

Alfred Mordecai, American Jew

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Of the nineteenth-century American Jews who combined the religious endowment of their fathers with the customs and culture of the new nation which they were helping to build, Alfred Mordecai is an interesting and outstanding example. A typical American of his time in his blending of heritage and environment, he took the best of the old and new and lived a life that reflected the finest qualities of both. He was, in some ways, an anomaly: a Jew whose life was spent mainly among Christians, a soldier honored and respected for his service in time of peace

He was born on January 3, 1804, in Warrenton, North Carolina, where his father, Jacob Mordecai, was then a merchant and respected member of the community. His grandfather, Moses Mordecai, had emigrated from Bonn, Germany, to America some fifty years earlier. A broker, he had swiftly found his niche in the Jewish business community of Philadelphia, where he was known as a man of religion and honesty. His quick identification with his new life is symbolized by his signature on the Philadelphia Non-Importation Agreement of 1765.

Jacob Mordecai, born in Philadelphia in 1762, inherited his father's love of Judaism, his strength of character, and his occupation. An excellent religious education made him an outstanding biblical student and authority on Judaism and endowed him and his large family with a sense of scholarship that dominated their lives. It was as a scholar that he achieved the most success, for his business ventures were not always happy in their outcome. They made a Federalist of him politically, but they did not leave him with a comparable estate. Shortly after Alfred's birth, some unfortunate tobacco speculations all but ruined Jacob Mordecai financially. His

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reputation as a scholar saved him, however, for with the backing of the townspeople of Warrenton he opened a nonsectarian boarding school for girls which soon became one of the outstanding institutions of North Carolina if not, indeed, of the entire South. His wife, Rebecca Myers Mordecai, boarded and looked after the girls, and his eldest daughters helped teach them.

Alfred Mordecai was given his early education with the girls attending his father's school. To this excellent training was added the additional schooling which he received from his older brothers and sisters and the religious education provided by his father. As a result, by the time Mordecai was fifteen, he had received an excellent liberal education. He could read, write and speak well, knew some mathematics, was familiar with the classics and the arts, knew history and geography, and read Greek, Latin, French, and probably Hebrew. His "intellectual development," he noted later, was "a good deal in advance" of his years. His formal training was completed by four years at the United States Military Academy, then the only scientific school in the country, where he achieved an outstanding record. In 1823, at the age of nineteen, he was graduated at the top of his class and commissioned a second lieutenant. His excellent education and his own perceptive mind and scholarly habits prepared him for a military life in which he was always more the scientist than the soldier.

During this period, his contact with Jews and Jewish life was almost nonexistent. In Warrenton, the Mordecais had been the only Jewish family in the town; but there, at least, young Alfred had lived in a Jewish home. At West Point, however, the situation was hardly compatible with Orthodox Judaism. Mordecai could not — nor did he attempt to — live as he had at home. Except on visits to his family or to family friends and relatives in Philadelphia, he probably saw no other Jews. His fellow cadets were anything but religious, and that he was the only Jew among them was never even mentioned. Like the others, Mordecai attended compulsory Presbyterian services on Sunday, and, like them, he was bored throughout.

For nine years after his graduation, Mordecai served his country as an engineer officer. He taught at West Point, helped supervise

and inspect the construction of fortifications along the Atlantic coast, assisted in a canal survey, and was stationed in Washington as an assistant to the Chief of Engineers.

In Washington, he partook of the gay social life of the nation's capital, attending parties at the White House and mixing with the important people of the national government. Washington at this time had no Jewish community. Indeed, Mordecai may well have been the only Jew in the city — certainly his contacts were almost exclusively with non-Jews. It is not surprising, then, that his first serious affair of the heart should have been with a Christian girl. Jeannette Thruston, daughter of Federal Judge Buckner Thruston, was the object of Mordecai's attentions for nearly two years before he finally asked her to marry him in 1833.

Despite his religious training, Mordecai's delay in proposing was due in no way to the fact that Miss Thruston was not Jewish. Indeed, there were too many examples of intermarriage within his own family for religion to have been a stumbling block for him. For on this and many other points the orthodoxy of Jacob Mordecai had been forced to give way before the realities of life in a Christian community. Not only was it frequently impractical, if not impossible, for this pious man to follow strictly the requirements of Jewish law, but several of his children had already married or would later marry Christians, and many would even renounce their Jewish faith. These events caused him much heartache, yet he consented — at least to the marriages — rather than break up his family. And he was completely successful in preventing such a rupture, for the large Mordecai family retained its closeness, affection, and warm sense of unity at all times. Within it, some became staunch believers in their new religion; others clung tenaciously to the old. The family, like so many others in the new nation, was in the process of assimilation. In another century, intermarriage, conversion, and death would have completed the process. Alfred Mordecai, himself, never gave up the Jewish religion, but neither did he follow it with the fervent passion of his father. He remained throughout his life a deeply and sincerely religious man. Yet his mode of living, his own beliefs, and the society around him militated against his strict observance of the outer forms of the Jewish

faith. And in 1833, if Jeannette Thruston had not refused him, he certainly would have married her.

In 1832, meanwhile, an Army reorganization had opened several positions within the Ordnance Department. Competition for these posts was strong, and all except one went to officers holding commissions in the Artillery. Mordecai, an engineer, was chosen, however, for the one remaining opening. His transfer and commission as a captain in Ordnance anticipated by many years the date when he would have reached that rank as an engineer.

In 1836, while commanding Frankford Arsenal in Philadelphia, he married Sarah Ann Hays, daughter of Samuel Hays and a niece of Rebecca Gratz. He had met her many years before on a trip to Philadelphia, but only the accident of being stationed near her had led to love and marriage. In the ensuing years, Sarah did her best to give her husband a Jewish home, keeping the Sabbath (which Mordecai himself did not) as well as the several holidays. When Alfred, Jr., the only one of her six children to marry, took a Christian girl for his wife, Sarah Mordecai refused to attend the wedding. Mordecai, however, was present, nor is there any evidence that he opposed the marriage.

During the years in which Mordecai was an ordnance officer, he rose to the rank of major, held many important positions and commands, and was sent on several consequential missions. He commanded Frankford, Washington, and Watervliet Arsenals, holding the post in the nation's capital during the Mexican War when it was a vital ordnance supply point. He was an assistant to the Secretary of War and to the Chief of Ordnance. He published a handy and useful *Digest of Military Laws* (1833), served on the Board of Visitors at West Point, and was sent to Mexico to investigate a fraudulent claim growing out of the Mexican War. It was, however, as a member of the Ordnance Board, which passed on and developed all new weapons, ammunition, and ordnance equipment for the Army, that he made his greatest contributions. Serving on the Board for more than twenty years, he was in the forefront of research and experimentation in the field of weapons and ammunition development. In 1840, he was sent abroad to study European methods of artillery production, and again, during

the Crimean War, he was dispatched to observe that conflict and further to study European arms systems and military establishments. His observations on the latter trip were published by the government in 1860, with a second edition in 1861, as *Military Commission to Europe, in 1855 and 1856: Report of Major Alfred Mordecai*. He performed important experiments with artillery and gunpowder, the results of some of which were published in 1845 as *Report on Experiments on Gunpowder*, with a sequel in 1849. These were of great value to the Ordnance Department and were translated into French and German. He did most of the work on the first *Ordnance Manual* ever published by the United States Army (1841), and was alone responsible for making important revisions in it (2nd edition, 1850). After several years with the Ordnance Board, he was assigned the important task of coordinating the research of the Board, writing the report, and drawing the plates on the subject of a system of artillery for the Army. His report, published in 1849 as *Artillery for the United States Land Service*, was a valuable and outstanding contribution.

Mordecai's claim to fame arises from work of interest and value to technicians or professional military men, rather than to the average student of history. His contributions, as one of his younger contemporaries wrote later, came not as a few large nuggets, but in an even flow of gold dust over a period of many years. His work was valued for its accuracy, its precise and systematic nature, and its immediate usefulness. It was an example and an inspiration for every other worker in the same field, and Mordecai was respected by all of them for his technical contributions no less than he was loved for his fineness of character, integrity, warmth, and gentle humor.

In 1861, Mordecai was confronted, like so many other Army officers of Southern birth, with the problem of divided loyalties. As a professional man, he was politically a Whig, as were his brothers who had gone into the fields of business, law, and medicine. But, like them, he was a Southern Whig. Members of his father's family were slaveowners, and he himself at one time had owned a slave. If he did not condone the practice of slavery, neither did he condemn it. He sympathized with the South and, until events

proved them to be in vain, held hopes that the North would decide on a course of conciliation. He saw no future for a divided nation, deplored those who urged radical measures, and at one time held that hanging a few extremists on both sides might well settle the whole issue.

Yet while Mordecai stood with those who hoped to preserve the Union, he would not at the same time lift his hand against his fellow Southerners. All his brothers and sisters, and their families, lived in the South and held to its cause. To fight against them, or even to make arms to be used against them, was something he would not do. He hoped to receive an assignment at some point, in California perhaps, far from the theaters of war, where he could serve without endangering his loved ones. When such an assignment was refused him, he felt that he had no other course than to resign the commission and the trust which he loved as dearly as he did his family in the South.

Still, if he could not fight against the Confederacy, neither did he wish to bear arms against the Union. He had served the United States faithfully for more than forty years, he had sworn to defend her, and he hoped for her preservation. His wife and children were Northern, with Northern sympathies — indeed, his son Alfred was even then graduating from West Point to be commissioned in the Union Army. He had no real state allegiance, for although he had been born in North Carolina, his family had moved to Virginia when he himself left for West Point, and since that time he had not lived anywhere in the South.

So, deploring the great conflict just beginning that would see his son fight on one side and many of his nephews on the other, he refused the offers of rank and position from the South and shunned the call of duty from the North. No matter if the war offered advancement and honor, the goals of all soldiers; no matter what the arguments of his Northern friends or Southern relatives were; with heavy heart he watched the unfolding of the great conflict from the sidelines.

The four years of war were hard ones for him — not only because of the mental and emotional anguish which they caused, but also because of the difficulty of finding a means of supporting himself

and his family. He was a military man and a scientist; the only trade that he knew was war, the only implements which he understood were the tools of war. To take a position having anything to do with the prosecution of the war was anomalous with his reasons for resignation. So he would not serve as a consultant on the construction of a fort near Philadelphia, he would not teach in or run a military school, and he would not take any other post which he felt would compromise his honor. As a result, he lived during the war on the small income which his daughters earned by teaching, an income apparently supplemented by what he himself could earn as a teacher of mathematics. With the end of the Civil War, at the age of sixty-one, he was faced with the problem of starting a new career.

For more than a year, in 1865 and 1866, Mordecai worked as an engineer on the Imperial Mexican Railroad. With the collapse of the Emperor Maximilian's government, however, he returned to Philadelphia. Not long after his return, through the offices of one of his many friends, he was appointed treasurer and secretary for the canal companies controlled by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. This position he held for twenty years, and through it he was able to support himself and his family, simply but honorably.

He passed the rest of his life in Philadelphia, quietly and happily, surrounded by his family and his many devoted friends. In 1886 he and his wife celebrated their golden wedding anniversary. Hundreds of friends attended the festivities, and gifts and good wishes arrived from all parts of the country. In June of the following year, he presided for the last time over the annual meeting of West Point graduates at the United States Military Academy. The senior member present, he looked back fondly in his speech to the pleasant days which he had spent there more than sixty years earlier. Four months later, on October 23, 1887, he died quietly in Philadelphia.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

This study of Alfred Mordecai is based primarily on the many thousands of manuscript items examined by the writer in preparing a biography of Mordecai. This manuscript material is available in

four major collections: the Alfred Mordecai Papers, in the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.; the Mordecai Papers, George W. Mordecai Papers, and other related material at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N. C.; the Jacob Mordecai Papers at Duke University, Durham, N. C.; and War Department records in the National Archives, Washington, D. C. The file of records and manuscript material at the United States Military Academy, West Point, N. Y., is also an important source, and there is some relevant material in the collections of the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Va., and of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa. No biography of Alfred Mordecai has been published, other than a few brief, unsatisfactory entries in encyclopedias and similar works. A short but rewarding memoir by Mordecai himself is, however, included in his papers at the Library of Congress and has been published as "The Life of Alfred Mordecai as Related by Himself," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XXII, No. 1 (January, 1945). For Alfred Mordecai's military contributions, also, the historian must rely principally on manuscript sources, since, outside of a few general military works and some early monographs, very little has been written about those aspects of the military establishment with which Mordecai was concerned. Mordecai's own published works, mentioned in this article, provide an additional key.