

A Note on the Jewish Ancestry of Louis Moreau Gottschalk, American Pianist and Composer

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Authorities have been divided in their conception of the background of Edward Gottschalk, father of New Orleans-born Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829–1869), who became mid-nineteenth-century America's greatest pianist and one of his native land's earliest accomplished composers. Clara Gottschalk Peterson, the pianist's sister, in a biographical introduction to her brother's *Notes of a Pianist*, refers to her father only as "an Englishman, born in London."¹ Rabbi Max Heller reported, however, some four decades later, that "in New Orleans there is a persistent tradition of Edward's having been a Jew."² Fannie L. Gwinner Cole, writing the presumably definitive sketch in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, comments: "His father, Edward Gottschalk, was a wealthy and cultured English broker born in London, but not of Jewish ancestry, as has been generally stated."³ Vernon Loggins, the pianist's most recent biographer, assumes that Edward Gottschalk was a Jew; he speaks of him as such a number of times, while indicating, on the other hand, that he and his brothers were identified with the Protestant community in New Orleans.⁴ Loggins, however, gives no precise reference to justify such statements, as, for instance, that "Père Antoine and everybody else in New Orleans took him to be an Israelite."

Loggins gives the names of Edward Gottschalk's parents as Lazarus and Jane Harris Gottschalk. I have not been able to trace

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¹ L. M. Gottschalk, *Notes of a Pianist* (Philadelphia, 1881), p. 25.

² Max Heller, *Jubilee Souvenir of Temple Sinai, 1872–1922* (New Orleans, 1922), p. 24.

³ *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1946), VII, 441–42.

⁴ Vernon Loggins, *Where the Word Ends* (Baton Rouge, 1958), pp. 6, 9, 45.

these persons in British sources, but there is no doubt that both "Gottschalk" and "Harris" were names borne by Jews in London at that time. Two men of the latter name — Benjamin Harris, living in Castle Street, and Samuel Harris of Russell Court — are recorded in the 1797 rate books of St. Martin's in the Fields, Westminster.⁵ Either one could have been Jane Harris' father. This possibility is suggested by the fact that the name Gottschalk is associated with the same neighborhood and synagogue as those of the great scholar Jacob Hart (Eliakim ben Abraham) — known also as Rabbi Gottschalk — who lived in London from about 1745 to his death in 1814. Biographical data have been supplied by Arthur Barnett, and also by the Jewish Historical Society of England, which has shown that the Gottschalk family originally came from Eisenstadt, Hungary.⁶ The names Harris and Gottschalk would seem to underscore the Jewish origins of the family.

There are, however, three far more definite clues. The first concerns the identity of Edward Gottschalk's sister Adelaide, who married Michael Seeligson, an early Texas pioneer, quite definitely a Jew and a member of Philadelphia's Congregation Rodeph Shalom in 1823-1824.⁷

The second piece of evidence is the listing of Edward Gottschalk as a subscriber to Isaac Leeser's *Occident and American Jewish Advocate* in 1843.⁸ While non-Jews also read Leeser's monthly journal, they were for the most part Christian clergymen; Judah P. Benjamin's name on the same list was starred with an asterisk as one whose subscription had not yet been definitely acknowledged, but this was not the case with Edward Gottschalk. It may be presumed that Leeser's doughty New Orleans agent, Gershom Kursheedt, had collared Gottschalk on the street one day and simply would not let him go before securing Gottschalk's assent to accept the journal.

⁵ Arthur Barnett, *The Western Synagogue Through Two Centuries* (London, 1961), p. 298.

⁶ Barnett, pp. 46-48; *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, XIV (1940), 207-20.

⁷ Edwin Wolf, 2nd, and Maxwell Whiteman, *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1957), pp. 352, 356, 495; Henry Cohen, "Settlement of the Jews in Texas," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, II (1894), 150.

⁸ *Occident* (Philadelphia), I, 216.

Even if it be asserted that Adelaide Gottschalk Seeligson might have been married to a Jew without herself being a Jewess, and that a subscription to the *Occident* is in itself inconclusive, the third item, in my opinion, is altogether incontrovertible — the listing of Edward Gottschalk as one of the “Israelite Donors, Who are not Members of the Congregation,” in a rare 1828 pamphlet, *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Israelite Congregation, of Shangarai-Chasset. (Gates of Mercy,) of the City of New-Orleans, State of Louisiana*. Since there is a separate listing of non-Jews who contributed to the financing of this first New Orleans Jewish religious venture, it ought to be clear that Edward Gottschalk’s coreligionists entertained no doubts but that he was a Jew and that he wished to identify himself as such by taking the affirmative step of making a contribution to the congregation’s funds. Not every Jew then in New Orleans did so. The well-known printer and bookseller Benjamin Levy apparently refused to make a contribution, although he never, to my knowledge, adopted his Catholic wife’s faith and was known as a Jew to visiting coreligionists.⁹ Among other New Orleans Jews who did not contribute to the congregation’s support, but whose Jewish identity can be firmly established by evidence too complicated for presentation here, were Samuel Hermann and Hart Moses Shiff. Hermann was a witness for the groom at Edward Gottschalk’s wedding on May 26, 1828;¹⁰ and both Shiff and Gottschalk were associated with the business of Samuel Hermann and Son.¹¹ These Jewish personal and business relationships indicate that Gottschalk did not even think of severing his Jewish ties when he married Aimee Brusle in a Roman Catholic ceremony.

The burden of proof would seem, therefore, to be the responsibility of those who insist, without citing appropriate evidence, that Edward Gottschalk was not Jewish.

⁹ Bertram W. Korn, *Benjamin Levy: New Orleans Printer and Publisher* (Portland, Maine, 1961), p. 15.

¹⁰ Loggins, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹¹ Correspondence in the Josiah Stoddard Johnston Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.