

## Reviews of Books

THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE, London, 1690-1940. By Cecil Roth.  
London: Edward Goldston & Son, Ltd., 1950. Pp. 311. £2 2s.

This latest history by Roth deals with the first German rite (Ashkenazic) congregation in England. It covers the period from the founding of the congregation — about the year 1690 — until 1940.

Using the congregation as the core of the German Jewish world in London, the author has written a very readable and appealing *Kulturgeschichte* of Ashkenazic Jewry in that city. No doubt the limitations of space, and the demands of reader appeal, impelled Dr. Roth to touch only lightly on the details of congregational organization and administration. The Great Synagogue has a series of constitutions and laws (*takkanot*) which, under other circumstances, might well have merited detailed analysis. Because it was the mother synagogue, influencing other communities throughout England and its colonies, a knowledge of the nature of its constitutional and administrative procedure might have proved instructive, at least to the historian.

This is a beautiful work, well written, well printed, and adorned with seventy-five plates. It is a book to be read and enjoyed.

The purpose of this review, however, is not to assess the value of this book for the student of English Jewish history. The *American Jewish Archives* intends to stick to its last. It will concern itself only with books that shed light on the history of the American Jew. This *The Great Synagogue* does.

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American Jewry today is a body of almost five million persons. It is difficult to realize that in the seventeenth century there may have been but one or two hundred Jews in the colonies, and that in the following century the Jewish "nation" numbered a thousand at the most. American Jewry was a relatively insignificant community. England was "home." England was important, because it was the hub of a great colonial empire. It is true that English Jewry — almost exclusively London Jewry — was also small; nevertheless, it was much more important than any of its Jewish colonial outposts.

Many, if not the majority, of the Jews on the British North American mainland came from England or through England. And when they left London for these shores they brought with them an Anglicized form of their Jewish names: Mears, Phillips, Marks, Jacobs, Lyon, Hart, Hendricks, Polock, and the like.

In spite of the fact that the majority of eighteenth-century American Jewish colonists stemmed from Central and Eastern Europe, they were, nevertheless, profoundly influenced by Anglo-Jewish institutions. This impact of English Jewry on America was demonstrated as late as 1825, when B'nai Jeshurun, the first Ashkenazic synagogue in New York City, was established. Its founders adapted the service and the administrative structure of The Great Synagogue to their own needs. This was only natural when we recall that among the leaders of B'nai Jeshurun were men with such English-sounding names as Jackson, Hart, Davies, and Collins.

The contacts between English and American Jewry, of course, began early. As a matter of fact, the real founder of The Great Synagogue had American financial interests. This man was Benjamin Levy, son of a Moses Levy. Benjamin, a wealthy merchant, broker, and speculator, was an important shareholder in the East India Company and in the Royal African Company. It is not surprising, therefore, that he appears as one of the thirty-two proprietors of East Jersey (1702).

One of American Jewry's earliest merchant-shippers was Moses Levy. It is by no means improbable that this businessman Levy was somehow or other related to the English magnate, Benjamin Levy. The names Moses and Benjamin occur also in the American Levy family.

The American Moses Levy may have been sent over to the colonies by the wealthier members of the Levy clan of London. This is only a surmise. There can be but little doubt, however, that Moses Levy's son-in-law, Jacob Franks, was dispatched to this country by his wealthy brothers. The Rothschilds were by no means the first Jewish family to realize the importance of stationing members of the family at strategic commercial spots.

The first Franks came to England from Germany in the late seventeenth century; Jacob — tradition would have it — was already doing business in New York in the first decade of the next century. He built up the American branch of the family business, which was closely co-ordinated with the financial interests of some, if not all, of the brothers in London. The American Frankses were army purveyors on a large scale, particularly during the French and Indian War. (Incidentally, it should be noted in passing that it was the need for sutlers and civilian quartermasters which brought quite a number of Jews into the country at that time. The New York Jewish community began to grow during that war; the Canadian Jewish community was a direct outgrowth of it.)

The Frankses, both in England and in North America, had Gentile business partners capable of exerting political influence. In

both lands the wealth that this Jewish family acquired — and the culture which followed in the wake of that wealth — made its members socially acceptable in a world which still refused to grant Jews political equality.

Roth describes in some detail the part played by the Frankses in the life of Ashkenazic Jewry in eighteenth-century London. They were one of the two or three families that dominated this major segment of English Jewry. And the English pattern found its counterpart here in America. Jacob Franks soon became one of the leaders, if not the prime leader, in the New York synagogue, even though it adhered to the Spanish-Portuguese rite. It was this German English immigrant who, as president, built the Mill Street Synagogue (1730), the first in British North America.

The money to build this modest structure came from the handful of Jewish settlers and from philanthropic Jews and institutions in South America, the West Indies, and England. Among the contributors listed — in a laconic half-dozen words — was a Benjamin Mendes DaCosta. This donor begins to assume some significance when he appears also as a benefactor of The Great Synagogue. He is to be identified, in all probability, with the Benjamin DaCosta who subscribed a sum of money (1735) to help the (Gentile) settlers of Georgia. The Jacob Mendes DaCosta, Sr., who also contributed to the Georgia fund, was, of course, the same generous Londoner who built the New York Jewish school (*Minhat Areb*) in 1731. As early as 1711, seven Jewish merchants in New York had contributed to the building of the steeple of Trinity Church. Under the influence of a tolerant Christian community, a new type of philanthropist began to emerge in Jewish life in the eighteenth century: the man who was ready to bestow his benefactions on both Gentiles and Jews. The Jew who was accepted as a member of the larger community documented his loyalty to it by generous giving.

Two sons of Jacob Franks were sent back to live in England. We may assume that they went to London to serve as resident buyers and to protect their father's interests vis-a-vis the government (army supply) and their uncles. From the vantage point of American Jewish history, the two sons, Naphtali and Moses, were just "boys" who went abroad and who appear fleetingly in the records. As late as 1743 Abigail Franks wrote to Naphtali as "Dear Heartsey." He was still his mother's boy. The two brothers, one might well assume, were not important.

This picture of the relative unimportance of the American-born sons of Jacob Franks will have to be modified. People on this side of the ocean turned to these two men in matters of business, religion, and philanthropy because they were very influential. Both married wealthy

Franks cousins and engaged in large-scale commercial operations. Now we understand why Oliver DeLancey, brother of the lieutenant-governor and chief justice of the province of New York, had no hesitation in eloping with Phila Franks. Her father Jacob was one of New York's great merchants; her uncles were reputed to be fabulously wealthy. For Oliver it was a good match; he could well afford to forget that Phila was a Jewess.

By 1749, "Dear Heartsey" was president of The Great Synagogue; in 1766 the younger Moses succeeded to the office. They were rapidly becoming leaders of Ashkenazic English Jewry. By 1753 Naphtali was already referred to in a contemporary English source as the "great rich Jew." The names Naphtali and Moses Franks began to appear in the records of the Philadelphia-Lancaster group of Jewish land entrepreneurs who sought to establish large colonies in Trans-Appalachia.

With the death of the second generation of Frankses in England, the family disappeared as a force in the Anglo-Jewish religious community. The compact, relatively large community could keep its rich Jews Jewish, at least for a generation or two. Over here, on the American side, their brother David—with no wealthy and socially acceptable Jews to afford him an acceptable milieu—had already reared a family of Gentiles. Assimilation here on the "frontier" moved at a more rapid pace than in London.

The appearance of Frankses here, as scions of the larger and more important English stock, was typical of the branching out of eighteenth-century English Jewry. Roth makes it clear that some of the most notable London families sent members here: the Mearses, the Waggs, and the Adolphuses. None of these branches in the male line took root and prospered.

The ubiquitous *mohel* or circumciser of middle-eighteenth century New York Jewry was Abraham Isaac Abrahams. His signature on the marriage contract of Haym Salomon, the patriotic American bill broker, identifies Abraham as a son of Isaac Brisker (Brest-Litovsk). An Isaac Brisker, Roth shows, was one of the founders of the burial society in London in 1696. Abrahams, a son of Isaac Brisker, was thus not only America's first *Litvak* (!), but also a native Englishman. His business and personal correspondence evidences a better than average English schooling.

Naphtali Hart Myers is another Anglo-American Jew who begins to take on flesh and blood as the result of the publication of *The Great Synagogue*. Our sources know him as a successful, generous, and cultured American merchant whose presence is documented in New York and in Rhode Island from at least 1746 to 1760. In 1755-1756 he was president of Shearith Israel in New York. After 1760, in all

probability, he returned home to England, and in 1765 became a co-president of The Great Synagogue. He was no "small potato."

There are a number of other references which show the relation between the two Jewries. The more we know about English Jewry — and American Jewry, too — the clearer the picture and the relationship will emerge. No one has yet made a comparative study of the constitutions of Bevis Marks (Sephardic) and The Great Synagogue (Ashkenazic) in England and the eighteenth-century congregations here. The results of such a comparison might well prove interesting.

Roth, in *The Great Synagogue*, did not set out to illumine American Jewish history. That was not the purpose of his valuable work. But by writing a history of this notable synagogue-community he has indirectly thrown much light on eighteenth-century American Jewry. His book has served to correct our pro-American squint. He has, unintentionally of course, put American Jewry "in its place." It was a small, relatively obscure segment of English Jewry.

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