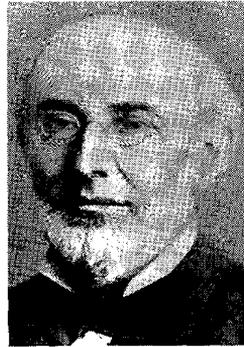


The Trials of an Immigrant One Hundred Years¹ Ago

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SELIGMAN KAKELES

One of the most absorbing chapters in the social history of the United States is the story of the problems and experiences of the alien who has come from afar to seek security and happiness in the New World. A century ago, Jews were coming in considerable numbers into the United States from Central Europe, together with their non-Jewish compatriots, driven from home by a variety of economic, political, and social difficulties which were seemingly insurmountable. By the thousands they came to America, most of them penniless, unskilled, but willing to work for a livelihood. Many of them became peddlers, striking out from the East towards the mid-West or down the seacoast to the rural South. Others remained in the growing German-Jewish ghettos of the metropolitan areas, trying their hand at a variety of occupations, some of them succeeding after severe struggles, others never earning more than a bare subsistence.

Some of the more successful, decades later, sat down to write their memoirs and reminiscences, sketching an idealistic story of the rapid rise of the hard-working, ambitious newcomer. Those stories we know. Unfortunately we tend to lump all the other immigrants together in the impersonality of statistics — so and so many men or families added to the population in such and such a year — with only a pale understanding, at best, of the heartbreaking and discouraging problems which obstructed the career of the individual in America.

Insight into the experiences of such an immigrant is afforded us by four letters which one Seligman Kakeles wrote in 1850-51 to the famous philanthropist, reformer, and abolitionist, Gerrit Smith of Peterboro, N. Y.¹ Kakeles, born September 20, 1820, at Lieben, a

¹Thanks are due to R. Craig Fabian of Syracuse University Library for permission to use the following letters in the Smith Collection: Nos. 393, 447, 481, and 576.

suburb of Prague, had come to the United States in 1846, to be joined by his wife and two children a short time later.²

His difficulty in finding a satisfactory occupation, and the bitter effort required to support his growing family induced him to seek help. Smith's name appeared in the newspapers frequently in connection with a variety of causes which he supported. His reputation as a man of broad human sympathies probably made Kakeles feel that he might be willing to become the patron of a needy immigrant . . . hence the following letters in which Kakeles narrates his problems and experiences and asks for assistance in finding a better job, and, later, for a loan. There is no indication that Smith did anything beyond writing words of encouragement and sending a gift to the infant child, Emanuel Gerrit Kakeles, who was named in his honor.

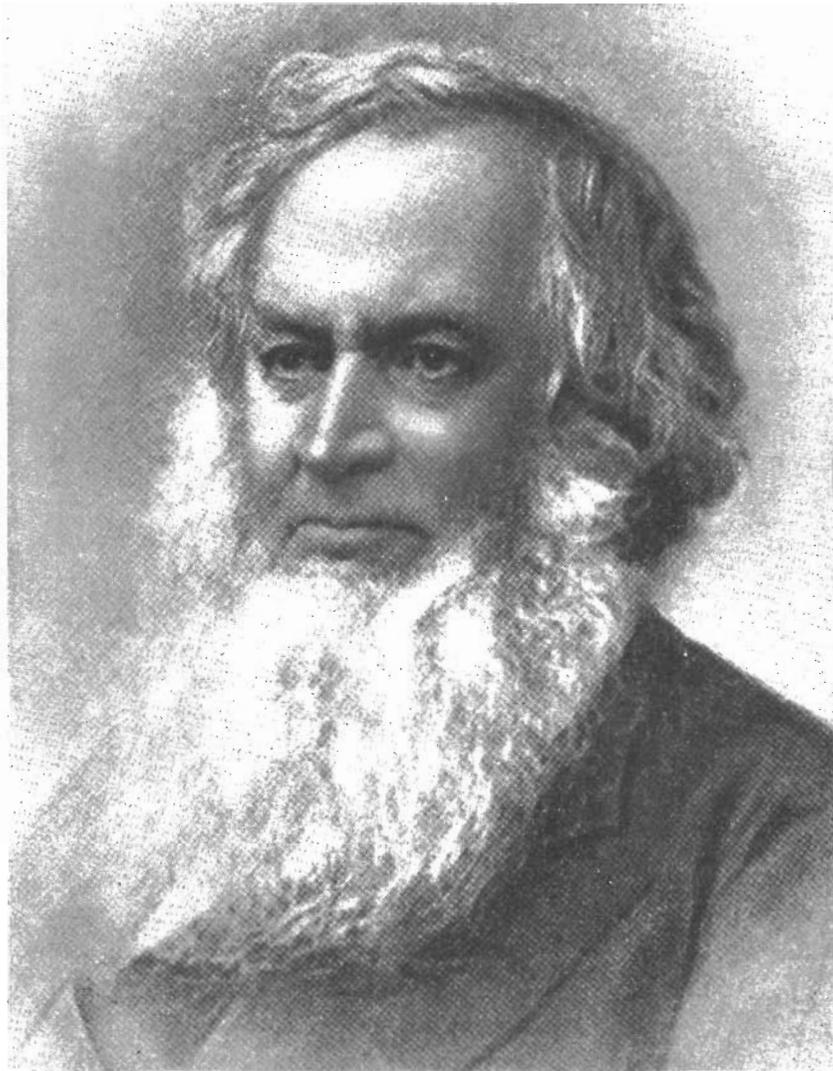
Judging from his picture, Kakeles had a sensitive, kindly nature. His letters reveal his bewilderment and helplessness in the face of economic need, and a naive, impractical approach to such mundane matters as buying a home. His determination to learn and use English is evident from these letters which he wrote after only four years in the United States — full of faulty grammar and spelling, but characterized by an exceptionally wide vocabulary.

Importunate though they are, the letters are very appealing. Kakeles' flattering comments about Mrs. Smith, his reference to his employer's intemperance, his description of himself as a "runaway white slave," his pious quotations from the Bible — all of these were calculated to win Smith's favor for his Jewish correspondent . . . and probably did. Smith, apparently, answered all but one of Kakeles' letters.

That the immigrant was a self-respecting Jew is clear: witness the proud manner in which he invites Smith to attend the circumcision of his son, the staunchly loyal way in which he describes his people as "an industrious, temperant and religious nation," his frequent quotations from Scripture and his numerous references to the Deity. We have no record of his experiences between 1851 and 1864, but in the latter year he finally found his life-work in the service of his people. On May 1, 1864, he was chosen sexton of Temple Emanu-El of New York, a position which he held until his death on November 28, 1903.

From the loins of such as Seligman Kakeles have come the brain and sinew which created modern America. The most famous of his grandchildren enriched America with beauty in song and story — Jerome Kern (1885-1945), the composer of *Sally*, *Show Boat*, *Music in the Air* and *Roberta*. Without the pain and unhappiness of Seligman Kakeles, "Old Man River" and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" might never have been written.

²These details of Kakeles' life were provided by his grandson, Walter G. Pollak of New York, for whose permission to print these letters the writer is grateful.



Courtesy of Syracuse University Library

GERRIT SMITH — REFORMER . . . AND FRIEND OF SELIGMAN KAKELES

I

New York May 7th 1850

Gerrit Smith Esq:

My dear Friend and Patron!

I have reason to grumble about, wherease you have forgotten to inform me of your *treasure*, whereby I neglected to perform my duty and respects towards your good lady in my former letters.

Still I had an ample recompense by a short interview with your distinguished lady the other day at Dr. Bayards in Broadway.

And truly I may bestow upon her the proverbs: Chap: 31 –

“She openeth her mouth with wisdom,

“And in her tongue is the law of kindness.

“Who can find a virtuous woman?

“*Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land.*

“Many daughters have done virtuously,

“But thou exellest them all.

“Favour is deceitful and beauty is vain,

“But the woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.

“O God! Give her of the fruit of her hands;

“*And let her own works praise her in the gates*
of S. Kakeles.

I regret to state that I could not answer your last letter sooner than now. I have been unwell for some days and was not able to write.

I am now thank the almighty God as well as before, and able to attend the business again, and my first inducement indeed is to write to you.

I venture again dear Friend to remind you on your promise in your first letter to me; although it is a difficult for you to find a situation for *one* man in such a large and blessed Country; yet I trust in God you will bear me in mind *and my dearest family to[o]*; perhaps it may happen once a vacant situation some where in your neighborhood, you will be so kind and remember: *I will not let thee go, except thou bless me* [.] My best respects to your good lady, also from my good wife, and in the hope that these lines shall reach you *all* in good health, we remain

Yours

Obedient

SELIGMAN & BETTY KAKELES
108 Delancy str. N. Y.

P. S. My little Julie said she likes Mrs: Smith very much, and she is sorry that she did not give her more kisses, when she left her.

II

New York November 13th 1850

Gerrit Smith Esq:

Dear Friend.

Doth my Father yet live?

Verily I am compelled to make such an inquiry as I have nothing heard of your Honor in such a long time—

I answered your last letter after I had an interview with your distinguished lady, and I do not know yet the reason why my last letter remained unanswered; therefore the above inquiry. Honorable Sir!

Circumstances put me in motion to [touch?] the pen again and to inform you that I have been so happy today from the providence to be presented with a quite strong, healthy, *Yankee boy*—You are perhaps aware of the ceremonies which we Israelites have to undergo by a new born male child, after eight days from its birthday. I take the liberty to invite your Honor to be present at the circumcision as Godfather—

A ceremony which you perhaps never had witnessed and it will afford you to get more acquainted with the particulars of the mosaic law, and the principles which we sons of Abraham strive to adhere to, and which we sacrifice with our own blood.

To the expectation you will not refuse the simple honor which your humble servant offers to you

I remain your most obedient

SELIGMAN KAKELES.

Should it please your Honor, or should business prevent you to accept the offer to be present wednesday the 20th of this month on which day the sacrifice shall be celebrated in the forenoon, please inform me by return of mail in case I should meet with a refusal, I should be very sorry indeed to select another Godfather. *Recollect I am but a stranger and sojourner here.* My best respects to your honorable lady and if it should be convenient for her to accompany you, it would meet my sincere desire. Also my good wife expresses a great wish to be honored with your worthy presence. In haste

Your Respectful

S. AND BETTY KAKELES
108 Delancy str. N. Y.

P. S. Please write by return your intention without fail.

III

New York January 26 1851

Gerrit Smith Esq:

Dear Sir!

Time and circumstances are changeable, also my circumstances altered within a short period in such a manner that I was pretty near out of employment—Mr. Canse my present employer discharged me from the office where I transacted his business during the time I was absent from the city. So soon as I came back from Rochester he remarked that he has no use of my services any more, the office don't pay him consequently he must give it up.

I was panic struck and remonstrated to him if he had no employment at all for me as the winter is there, no means to live an[d] I would be ruined with my little family[.] [H]e listened indifferently and proposed me to go to Brooklyn to his factory and see if I could do there all kinds of work—I had to consent and so improved my condition; have to work very hard and 37½ cents expenses ferry money every week from my *means of grace* \$5 per week.

I would have written to you sooner and answered your worthy letter, but how in the world could I style a few words who still finds difficulty with the english to such an illustrious man in such a state of mind as I was situated and therefore had to delay my answer until my mind was a little settled to find some words of consolation in the few words of grievance which I take the liberty to bother you with.

Dear Friend!

How hard it is for me to importune you with my domestic affairs you cannot imagin as I am always affraid you may think that I am an imposter but before the almighty God it is not so. I speak and write the truth just as I am situated now. I have to work hard still it is sweet as I earn hardly my bread with *the sweat on my face*. I am not able to send my little girls to school they are not provided with winter garments a thing for which I am the most sorry for. And now dear Friend I ask you is it not wrong in the society of mankind that a man who is willing to serve in an adoptive fatherland for the sake of supporting his little family and shall not be able to find any situation in a land of plenty?

I am most sure and convinced that you love the Jews and you have good reasons for it too, to love an industrious, temperant and religious nation[.] You will very seldom find murder, intemperance and infidelity among the Jews, and intemperance is the most

cause which compells me to abandon my employer to which he indulges very freely. I would have done so long ago but I cannot give away the dirty water before I have clean one.

I was not aware of to be so near you on my last tour or else I would have surprised you with my humble presens. I rejoice to here of the good health of your distinguished lady and I shall pray [*tear in letter*] continuance. I approve heartily to your proceedings in Syracuse especially the address of which you had the honor to be the author. I am most sorry to mention the sickness of a child in my family. Little Gerrit is improving every day and if he shall make such progress always he soon will be able to help you along in your human and philanthropic cause may the providence preserve you and speed him to *it* such a just transaction. My dear wife is very much fatigued with our little family without any assistance at all very hard indeed for her. I must close as I am very sleepy it is half past one after midnight. We all remain your most obedient servants and children.

S. [&] BETTY KAKELES
108 Delancy str.

If you can find a remedy for improving our condition do it.

IV

New York September 15th 1851

Gerrit Smith Esq:

My dear Friend!

I am in possession of your worthy letter since monday last. I studied it carefully, and but two sentences are satisfactory to me: first your honor is very carefull to answer all my letters which is very flattering for me, and the sympathy of yours in the hope of my good future through the agency of the God of Abraham.

My kind adviser! I consider you as the Angel of Abraham's God send upon earth to establish good among the oppressed, and indeed it is so[.] [W]here in the world is there to be found a man to spend so freely among his brethren as one certain Gerrit Smith blessed he his name for ever? [A]nd of all this I never was aware before untill I read in the papers about it.

Encouraged through the donations of which your honor made some time ago I took the liberty as a runaway white slave from the arbitrary powers of Austria and Russia to apply to your benevolent sentiments towards the oppressed without distinction of creed and color, not for assistance, but for advise and help to found

a new home in this adoptive and glorious land but alas I came to[o] late, still you gave me some consolation by expressing your *wish that you could help me to a home.*

I dwell now for five years in this crowded and populous city and had the misfortune to lose a beloved child and am still in the same position as I was when I first arrived here, and why? why because I have to work for the landlord only. [T]he month is soon round and there is \$8-30 cents rent pr month or \$100 a year.

Dear Friend! We have a proverb in our country. If you can't save anything before you are fifty, after fifty is too late. I am very sorry to have been so easily retaliated by you in regard to the prospect of my future, my sole object was to found a home for my dearest family, and indeed I know 4 building lots for sale in the 89th str. in New York, for the price of \$900[.] I have a friend who would buy two of these lots and the other two I intended to buy and erect a little cottage upon it and establish there my future home and so avoid the crowd and enjoy the pure fresh air in the suburbs of the city. My cal[c]ulation was to borrow the money of you and pay you the same amount of money monthly as I pay now rent and give you as security a mortgage on the property, on my valuables of which I mentioned already, and so would be able in course of a few years through the help of God and your assistance to have my own home, as I had it once in the old country and been robbed of it. [T]his is my only desire, couldn't you help me to it? to be sure you could and so you would help one of the hundred ready to a home without running a risk of losing your money nor interest neither. Come if you please and encourage me and be the inducement to my future home where the next Gerrit shall reside.

While I am speaking of Gerrit I must express 1000 thanks for him, for your present[.] [M]y dear wife is just sewing a dress and jacket for him and there will remain a little some yet for a cap, he is growing very fast and will soon walk, he is our greatest pleasure and as soon as I shall be a little able I will send you his likeness. Please write often so as not to forget my name, I remain

Your most obedient

SELIGMAN NOT
SOLOMON KAKELES
108 Delancey str.