein, the first Jew of Rochester to be chosen to represent the local congressional district. Indus-

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trially, clothing manufacturing has been the chief commercial interest of the Jews of this city; the industry is a mammoth one, employing some 15,000 people and ranking third in total production in the United States. In civic and social work Rochester Jewry has gladly participated; in the fields of charity and philanthropy, they have not only "cared for their own" in accordance with the pledge made to the old Dutch Governor by the first company of Jews to land on American shores, but have given according their means to all communal institutions.

Although the local records have not all been gathered, we know that at least 450 Jewish boys from this city served in the World War; ten of these laid down their lives—one of them being David Hochstein, whose genius was just coming to flower.

The relations between the Jew and the non-Jew in Rochester have been uninterruptedly on a high plane. The Rabbis of this Congregation have on various occasions spoken in Christian pulpits and the pulpit of this Congregation has been frequently honored by the presence of Christian ministers.

The first occasion of this kind was fifty-two years ago when two young men, Mr. Sol Wile and Mr. Isaac Wile, sponsored an invitation from this Congregation to the Rev. M. M. Mann, the minister of the Unitarian Church, to lecture in the Temple; the date was April, 1870. A tradition was thereby established, which has been maintained ever since, that made for especially close relations between the Unitarian Church and this Congregation. It is perhaps worthy of note that the first Community Thanksgiving Service held in Rochester in 1917 was launched by Temple Berith Kodesh.

The future of the Jewish community of this city, we hope and pray, will measure up to or even surpass the story of the past. America has conferred on the Jew not only political equality and religious freedom but most important of all—the opportunity to grow into erect manhood. For two thousand years he never had the chance. His love and affection, his loyalty and fealty to the country which first said "Come unto me all ye that are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest," are ingrained in his very being. The late Jacob Schiff spoke not only for the Jews of New York City but for the Jews of every city in America when he said on the occasion of the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the Settlement of Jews in the United States: "We pledge ourselves anew, upon this momentous occasion, to our fellow-citizens, from whatever race

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they may have sprung or whatever faith they may profess, that we shall ever stand ready to be one with them in every endeavor to augment further the greatness of this, our beloved community."

Emma Lazarus was the mouth-piece of American Jewry when she wrote her ode to the Statue of Liberty:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand a mighty woman
with a torch, whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, and her
name 'Mother of Exiles'; from her beacon-hand flows world-
wide welcome; her mild eyes command the air-bridged harbor
that twin cities frame.

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp," cries she with silent lips.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to
breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these—the
homeless,

Tempest-tossed, to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door."