

A Dinner for Dr. Neumark

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The following account of a personal experience that occurred in 1915 may be of some historical interest. It points up the bitter attitude of some of the leaders of the Cincinnati Jewish Community of that time toward Zionism, and at the same time also points up some of the personality traits of these same leaders glossed over because of their high professional standing.

During my undergraduate years at the University of Cincinnati, I became a member of a local organization called "Ivria." This small group was composed of students from the Hebrew Union College and from the College of Liberal Arts of the University of Cincinnati. Its purpose, as its name implies, was to further the use of the Hebrew language. After graduation, I still maintained my interest in the organization and gradually became its father confessor.

In 1915, the group asked me to help them arrange a dinner in honor of Professor David Neumark, of the Hebrew Union College faculty, who had just published a very scholarly book in Hebrew. Their difficulty, of course, was money, of which they had none. I promised them that I would try to help them. I went to my friend, Dr. Boris D. Bogen, who at that time was head of the Jewish Community Center, or Settlement House, as it was then called, and explained the students' dilemma. The idea appealed to him, and he promised to furnish the dinner free of charge for the group. The total number present, I assured Dr. Bogen, would not exceed fifteen. Naturally the students were delighted, and a definite date for the dinner was set.

Several weeks later I received a telephone call from Mr. Alfred M. Cohen asking me to come to his office as there was a matter he wished to discuss with me. I went to his office at the appointed time. Mr. Cohen, who was then President of the Rockdale Temple, amazed me with his opening remarks: "Dr. Lurie, I understand that

you are planning an elaborate affair to honor Professor Neumark and limiting it to a few privileged guests." Before I could reply, he went on to say that, in his opinion, it was unfair both to Dr. Neumark and to the Jewish Community of Cincinnati not to have a larger representation for such a great occasion. I finally explained to Mr. Cohen that the sponsoring group consisted of a handful of undergraduate students at the University of Cincinnati and the Hebrew Union College and, but for the generosity of Dr. Bogen, there would have been no dinner at all. Mr. Cohen brushed this aside and said that he would appoint a large representative committee that would underwrite the dinner. I meekly acquiesced. A sponsoring committee was organized quickly, and invitations were sent to many people. The response was very enthusiastic. Approximately 300 people accepted the invitation to attend the dinner.

One of the chores of the committee was to arrange the speakers' program. It was felt that, in order to emphasize the theme of the occasion, the master of ceremonies should be a man who not only was a scholar, but who also could speak Hebrew. It was the unanimous opinion of the committee that Professor Gotthard Deutsch, of the Hebrew Union College faculty, fulfilled all requirements, and I was commissioned to contact him. Dr. Deutsch accepted our invitation gladly. The other speakers were to be Dr. Kaufmann Kohler, President of the Hebrew Union College, and the guest of honor, Dr. David Neumark.

However, an untoward event occurred. Two weeks before the gala event, Dr. Deutsch developed acute lobar pneumonia from which he fortunately recovered. It was, however, impossible for him to attend the dinner. A substitute had to be found. The committee met hastily and decided that Rabbi David Philipson, of Rockdale Temple, should be asked to step into the breach. I was designated to speak to Dr. Philipson. I suggested that it might be better if Mr. Cohen, who was president of the temple, would contact Rabbi Philipson. Mr. Cohen, however, refused very emphatically. Apparently he knew Rabbi Philipson too well to undertake this mission.

I went like a lamb to the slaughter and spoke to Dr. Philipson. I explained our dilemma and asked him if he would please help us

out. His immediate reply was "No." When I asked him "Why?" he looked straight into my eyes and said, "Doctor, I am not accustomed to play second fiddle to any man. You asked Dr. Deutsch first." With these words, he dismissed me. I returned crestfallen to the committee and gave my report. The members were shocked, to put it mildly. They then decided that I should act as toastmaster, even though I was not an erudite Hebrew scholar. Thus, the first hurdle was overcome.

The fateful day, or rather evening, finally arrived. More than 200 representative men and women were present. Just before the guests were to be seated, one of my assistants rushed over to me and said that I had better go at once to the room where the guests had assembled as there was considerable excitement there. To my utter surprise and consternation, when I entered the room I heard Mr. Leo Wise, the editor of the *American Israelite*, haranguing those present and urging them not to enter the dining hall until "that flag was taken down." "What flag?" I asked him, and he said, "The Zionist flag which is hanging on the rail of the balcony." True enough, a small paper Zionist flag was on the rail of the balcony. I had no idea who had placed it there. It had probably been left there from a previous affair. I so informed Mr. Wise and, for the sake of peace, ordered that the flag be removed. Whereupon Mr. Wise and his cohorts gloatingly entered the dining hall.

This, then, was the second hurdle to be successfully overcome.

During the course of the dinner, Rabbi Philipson came to the speakers' table and began to whisper into Dr. Kaufmann Kohler's ear. I had no intention of eavesdropping, but Dr. Kohler was sitting at my left and I could not help overhearing the conversation between the two men. Dr. Philipson told Dr. Kohler that the meeting was in reality a Zionist affair. The honoring of Dr. Neumark was merely a way of luring people to the meeting. Whereupon Dr. Kohler said, "Don't worry, Dave, I have a paper that I will read this evening which will put these Zionists in their place."

I was aghast. My emotions were a mixture of shame and disgust. For a moment I did not know what to do. My desire was to ask both of these gentlemen why they wished to disrupt the dinner—which



Dr. David Neumark
Professor of Philosophy
Hebrew Union College, 1907-1924



was not a Zionist affair, but a dinner being given in honor of a distinguished Jewish scholar. I thought better of this, however, and instead walked over to Mr. Bernhard Bettman, who was Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Hebrew Union College, and told him what I had inadvertently overheard. Whereupon Mr. Bettman, who incidentally was sitting at Dr. Kohler's left, turned to Dr. Kohler and said, "Dr. Kohler, I understand you propose to read a paper on anti-Zionism. If you do, I shall be greatly displeased." No more was said, but when I called upon Dr. Kohler to speak, he could not refrain from showing his resentment. His opening remarks were to the effect that he had come prepared to deliver a talk on a very important issue, but, unfortunately, he was not permitted to give it.

Thus, the third and final hurdle was overcome.

One can readily see that the evening was not one of unalloyed joy for those present and especially for the bedeviled chairman of the meeting. I later learned that Professor Neumark had also sensed the undercurrent of disharmony that prevailed.

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