

Jewish Immigrant Life in Philadelphia

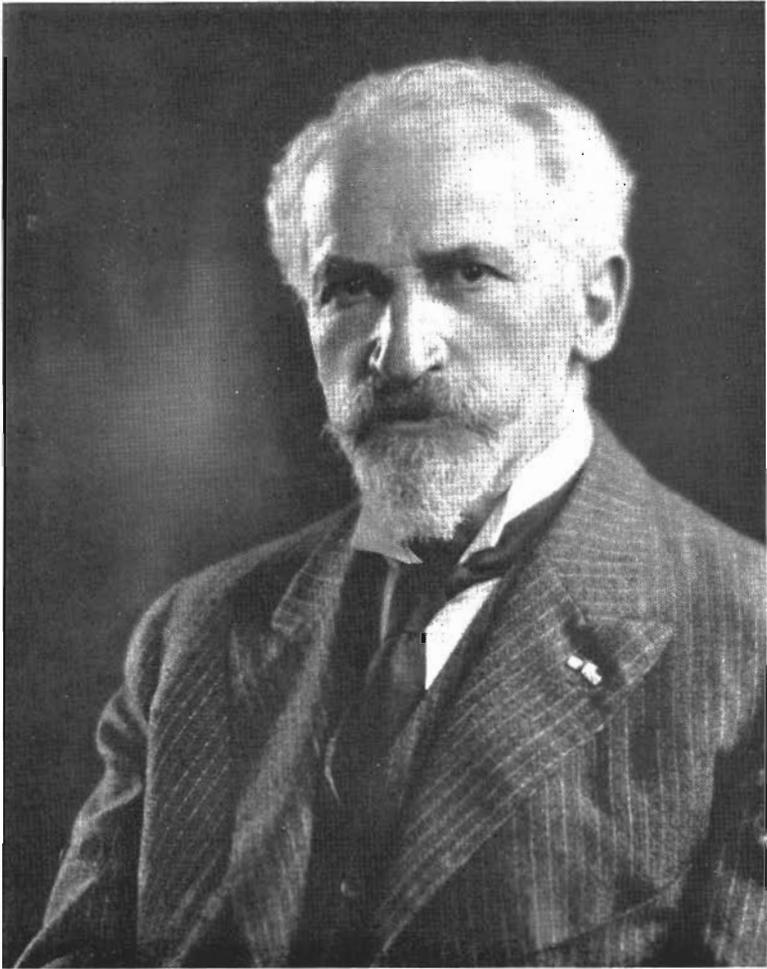
From *The Sunday Mercury*, August 10, 1890

The most stirring historical event in the life of American Jewry was the coming of the East European Jews to the United States. This immigration, which began as a trickle in the 1850's, became a mass movement by the end of the nineteenth century. The East Europeans came first by the hundreds, then by the thousands and the tens of thousands, for the bloody upheavals in Russia spurred the persecuted refugees to seek a haven in this country. Fleeing from the social decay of Russia, they arrived penniless and bedraggled. But with a courage that always distinguished them, they settled in the major cities of the United States and began to rebuild their lives.

A large number of these Russian immigrants settled in Philadelphia. The first few hundred who arrived were easily absorbed into the community. But as their number and needs increased, the demand for the services of an agency to help them became apparent, and in 1884 the Association of Jewish Immigrants of Philadelphia was founded. The object of the association was not only to supply the immediate requirements of food, clothing, and shelter, but also to provide dignified employment.

This organization, one of the many forerunners of the HIAS (Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society), was founded by Louis Edward Levy (1846-1919) and functioned on a local level. However, Levy's organizing activities were nationwide. In 1890, he was one of the founders, in Philadelphia, of the short-lived Jewish Alliance of America with its thirty-one branches throughout the country.

Louis Edward Levy had a distinguished record of service in both the civic and the philanthropic fields in Philadelphia, where he finally settled, but he is best remembered for his many scientific achievements. As a young man he lived in Detroit, where he improved the type of compass used by the pilots on the Great Lakes and furthered



*Courtesy of Mrs. Hortense Amram,
Washington, D. C.*

Photo by Elias Goldensky, Philadelphia

2

LOUIS EDWARD LEVY

Author, Publisher, Scientist, and Humanitarian



Kean Archives, Philadelphia

A TYPICAL SCENE IN THE RUSSIAN JEWISH QUARTER OF PHILADELPHIA

לעבענסבילד אין דעם אידישירוסישען קווארטאל אין פילאדעלפא, פאמאנארפירט
אין לאמבארד סטריט, נעכען דיא זמע סטריט

the knowledge of microscopic photography. He later moved to Baltimore where, in partnership with Max Bacharach, he invented a photochemical engraving process known as *Levytype*. In 1877 he moved to Philadelphia. There he collaborated with his brother Max, an inventor, and earned for the Levys many enviable scientific honors and awards. Chief among their contributions was the improvement of the halftone process for rapid photographic reproduction.

Levy worked closely with the firm of Brockhaus of Leipzig, which issued the valuable *Iconographic Encyclopedia of the Arts and Sciences*. In addition to their work in the field of photography and etching, the Levy brothers established a publishing department. Among the many books issued under the *Levytype* imprint, *The Jews of Philadelphia*, by Henry S. Morais (1894), has the distinction of being the first Jewish local history published in the United States. Book publishing at that time was but a step away from newspaper publishing, and Levy's extended activities included the acquisition of two newspapers, the Philadelphia *Evening Herald* and *The Sunday Mercury*. In those publications he demonstrated the effectiveness of the *Levytype* photographic methods in illustrating current events. *The Sunday Mercury*, a popular weekly, recorded the events of the week with a graphic richness which was the envy of its contemporaries. Its newsy reports of political events, social life, and the activities of the city's civil servants were vividly illustrated by the halftone process.

The plight and progress of the Jewish immigrant, in which Levy was greatly interested, was the feature of one issue of *The Sunday Mercury*. The story was in sharp contrast to the description, published in an earlier issue, of the dignified Hebrew Charity Ball, a Jewish social event of the year. The proceeds from that ball were earmarked to aid the poor immigrants. The account dealing with the newcomers from Eastern Europe discussed religion, politics, trade unions, squalor, and faith in the world to come, and reflected Levy's sympathies with those humble Jewish immigrants.

This detailed sketch appeared in *The Sunday Mercury* of August 10, 1890. It is reprinted here from a unique copy in the possession of Maxwell Whiteman.

Since 1882 [1881], when the bloody uprising of the Russian ex-serfs against their Jewish neighbors started the great modern exodus of the Russian Jews, the emigration to this country has steadily continued, until now there are considerably over a hundred thousand of these refugees settled in this country. Of these it is estimated that eighty thousand are settled in New York City alone. Philadelphia has about ten thousand of them, Chicago nearly twice that number, while another twenty thousand are spread through the other towns and cities of the Union.

The recent revival of the spirit of persecution which has made that country a vast Ghetto for the three millions of Russian Jews is now attracting the universal attention of the civilized world. The news recently cabled from Europe, that the horrors of 1882 are to be repeated now at the instigation of the Russian Government, has been officially denied at St. Petersburg, but the details of recent atrocities now arriving by mail, openly printed in Russian newspapers, and particularly such as are conveyed in private correspondence from various points of the Empire, clearly demonstrate that the worst statements of the situation are true, and that the official denials are merely a formal subterfuge, of a character for which Russian diplomacy has become proverbial.

The stories of unbridled villainy contained in some of the printed reports simply corroborate the recitals of horrible excesses which private letters from the affected districts convey to the refugees on this side of the water. From Odessa, where out of a population of 250,000 over 70,000 are Jews; from the districts of Mohileff, where more than a third of the inhabitants are of that race; from Kiev and Kovno, and from others of the sixteen districts of Russia in which the Jews are allowed to dwell, and to which they are restricted, come tales of outrage, rapine, and murder, to which these wretched subjects of the Russian Czar are subjected.

The more or less guarded editorial comments on the news from these districts, in the Russian papers of St. Petersburg, Odessa, and Warsaw, now at hand, all conclude with allusions to the general movement towards emigration, which the disturbances had occasioned. From past experience it may reasonably be anticipated that the present ebullitions will subside when the purposes for which the local officials had incited them have been duly subserved, but that the upheaval will cause a sort of tidal wave of emigration of the surviving victims of the persecution is simply a matter of course.

There is much talk of directing the refugees to a settlement in Palestine. But, besides the fact that the Ottoman Government, for political reasons, is opposed to any considerable influx of infidel population, whether Christian or Jewish, there is another factor militating against their coming, even more potent than the government. That factor is one similar to the situation in Russia; the local populace is but imperfectly controlled by the government of the Porte, and disturbances similar to those latterly reported from Erzeroum, where the Christian Armenians were slaughtered in their cathedral by their Moslem neighbors, would become more imminent, to the serious discomfort of the Sultan and his advisers. The conditions of security, for want of which the refugees flee from Russia, are equally wanting among the Turks, and the result is that Western Europe, especially England, is made the goal of all who can get away, and in the end all those countries become merely stations on the roadway of the great exodus to these western shores.

The history of those Russian Jews who came to America in 1882, and since, has been one of great poverty and struggle, and though of slow, yet, withal, of a steady and marked regeneration. There exists among them a strong desire to become owners of their own homes, and to a very appreciable extent a yearning towards agricultural pursuits. The few hundreds who were then aided to form the settlements near Vineland and Bridgeton, N.J., have, since the founding of the colonies, been reinforced by a large influx of newcomers, who have purchased their holdings, some of them of quite considerable extent. Not a few of these farmers have prospered considerably, while the great majority have attained a fair measure of comfort and independence. Of the great masses settled in the cities many eke out a scant subsistence in various of the semi-skilled occupations, while quite a fair proportion have succeeded in successfully establishing themselves in some line of trade and traffic.

The fact that the already considerable numbers of these people now settled among us is likely soon to be increased by the refugees from the present persecution renders a review of the situation here of timely interest. For that purpose a reporter of *The Mercury*, accompanied by our staff photographer, made several visits to the southern section of the city, where the great majority of the Russian Jewish residents of this city are located, and the salient features of what they noted and observed are herewith reproduced.

A line drawn from the Delaware River up Pine Street to Broad, from thence to Washington Avenue and back again, will enclose the habitations of the vast majority of the Russian Jews of this city. Although the colony numbers all told but 10,000 individuals, they have set their impress upon this section, which was at one time the hotbed of native Americanism and afterwards degenerated into the Whitechapel of Philadelphia.

It was only a few years ago that the ring of a pistol shot was a daily occurrence in this section, and many a man has been borne out of the neighborhood feet first, whose murder is still unavenged, and whose murderer today stalks the streets a power in politics, or else fills a grave to which he was sent by the bullet of a man like unto himself. For many years certain portions of this section were a stench in the nostrils of the decent people of Philadelphia. No man who cared for his life would venture there save under police protection, and no woman's honor was safe who strayed through its streets save in broad daylight.

The worst spot of the whole was that which includes such streets and alleys at [as] Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Pine, Lombard, South, Bainbridge, Alaska, Spofford, St. Mary's, Baxter, and Emeline. They represented a terra incognita, and only the enthusiastic missionary ever explored them. Policemen shuddered when put upon the beats, and merchants sooner let cases go by default than attend the courts located there. From this neighborhood came forth the celebrated criminals of Philadelphia; this was their nursery, and from there they were hurried into the penitentiaries of the country. Such a thing as an honest election was unknown, and in a word it was the home of the vicious, unfortunate, and abandoned.

In 1882 [1881] the first great influx of Russian Jews came into the neighborhood, bringing with them their habits of industry and sobriety, their love of family, and their desire to improve their condition. Slowly but surely the leaven they put into the mass has worked until today many of the crowd of loafers, who once made the different corners their lounging places, have largely disappeared, and their places have been taken by laughing, gleeful children whose auburn hair and scintillating eyes tell of their birth and their ancestry.

When the desire to come to the United States seizes upon a new people it is generally felt first by the dregs of the population, and the American people learn of their coming by seeing them working on the streets, the railways, and the buildings for even a more meagre pittance than that paid

to their predecessors. Such at least has been the rule with the Irish, Italians, Chinese, and Hungarian pioneers of emigration to this country, and when in 1882 [1881] the first batch of Russian and Jewish refugees came to our shores, the same thing was expected of them. The papers made a great sensation of the event, and then the Russians dropped out of sight. People had forgotten all about them until a few months ago, when the cloak-makers' strikes in this city and New York called their attention to them again. During this time they had grown from a mere handful to nearly 150,000 people, 80,000 of whom had settled in New York, and the rest had located in the other great cities of the Union, and in no place had their coming disturbed any previous condition.

In the meantime the Chinese question, the Italian question, and the Hungarian question had attracted the attention of the political economists, but no one had even thought of the Russian Jewish question, and for the simple reason that these people came here with the intention of becoming citizens and giving their children a birthright of liberty.

In their own country they had not been the scum of the population. On the contrary, they were the real artisan class of Russia. They were the tailors, shoemakers, butchers, bakers, carpenters, and what not of the great empire, and, coming here, each man went to the trade he had learned.

Here and in New York many of them engaged in cloakmaking, and coming from a country where any association of the working people is looked upon as a seditious movement to be downed either by the sword or scimitar, the right to meet as they pleased, without let or hindrance from the authorities, became very precious to them, and they hold it to their breasts as closely almost as their religion. It is this feeling that brought them victory in New York and makes them unconquerable here despite privations and misery.

If one wishes to know these people, let him do as a *Mercury* reporter did last week: go among them, hear their stories, learn their beliefs, and see their homes.

They came here as strangers and after great sufferings, persecuted at home, like the tribes in Egypt of old; they heard stories of the promised land beyond the sea, where every man was his neighbor's equal and where a man could worship his father's God in his father's way. Then, gathering their families together, each man with his wife and children, and leaving behind him all of his memories, they started on the new exodus. Robbed, beaten,

and maltreated on every hand, they never faltered, and finally, after privations and sufferings of which no pen can ever give a picture, they reached the place they had been brought to believe was the home of the downtrodden and persecuted.

In their old home they had been of the better class, but, forgetting all this, they were content to take the lowliest place and the humblest home, in the confident belief that time would right them. That their belief in this ultimate justice was not founded on nothing is proven by the position they hold in this city today. The two thousand families of this city own five hundred houses, and while many of them live in rented rooms, a still greater number have followed the Philadelphia plan and rented houses of their own. As soon as the head of the family finds himself in the condition to afford it, he gets away from the slums and becomes a householder. He sends his children to the public schools, and at the very moment that the law permits he is naturalized.

It is safe to say that not a single Russian Jew who has the right to be a citizen of this country has failed to avail himself of that privilege. But nobody ever hears of the Russian Jew vote. For among these people every man thinks for himself and votes accordingly. Perhaps it is a pity that they do not band together. If they did, such scenes as have been enacted by the police during the recent strike would never have been enacted.

To show how these people have assimilated themselves a few statistics may not be altogether dry reading. Since they came here they have not only started several literary societies like the Hebrew Literary [Society], the Russian-American League, the Progress Club, and the Tourgenieff Club, several social lodges and labor unions, but many of the younger ones have gone into the learned professions. Four of them are druggists, eight are students in the medical colleges, one is a student in the engineering department of the University of Pennsylvania, three are students of the West Chester State Normal School, and two are recently-graduated physicians. Several of the students are ladies.

Among their organizations are the Michael Heilprin Lodge, I.O.B.B. [Independent Order B'nai B'rith]; the Hebrew Literature Society, the Down Town Beneficial Society, the Working Men's Lodge; Sexennial League, the Liberty Lodge, O.B.A. [Order Brith Abraham], the Dorshe Sphath Ever ["Furtherers of the Hebrew Language"], Association of Jewish Emigrants, and congregations: B'nai Jacob, B'nai Abraham, Rodfe

Zedek, B'nai Reuben, Anshe Nyezín, Kurlander, B'nai Israel, and Anshe Shavel.

At 316 South Fourth Street is the Industrial School. All of the pupils are children of Russian Jews, and every pupil attends the public schools of the city before going to the lectures at the Industrial School. There has been purchased lately the property at the southwest corner of Tenth and Carpenter Streets, and in a short time ground will be broken for the erection of a new schoolhouse, which will give accommodation to 1,500 children. It will contain apartments for the young women, young men, and kindergarten, lectures, and a library, and space for the manual training of males and females, together with baths for the sexes. In this work the Jewish population generally will take part, and it will be under the auspices and direction of the Hebrew Education Society.

If one wishes to learn more of the people, let him go among them, as a *Mercury* reporter and an artist did on Thursday, visit them at their homes, and see their children at play on the sidewalks. At present the strike, which involves nearly one-fifth of the entire colony directly and many more indirectly, has to a great extent cut down the financial resources materially, and consequently there are many more evidences of destitution to be seen than at more prosperous times; yet, unlike strikers of other races, the saloons are not crowded with the men out of work nor are the corners and other meeting places packed with loudmouthed debaters . . .

The loungers as a rule are either children or the people of other nativity than that of the Russian Jews. The men, who in most other cases would be found on the streets, are absent for the simple reason that they, notwithstanding what they believe to be the righteousness of their cause, are around town seeking in various ways to add to their little store and thus be able to overcome the men who they think are trying to grind them to the earth.

As the newspaper man and the artist passed through Emeline Street . . . they were greeted by a crowd of children of both sexes and all nationalities, who beseeched the man with the camera to take their pictures. A slattern[ly] woman, with a baby at her breast, lounging on the step of one of the poor little houses, looked up at this, with a sneer on her face and an oath on her lips, and said: "Oh, they don't want nothing but Sheenies." And then there came from a half dozen other slatterns various views as to the advisability of transporting all the other Sheenies to the nether regions.

Just a few steps beyond this the reporter happened to glance into the window of another house and there, unconscious of the noise and filth outside, sat an old man, with the long white beard and the clear-cut features of a patriarch, pointer in hand, teaching the Law to a little fellow not yet in his teens. It was a picture for a Millet, and nobody but a Hogarth could have done justice to the other.

The contrasts that *Mercury* men found everywhere between the Russian Jews' homes and those of their Gentile neighbors in the slums was, to say the least, astonishing.

Here were men who, for a time at least, had given up their regular means of subsistence, and yet their homes were scrupulously clean. The kettle was hissing on the stove and the odor of health-giving food touched the noses of the newspaper men with a force that made each of them long for a taste of the unknown dainty. In the other houses dirt and filth reigned; the women, as a rule, were on the streets and the children in the gutters; what men were about were either at home drunk or in the nearest saloon trying to reach that condition.

The reporter stopped at a neighboring butcher shop and asked the proprietor as to what the Jews lived on. "The best I've got," he answered, "and what is better, they pay cash for what they get. They do not buy as much as some of the Irish and Americans do when they are in cash, but they utilize everything they get and let nothing go to waste. They buy very close, but if they want a thing they will pay a good price for it. They are good neighbors as a rule, and their children are about the streets less than any others."

On South Street the Russians have made themselves at home. They are gradually beginning to put their impress on the street, and before long, if they have their way unmolested, it will be as much theirs as their own homes. These people are very clannish and hang together as closely as possible. They are heart and soul engaged in the cloakmakers' strike and mean to see it out to the end. One of their leading men, a highly educated gentleman, whose business puts him beyond the wants of the many, said to the *Mercury* man in a talk the latter had with him about the strike: "Our people are in this thing as a matter of principle. They think their cause is a righteous one and would sooner starve than give in. It is the principle they are contending for, and they are as earnest in the matter as were the men who carried through the Revolutionary War.

“They believe that if they give in to the employers now, that their freedom is over and that henceforth they and their children will be doomed to the same slavery from which they fled. This feeling sometimes drives them to extravagant expressions of which their enemies are quick to take advantage. Only the other night one of the leaders, in talking about the strike, exclaimed: ‘I have six children, and sooner than give in I would kill them one by one and eat them to keep me alive.’ Of course this was extravagance, because in no race in the world are the family ties dearer than they are with this people, yet someone swore out a warrant and arrested this man on the charge of threatening to kill his children, and he was held to bail by a magistrate.

“Understanding the language not any too well, they are misunderstood by the authorities, and their enemies keep inciting the people against them. Only a little while ago the strikers were holding a meeting at Fifth and Gaskill Streets when suddenly the doors were burst open and the police raided the place. They made a break for the people on the platform and arrested them, and then drove the audience out of the building, amusing themselves in the meantime by smashing the flying men’s heads with their clubs. Many of the audience were severely handled, and yet these people were only meeting together under the rights guaranteed them by the Constitution of the United States. The speaker of the occasion, a man by the name of Stahler, was hustled to a police station, kept over night, and then put under the exorbitant bail of \$2,500.

“Do you think that the police would have dared to break up a meeting of Irishmen or Americans in the same way? Mind you, these men are not Anarchists or Socialists. They are simply strikers, and yet the authorities, without writ or warrant, treat them as though they were no more than stray dogs. I could fill a page of your paper with stories of a similar or even worse character had I the time or you the space. They may be mistaken in their demands, but they do not think so, and are just as much entitled to a fair hearing the same as any other people. Come with me if you have the time and see some of the homes I can show you, and say then whether you do not think that these men believe in the righteousness of their cause.”

Then he led the newspaperman up flights of rickety stairs, along dark and noisome courts and dreary yards, and showed him how some of the victims of the great strike managed to live and keep their hearts. Unlike the homes the reporter had seen before, no cheerful kettle hissed upon the

hob, and no savory soup sent out its invitation to the hungry. Here grim and haggard want had set its seal, and here poverty had made its home.

One bearded Russian, in broken English and translated Russian, told the tale of his weeks of fighting off the hunger wolf. He had been making fairly good wages, enough to keep his children healthy and [to] encourage him in the hope that some day he might be able to rent a home of his own. Then he went on the strike, and little by little he saw his hopes fly away. He saw wan faces and the hungry eyes of his little ones glare at him as he came home penniless night after night.

He did everything a strong man could do to put a little into their empty stomachs, but it was only a little, and the griping of his own told him each day of how his precious little ones must suffer; yet during all these weary weeks not a word of complaint had come to him, nor had thought of surrender come into his head. He, like others, preferred martyrdom to surrender. This tale is only a sample of what the reporter saw and heard among these victims of Russian cruelty and American rapacity.

The Russian Jew is as stubborn as a man can well be, and if he gives in this time will do so simply to save the lives of his children . . .

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