

THE FIRST

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The Literary Club of Cincinnati, April 23, 2018

Historians of the Jews are ever trying to determine who was the first Jew in some particular place or in some important activity. It is well known that the first Jewish community in North America was established in New Amsterdam back in 1654 by Jews escaping the return of the Inquisition to Brazil. It is even known that the first Jew to settle permanently in Cincinnati was a certain Joseph Jonas from Plymouth, England, who arrived here in January 1817. Jonas had come despite efforts by a friend to dissuade him from proceeding to Ohio: "In the wilds of America, and entirely amongst Gentiles," his friend warned, "you will forget your religion and your God." But Jonas didn't forget either his religion or his God, though for the first two years he had to conduct his prayers in solitude.

"But who then was the Joseph Jonas of the Cincinnati Literary Club?" I asked myself and began searching by typically Jewish names in the "Catalogue of Members, Past and Present," conveniently contained in our *One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary Volume*. My initial thought was that there might not have been a Jew in the Club until around the

beginning of the twentieth century. But I was soon proven wrong. The first Jew in the Literary Club of Cincinnati, I discovered, was accepted as a member as early as 1869, only twenty years after the founding of the club. Not only was he a Jew; he was even a rabbi. And beyond that, his name had been familiar to me for many years since he played a role in Jewish history that made him a prominent character who appears in every Jewish religious school textbook. But how did this man, Rabbi Max Lilienthal--or as he is called in the Club Minutes: Reverend Max Lilienthal--who lived from 1815 to 1882, get into the Literary Club? After all, preaching sermons was not then or today regarded as a strictly "literary" activity.

To my happy surprise, I found the answer. In 1857, twelve years before he was voted into the Club, Max Lilienthal had published a book of poems. The publisher was Bloch and Company, located at 32 West Sixth Street in downtown Cincinnati. Not surprisingly, as Lilienthal had grown up in Germany, and since most everyone in Cincinnati at that time, especially the Jews in the city, knew German, his book of poetry was in that language. It was romantically entitled *Freiheit, Frühling und Liebe*, or in English: "Freedom, Spring and Love." I can't resist giving you a taste of this poetry, though I fear it will never compare even distantly with Goethe or Heine. Here is a sample of four lines from a patriotic poem

praising the American union at a time when the bond between South and North was beginning to fray. First in the German original, then in my poor effort to retain the rhyme in an English translation:

Die Union ist ein Zauber,
Der unser Land umschlinget,
Ein Ring voll Wunderkräften,
Den keine Macht bezwinget.

The Union's an enchantment,
That encircles our fair land,
A ring that's magic: firm, unbent,
Its soul no power can command.

More about Lilienthal and the United States later. But let's go first back to an exploration of his life before his immigration to America--for it was far from conventional.

Max Lilienthal was born in the town of Huttenbach in Bavaria in the year 1815. At that time German governments were insistent that clergy of whatever faith, receive a doctoral degree. Lilienthal did so at the University of Munich. He must have impressed authorities at the university for, shortly after completing his studies there, he was

entrusted with the task of cataloguing the Hebrew manuscripts in the Munich library. But although he possessed both rabbinical ordination and a Ph.D., it was not easy for him to find a suitable pulpit since most of the Jewish congregations were not yet ready for a religious modernizer such as Lilienthal apparently was, and the reactionary and strongly Catholic Bavarian government at that time was fearful of any form of religious innovation. The best Lilienthal could do was to gain employment as the community rabbi and the principal of a German-speaking school in the city of Riga, today the capital of Latvia, then contained within the Tsarist Empire. There he innovated by introducing a confirmation ceremony for girls as well as for boys. But he did not remain there long. After only a few months, the inexperienced Lilienthal was ordered to St. Petersburg, the capital of Tsarist Russia.

Life for the Jews in Russia in those days was difficult. Tsar Alexander I, who reigned from 1801–1825, had turned from a moderate liberal into a severe reactionary after Napoleon's invasion of Russia. He was succeeded by Nicholas I, a ruler who cared mostly about his army and unlike his predecessors, Catherine and Alexander, had no inclination to enlightenment. Nicholas forced the Jews to serve long terms in the Russian army and kept them quarantined in the so-called Pale of Settlement, an area in the western portion of the empire, which Russia

had annexed when Poland was divided up among Russia, Prussia, and Austria in the last decades of the eighteenth century. But Nicholas was also interested in assimilating the large Jewish population located there. The question was how this could best be accomplished. The stick he used was army service; the carrot was called regeneration through education, a policy that would supposedly open up new opportunities for the Jews but also make them less Jewish and perhaps no longer Jewish at all.

Within Nicholas's government a conservative, but by the standards of that time enlightened nobleman served as Minister of National Education. Count Sergey Semionovich Uvarov was a classical scholar with far broader interests than his master. After unsuccessful meetings with Russian Jews regarding their "regeneration," Uvarov decided that his plans required an initiative that would be spearheaded by Jews from the West, who would be more amenable to a culture that transcended a narrowly conceived Judaism. To this end, in January 1841, Uvarov summoned the twenty-five year old Western rabbi, Max Lienthal, to St. Petersburg where he spent five weeks with him formulating a strategy for enlightening the allegedly benighted Russian Jews. The plan was to bring a slew of rabbis from the West, a clerical phalanx to westernize the Jews of the Pale. Lienthal was on board since he hoped that along with modernization of Jewish faith and culture would come political

emancipation. Russia would become like France, which during its revolution had been the first European state to grant equality to its Jews. He received no such explicit promise, but Uvarov did assure Lilienthal that the tsar's intentions were honorable. And Lilienthal believed it. To a colleague in Bavaria he wrote: "The exalted desire of the monarch is for education and emancipation, for culture and the rights of man."

Lilienthal now set himself to the task of composing a curriculum for the new schools that the minister had proposed for re-educating Jewish children. In addition to Bible and Talmud, it would include classes in horticulture, agriculture, and mechanical drawing. His next step was to get better acquainted with Russian Jewry since the small Germanized community of Riga was hardly typical. He was in for a shock. When Napoleon had come to Vilna (today Vilnius) on a Friday afternoon in 1812, he had allegedly exclaimed to his entourage: "Gentlemen, I think we are in Jerusalem!" Reflecting on his visit to this same immense Jewish community, Lilienthal wrote in his memoirs: "I did not know what to make of this swarming beehive of Jews. I too believed myself to be in Palestine instead of in Russia, so entirely and thoroughly Jewish appeared to me the city of Vilna." When he entered the main synagogue of Vilna he thought he was in a time warp; "It was as if the past centuries of Jewish history were greeting me. It was as if [the local Jews] themselves, used to

seeing only the costume and dress of the fourteenth century, were astonished to perceive a modern Jewish stranger in their midst.... I felt so lonesome in the midst of these strange faces--[I was] the only *daytshl*, [i.e. the only German Jew] in the crowd of Polish Jews."

Here and elsewhere in the Pale of Settlement, Lilienthal discussed Count Uvarov's plans with his fellow Jews, men and women with whom he shared a faith but who were so different from himself. Whereas Lilienthal was enthused by what he had heard in St. Petersburg, the Jewish leaders with whom he now met were not. They were convinced that behind the scheme was nothing other than a thinly veiled effort to lead them gently into Christianity. Only a small stratum of acculturated Russian Jews supported this stranger from the West, but even they were unhappy that he had not given them a role in his efforts. Lilienthal had no more success selling the Count's initiative in other cities. In Minsk a teacher of the old school shouted: "We want no part of Lilienthal and his followers and their ways." And the assembled crowd chanted: "We don't want, we don't want!" The police were called and Lilienthal was forced to flee for his life.

Clearly Lilienthal needed higher status if the Russian Jews were to listen to him. Realizing this, Count Uvarov made him an official representative of the Ministry of National Education and sent him once

more throughout the Pale of Settlement, this time under police protection, to convince the Jews and, in the words of a contemporary document, "to prepare them for a truly civil and moral life, which consists merely in the approach to a universally acknowledged civilization, without infringing on their religion." Lilienthal's task was now no longer to ask the Jews for their opinions, but simply to persuade them that the government's intentions were benevolent. To this end, he wrote a pamphlet in German that was translated for him into Hebrew (Lilienthal's Hebrew was not quite up to his writing a lengthy piece in the holy tongue). Its hopeful but also pretentious title read: "Proclaimer of Salvation, Announcing to the House of Jacob their redemption and to the House of Israel their Remedy." The pamphlet assured its readers that the government desired their welfare and that a secular education would result in economic advantage. It concluded with the assurance: "These are the words of your brother." Some readers were convinced; most were not. The majority were concerned that if the traditional Jewish life were subjected to critique, the result might well be that some would reject Judaism in its totality.

Lilienthal now visited close to two dozen Jewish communities to convince them of the government's good intentions. With Uvarov backing him, the welcome was at least cordial, if not warm. He even gained

support from one of the most prominent Russian rabbis. Lilienthal had told that rabbi that the tsar wanted to subject all of the Jews of the empire to forced penal service (the stick) and only Uvarov and one other minister had persuaded him that re-education would be the better path (the carrot). A commission was then formed to draw up the plans and an edict issued to establish a new set of Jewish schools that would include secular as well as Jewish subjects. The edict concluded: "We hope that this new demonstration of Our concern for the moral improvement of the Jews will convince them to cooperate with these plans aimed at their true benefit." However, Uvarov appended a secret memorandum to the ukase, which indicated the tsar's true intention: the ultimate conversion of the Jews to Christianity.

Eight months later, in the summer of 1845, Lilienthal returned to Germany. It's not clear why he left. Perhaps he learned of the secret memorandum. Possibly the Russian authorities had attempted to convert Lilienthal himself to Christianity. Perhaps he was simply disillusioned with the government or with his inability to gain a well-paying permanent government position. Or, as one scholar has suggested, it may have been simply in order to marry his fiancée who had been waiting for him in Munich ever since he left for Riga. Or--a last speculative possibility--it was the call of America, where he could hope for a more sedate, less

frustrating, more prosperous and fulfilling life as a Reform rabbi in a country where, unlike in Bavaria, religious innovation was not seen as a political threat and, unlike in Russia, freedom of religion was enshrined in its constitution. In any case, Lilienthal never returned to Russia and he remained in Germany only a brief time, long enough to wed his long suffering fiancée. His hope for the Jews of Russia shattered, he set his face westward across the ocean.

Still that same year the Lilienthals arrived in New York. Although he was now barely thirty years old, Max's activity in Russia had made him a well-known personality in the New York Jewish community. In Gotham he was soon elected as the rabbi of no less than three German-Jewish congregations in the city. However, in those days being the successful rabbi of a single congregation of obstreperous laymen was difficult enough. Of three at once was entirely unmanageable. To Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise in Cincinnati Lilienthal wrote: "If you want to be the Christ, you must expect to be crucified." Shortly after being fired from his rabbinate, Lilienthal turned to education, founding a very successful private school for Jewish boys that drew students from as far away as the Queen City.

It may have been the parents of these children from Cincinnati who a decade later, in 1855, recommended that Rabbi Lilienthal come here in

order to fill a vacancy in the pulpit of the Bene Israel Congregation, today's Rockdale Temple, now on Ridge Road in Amberly. But there was one problem, the liberal atmosphere of the United States had turned Lienthal into an avid religious reformer at a time when the lay leadership of that congregation, unlike today, was still very traditional. His early sermons, preaching religious reform, prompted the departure of the more orthodox members. Those who remained were more in sync with their new rabbi and gradually introduced an organ, seated men and women together, and allowed men to worship with bare heads.

Lienthal soon became a well-known figure in our city, whose activities went far beyond his duties as a congregational rabbi. He was intensely interested in what we would today call interfaith activities. He is credited with being the first rabbi to preach in a Christian pulpit. On one occasion he even produced a sensation when he gratuitously attended to all the duties of Rev. Dr. Spaulding of the Plum Street Universalist Church during the absence of that minister. He was elected to the Cincinnati Board of Education and served on it for nine years, until 1869, and also as a member of the Regents of the McMicken University, later to become the University of Cincinnati. He was even President of the National Sangerfest, the German-language song contest, when it was held in Cincinnati in 1870.

What especially concerned Lilienthal in Cincinnati were violations of the constitutional barrier between church and state. Violations, such as Bible reading in the public schools, reminded him of the old Europe whose ways in this regard America was devoted to abandoning and which even western Europe was beginning to leave behind. He therefore decried Americans who failed to realize America's exceptionalism and were bent upon "christianizing the country and the constitution."

Like most Germans of the time, Lilienthal tended to the formal. His letters to his father from Russia were invariably signed "Your loving, Dr. Max Lilienthal." Even his love letters to his fiancée often concluded with the formal "Dr. Max Lilienthal." A popular Cincinnati journalist of that day, Lafkadio Hearn described Lilienthal as follows:

Our most venerable rabbi, excepting perhaps Dr. Wise [Isaac Mayer Wise, the rabbi of the Bene Jeshurun synagogue, today Wise Temple], is the Rev. Dr. Max Lilienthal. He is very jovial, even for so jovial and pleasant a class of religious teachers as our Rabbis. He is of medium stature, spare and slight, but full of vigor and energy. His manner is hearty, frank to bluntness, and ever courteous; while his features denote energy rather than executive ability, and good-nature rather than keenness of observation. He is a great favorite

with children, and has a wonderfully pretty daughter....

Max Lilienthal was not a philosopher. He was much more interested in solving practical problems. He loved to quote the famous phrase from Goethe's "Faust", which as a graduate student years ago, when frustrated with classes in philosophy, I also liked to cite--in fact I still do: "Gray, dear friend, is all theory, and green the golden tree of life". Never mind that in Goethe's play those words are spoken by Mephisto, the devil who tempts the studious Faust.

However, according to Rabbi David Philipson, who succeeded Lilienthal in the Bene Israel pulpit and was followed later by our member David Reichert's father, Rabbi Victor Reichert, what most characterized Lilienthal was not the religious reformer but the American patriot. "He was ever insisting on the fact that the Jew is as patriotically American as any man in the land." For Lilienthal the United States was the land of freedom and religious liberty. It was so different from tsarist despotism.

But Lilienthal's fervent expression of patriotism became ever more problematic in his first years in Cincinnati since, for some, patriotism meant the cause of abolition and for others the cause of continued slavery. The future of the Union that he touted with such enthusiasm became problematic. Lilienthal left no doubt that he passionately favored

Lincoln, maintenance of the Union, and slavery's abolition. In the months directly before the Civil War, he preached a number of sermons arguing for preservation of the Union.

But thereby hangs a tale. Lilienthal had become so popular a rabbi that Jews all over America wanted to have a copy of his picture including one gentleman by the name of Jacob A Cohen living in New Orleans, Louisiana. Mr. Cohen had treasured the portrait of Lilienthal dressed in the robes of his rabbinical office--that is, until he learned that the rabbi had become an ardent admirer of Abraham Lincoln. Thereupon he returned the portrait to Lilienthal, scratching a message on it that included these words: "Since you have discarded the Lord and taken up the Sword in defense of a negro government, your picture, which has occupied a place in our Southern home, we return herewith, that you may present it to your *Black Friends*, as it will not be permitted in our dwelling. . . . I shall be engaged actively in the field and should be happy to rid Israel of the disgrace of your life. . . ." Where Lilienthal had signed the portrait and written beneath it "The Lord is my banner," Cohen had crossed out three words and written instead: "Abe Lincoln is your banner."

The last years of Lilienthal's life were marked by a sharp recrudescence of antisemitism not only in the Russia, where he had been

so unsuccessful, but also in the Germany that he had admired and loved. In Russia, under Tsar Alexander III, widespread pogroms broke out in numerous towns of the Pale of Settlement; in Germany even the highly respected Professor of History at the Berlin University, Heinrich von Treitschke, lent his voice to new agitation. In 1879 Treitschke popularized the saying: "The Jews are our misfortune" and sought severely to limit Jewish immigration to Germany. In view of these developments, America seemed yet more desirable.

When Max Lilienthal died in 1882, he was eulogized by at least three rabbis but also by leading Cincinnatians not of the Jewish faith. Among them were two men of great prominence. Jacob D. Cox had served as a Major General in the Union army during the American Civil War and was later elected Governor of Ohio. He was also a respected scholar, known for his books on campaigns during the Civil War and he may have possessed a shared literary interest with the rabbi. Judge John Bernhard Stallo was known as one of the so-called Ohio Hegelians and also as a prominent political liberal. But for our purposes more importantly, ever since 1859 he had been a member of our Club. In Stallo's eulogy he said of Lilienthal: "His longing was for the future, not the past. 'Forward and upward' was his motto."

For many years Lilienthal had taught Jewish history at the Hebrew

Union College, my own institution and my own field. He believed that education was among the fundamental principles of Judaism. But he also loved trying his hand at literature and, though scarcely a great poet, greatly enjoyed writing poetry. Perhaps he even read some of his poetry at a meeting of the Literary Club. Regrettably, we don't have the papers from those early days. Let me, then, conclude with a final poetic example, a quatrain which shows that, in addition to all else, Lilienthal also had a sense of humor. Here's my translation:

Say not that's nonsense, all a lie
 'cause to your brain it didn't cling.
 The world is long and broad and high
 But short your understanding.

Sources Used

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