

Dr. David Philipson's Place in American Jewish Historiography

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Dr. David Philipson, the "Dean of the American Reform rabbinate" and the historian of Reform Judaism, died in Boston, June 29, 1949, in his 87th year.

This distinguished rabbi was not a "professional" historian; he was not originally trained for the discipline of history. Yet, in course of time, he became a competent student and did creditable work.

To understand him, it is important to understand the *milieu* to which he was exposed. He began his studies at the Hebrew Union College in 1875. (At that time American Jewry was a small, obscure branch of Israel. All told, there were only about 250,000 Jews in this country. Culturally the American community was a German colony.)

The academicians who taught young Philipson in his teens, the men he knew and admired, were German Ph.D.'s, or at least German trained. Still living in Germany was that "grand old man," Leopold Zunz, founder of the new Jewish historico-critical school. Abraham Geiger, one of the most brilliant stars in the firmament of research, the founder of the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums* in Berlin, had died but a year before, in 1874.

Young Philipson in his studies was obviously oriented toward Europe. He spoke and preached in German. In the late 1870's, American Jews believed that only the culture and scholarship of German Jewry had merit, and to a great extent they were justified in this conviction. Philipson's academic ideal was the critical study of Jewish life and history, *die Wissenschaft des Judenthums*. The Jewish research library which he assembled for his purposes contained practically every basic work. It reflected his understanding, his grasp of the nature of the best in Jewish learning as recorded by modern scholars in non-Hebraic works. Through his knowledge of French, German, and English, he had a good acquaintance with the latest research studies in the various Jewish fields. He was no Hebraist in the scholarly sense.

Philipson knew the difference between homiletics and history. In a Rankean sense he had a passion for the facts. Possibly this is one of his weaknesses, for, frequently, he neglected to present ideas and motivations as he soberly collated the naked facts. None of his writing was "brilliant." He did not dig deep for underlying causes. But his method-



— Photo by A. Schalita

DAVID PHILIPSON

ology was sound. This spiritual child of German *Gründlichkeit* was careful and accurate; he knew the meaning of intellectual integrity.

A whole generation learned an important lesson from him. No rabbi was too "big," too busy to study. Everyone knew that David Philipson was a very busy man, that he was very active in the larger Cincinnati community, that he was a man who had achieved national recognition in country-wide Jewish organizations, that he was the rabbi of the widely-respected B'ne Israel (Rockdale Avenue) Congregation; yet, apparently, he found time to study and to write.

In all probability he was the first American rabbi to interest himself, in more than a casual fashion, in the history of the Jewish element in the United States. His interest in this field goes back to about the time of the Columbian Exposition, the Chicago World's Fair, when the American Jewish Historical Society was established (1892). He was among its first members. When he died he was one of its vice-presidents.

He never studied American Jewish history. He lived it — and survived it. His knowledge of the life of his people in this land — and it was an extensive knowledge — was not gained through systematic, purposeful reading or studying. It was a process of "recalling."

It is important to bear in mind that he was born as early as 1862; his own experience — to say nothing of the earlier decades he lived vicariously through the experience of an older generation — included about one-half the span of the history of the United States! He knew Jewish life here because he had witnessed its growth from a community of about 100,000 to a community of about 5,000,000. Unfortunately he made no attempt to collect the literature, the sources of American Jewish history. His own library was surprisingly weak in this direction. He bought few books touching on the life of the Jew in the United States. Of course, the extensive collection of Americana in the Hebrew Union College Library was at his disposal.

The selected bibliography of the writings of Philipson (*Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, XXXIX [1950], 445-459) documents his growing interest and accomplishments in the field of American Jewish historiography. Among his writings are numerous biographies of American Jewish notables; nine of these sketches appeared in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. He did the first real work in the field of Ohio Valley Jewish history. (His own congregation was established in 1824.) From his pen came a history of the Hebrew Union College, a study of the Hebrew words on the tombstone of Governor William Bradford, and one of the earliest essays on the Jew in America (1909). With Louis Grossman he edited a volume of *Selected Writings* of Isaac Mayer Wise, the founder of American Jewish Reform institutions. The first edition of his *The*

Reform Movement (1907) contained a chapter on "Reform in the United States." Of considerable value for the general American historian is his translation of the *Reminiscences* of Wise and the edition of the *Letters of Rebecca Gratz*. Both of these works throw a great deal of light on social and cultural conditions in the ante-bellum period. In 1941, in his eightieth year, he published his autobiography, *My Life as an American Jew*.

In spite of a growing interest in American Jewish history his orientation toward Europe remained dominant until some time after the First World War. This war, with its brave determination "to make the world safe for democracy," with its crusade against German militarism, turned him away from Europe and focused his attention more and more on American Jewish life. Although originally a great admirer of German culture, there was no nostalgia within him for Germany itself. Unlike some of the German-born Jewish scholars, he could easily make an *Umstellung* in his emotional relations to Germany and to German-Jewish and to European-Jewish historical studies. His roots were here; he was a native son — and was proud and conscious of it. His spiritual relationship to American Jewish life was a positive and an affirmative one.

The Second World War, of course, completed the process of estrangement and re-orientation. In 1941 he established the Ella H. Philipson Graduate Fellowship in Jewish history, preferably in *American Jewish history*. The very next year, the first *required course* in American Jewish history in an American collegiate institution was introduced into the curriculum of the Hebrew Union College. After Philipson's death, his executor, the Hon. Murray Seasongood, knowing the Doctor's interest, gave the American Jewish Archives first choice of the books and papers in the Philipson library. The papers now constitute the "David Philipson Collection."

David Philipson was one of the founders of American Jewish historical studies. He helped give it much needed status, prestige. Up to the time of the Second World War, American Jewish scholars, with almost no exception, were interested only in *other* Jewries. No man could gain his spurs in the republic of Jewish letters by working in the field of American history. Articles on American Jewry rarely appeared in the scientific journals, annuals, and *Festschriften*. Students were not even encouraged to work in the field.

Philipson, therefore, will be remembered in future works on American Jewish historiography for his appreciation of the importance of research in the American Jewish field. He will be remembered for the part he played in bringing about the recognition of American Jewish history as a separate and accepted discipline in the field of the Science of Judaism.