

Brotherly Love

1854

“To the industry of foreigners,” wrote Charles Cist appreciatively in 1851, “Cincinnati is indebted in a great degree, for its rapid growth.” Native Americans, in fact, constituted no more than 54 per cent of the city’s population. Of Cincinnati’s approximately 115,000 residents in the early 1850’s, some 30,000 were of German birth, while another 13,000 had come from Ireland. Among the 30,000 Germans were many Jews.

The life of an immigrant was not always agreeable, even in a “melting pot” like the Queen City. He had to learn a new way of life and a new language. He was often lonely, yearning for family and friends back in his European homeland. Economic competition was sharp, and often the conditions under which he had to earn a living — be it by peddling or storekeeping or some such pursuit — did not contribute to sweetness of temper on his part. The life of an immigrant, in short, was often one of frustration and aggravation.

The documents reproduced below may be taken as testimonials to the psychic difficulties with which the immigrants were not infrequently beset. One of the ways in which their maladjustments expressed themselves was in bickering and recrimination. Messrs. S. R. Biesenthal and I. Marienthal, members of Cincinnati’s Bene Israel Congregation, now the Rockdale Avenue Temple, were probably immigrants reacting rather characteristically to the frustrations of their far from easy lives in the New World. If Mr. Marienthal’s charge against Mr. Biesenthal seems a trifle far-fetched, it may have been just that. When immigrants quarrelled, they were ready to believe anything of each other; each, in the other’s jaundiced view, was *capable de tout*.

Mr. Biesenthal, of course, may have been a particularly difficult person. To the trustees of the congregation, he was apparently obnoxious enough to be voted against, 9 to 1.

The documents are taken from the Minute Book (1845–1869) of Congregation Bene Israel, Board of Trustees, Cincinnati. The originals are in the possession of the American Jewish Archives.

Cincinnati, August 27, 1854.

A called meeting was held this day pursuant to notice. L. Abraham acting as secretary.

The minutes of the last meeting were read and adopted. The parnass

[president] stated that he had called the meeting for the purpose of taking into consideration certain charges brought against Mr. Biesenthal by I. Marienthal. It was objected that the trustees had no cognizance of the matter, the vestry [the officers of the Congregation] having control of the case, with power to appeal to the congregation. But both parties being present with their witnesses and consenting to the arbitration of the trustees, they went into consideration of the charge which was read as follows:

Cincinnati, 22nd August, 1854.

To the Hon. Parnass Vestry of K. K. B. I.:

I request you to summons Mr. Biesenthal to answer a charge of violence against me as he hired an Irishman for fifty dollars to take my life; as I think that this is a violation of the relation which one Jew holds against another, I request the Hon. Vestry to take immediate action of the same. For witness I take Mr. Hart Judah.

Hoping that you will yield to my request, I am yours fraternally,

I. MARIENTHAL

After examination of the case, the parties having retired, the trustees voted him guilty as follows:

Guilty:

F. Milius	E. Mayer
A. Maltzer	L. Abraham
M. Klaw	I. Seasongood
M. E. Mohring	Hyman Moses
P. Hiedelbach	

Not Guilty:

Saml. Bruel

It was then moved to suspend Mr. Biesenthal two years which [motion] was lost. It was then resolved that Mr. Biesenthal be suspended for one year from this date, and notice to be sent him of the same in writing by the secretary.

. . .

The trustees held a meeting 6th September, 1854. Minutes of the next preceding meeting were read and approved.

A protest was presented by S. Bruel which was read and ordered to be filed. It related to the action of the Board in respect of the action had in the matter of S. R. Biesenthal.

I. Abraham stated that he had been employed by Mr. Biesenthal to call the attention of the Board to the illegality of their action in respect to Mr. Biesenthal and after discussing the same it was unanimously Resolved that the action had in respect to the suspension of Mr. Biesenthal is illegal and void and therefore that the same be annulled and rescinded . . .