

Our Literary Courtship

DELLA RUBENSTEIN ADLER

It all started on a dreary Friday afternoon in the late winter of 1904. On that day destiny touched me, for if it were not for a few trivial incidents, I would have never met my husband, Joseph G. Adler. So I must believe that it was so destined, and this is how it all happened.

Mother and Ethel, who was nicknamed Bobby, were busy with last-minute preparations for the soon coming Sabbath when our old-time front door bell clanged through the house. Sister Bobby hurried to the door, and there she found a personable young man who introduced himself as Mannie Adler, an Orthodox Jew from Baltimore, Maryland. He explained that he was a stranger in Buffalo, had never been here before, and that he had been directed by a Pittsburgh rabbi to Aharon Yossel Bloch and his wife, Shaina Esther. They happened to be first cousins of Mother. When he arrived at their residence, Shaina Esther, who interviewed him, realized at once that her household was not equipped to entertain strange young men. Mannie soon realized it, too, but Shaina Esther thoughtfully sent him to our house, and that is how he happened to be standing at our doorstep ringing our old bell. Bobby listened to what his quest was. He wanted to be provided with kosher meals for his few brief business days in Buffalo. Then she told him that as he had given no previous notice, it would be inconvenient for us to accommodate him. Mannie turned disappointedly away and headed for the Iroquois Hotel, where he was stopping. Mother, listening at the head of the stairs, gathered what was going on and scolded Bobby severely. "This is not so done in a good Jewish home. If that young

Mrs. Adler (1876-1975), the widow of Joseph G. Adler, lived most of her long life in Buffalo, N. Y. "Immigrants in Buffalo," her memoir of the city's Jewish community in the late nineteenth century, appeared in Vol. XVIII, No. 1 (April, 1966), of *American Jewish Archives*.

man wanted kosher meals, he should at least be given the opportunity to eat whatever we had. You go right after him and bring him back." Well, Bobby ran after him, caught him, and told him that if he was willing to accept family fare, it would be quite all right. Mannie was more than willing, and that evening, after attending services in the synagogue, he came back to our house. I never knew if he liked the food or not, but I do know that he liked the environment. There was quite a crowd of us. Emil, who was already a lawyer, interesting, knowledgeable, and articulate, was good company. Sadie—a schoolteacher, bright, witty and sassy—was also good company. Bobby and I helped, I suppose, a little.

So all of us had a very nice time that evening, particularly Mannie, who stayed until very late that night. The next day he came at noon for dinner and stayed all afternoon. That Saturday evening happened to be Purim,* and after the reading of the *Megillah*** in the synagogue, he returned to our house and called his brother Joe, who chanced to be in Cleveland, Ohio. Joe listened and that very night took a sleeper for Buffalo. The next morning, when I came to the breakfast table, I found Joe sitting there. Not a shake or a quiver from me, for it didn't matter to me one way or the other. He was a smallish man with dark blonde hair and Van Dyke beard and blue eyes. I found him very witty, very interesting, and very knowledgeable, as he read every paper there ever was. We all enjoyed his company, but that was it.

After a few days, both boys left and thereafter they came once in a while. Sometime Mannie came and sometimes Joe came. At one of these visits he and my brother had an altercation what about I'll never know, but it was something trivial (I know that)—and Joe didn't come any more. We didn't see him for a long time, perhaps a year or so. Then one summer day Mannie, who was visiting us, said that he was planning to write a letter to Joe and he would very much like the three of us to write messages. We were willing, so Sadie wrote, Bobby wrote, and he then handed the letter to me and I wrote, "Why isn't Buffalo on your map anymore?" It never dawned on me that this was some-

* The late-winter Feast of Lots.

** The biblical Book of Esther.

thing that would go down in my personal history, but in reply to this I received a four-page letter. That started our correspondence. At first it was now and then, later every two weeks, and before the ten months elapsed until he came again, we were writing to each other every single day. After I was through with my day's work at the office where I was employed, I wrote to him and he wrote to me daily of the day's happenings and so forth. And so it developed into a warm, sweet friendship. I didn't feel very sentimental about it or romantic, but we were very good friends. From that we drifted into marriage in 1907.

Meanwhile, in 1906 I was bold enough, and perhaps silly enough, to visit Joe's family in Baltimore. His family consisted of his mother, a fine-looking, stately woman who spoke mostly German and very little English. She, like my own mother, was a widow of long standing. But she was an interesting, well informed conversationalist. Besides Mrs. Adler were her eight children. Of the six boys, Joe was the oldest, then came Mannie, Ike, Nathan, Mose, and Aaron, plus two daughters, Sarah and Lina, who came in somewhere among them.

I must begin with my future mother-in-law who at fifty-six was something of an invalid. She was troubled with diabetes, and for that reason she had no duties in the house at all except to manage and dominate the household—everything from finances down were under her thumb and she did a good job—but that was all. This was my mother-in-law's [typical] day. She stayed in bed, ate her breakfast in bed, read her paper in bed, and when she got tired of doing all that, she sent for Gussie, who acted as a personal maid to her. In Gussie's hands she became the regal lady I was accustomed to seeing. I was so shocked one day when I saw her without her warpaint, I have never forgotten it. When fully dressed, she repaired to the library—a very nice room at the back of the house, with plants and flowers, comfortable furniture and a great many books. It was very homey looking. There in the library, she reigned for the rest of the day. She wrote every day to everyone of her boys who chanced to be on the road, knew exactly what was going on, but never did any housekeeping.

To my knowledge, the only real work Mother Adler ever did in the house was on the day or two before Passover. Then she would don a white apron and come down into the basement kitchen to supervise the baking of the cakes to be served at the

Sedarim.* She was very good at it, knowing exactly how to do it and, more to the point, she knew exactly how to direct everyone else how to do it. I was there and the two girls—we all helped. That was the only work I ever knew her to do. There was also another side to Mother Adler. She was a very good companion to her boys, especially the older sons. One stern *Nein* from her could have wrecked all our plans, but that *Nein* never came, and we parted at the end of my visit good friends and ever after remained so.

I found Baltimore a fascinating place with its Southern charm, its warm hospitality, and the lasting evidences of slavery in Maryland. I saw the huts that had been used by the slaves close by the White man's big house. Of course they had long since been abandoned, and the Blacks, who were in large numbers in Baltimore, occupied the run-down homes formerly used by the Whites. The Blacks were close by and were available for domestic services so the women of the day had many to help them. Therefore they had a great deal of leisure time which they filled with social activities. There was much of that, even unto the daughters making their debuts. The daughters of these Jewish men of the German Orthodox Synagogue—some of them, not all—were presented to "Society" and launched into the gay season that came with it. This surprised me because these families were Orthodox and strictly observant in their synagogue. Outside of it they were men of affairs and socialites, too—they had their clubs, beer gardens and card games and lived very much like the rest of the community.

The synagogue was run by the German-born or their descendants who controlled it almost completely. Moses Strauss was the president and leader of the men. Caroline, his wife, was the president of the sisterhood and led the women in the way they should go. I became quite well acquainted with Caroline during my visits and later after my marriage and found her to be a very good woman. In her own home, she was just a nice German *Hausfrau*, but driving through the streets of Baltimore in her carriage—complete with a coachman in livery—she was elegant indeed. This kind woman was fond of my husband, and to honor him, she invited me to sit in what was called the "royal pew."

* Seder (pl. Sedarim): the Passover ritual meal.

This was reserved for Caroline Strauss and her five daughters. Since it was a very thoughtful thing to do, I accepted and learned to know them well. They were kind and helped me in every way they could to become acquainted with the order of services and the local customs. I learned a great deal from them and we became good friends. My enjoyable three-week visit came to an end, and I went back to Buffalo to my old job and to prepare for my forthcoming marriage, which took place the next February.

After our marriage, Joe and I settled down to a happy life and were later joined by our two sons, Selig, the older one, and Louis. We got along very well and were serene and contented until great sorrow struck us when Joe died on a night train traveling between Charleston, South Carolina, and Jacksonville, Florida. I was left alone, sad, desolate and uncertain. I needed my close family and they needed me, and so I decided to come back to Buffalo, which I did in 1926. I never was sorry that I did that. Here my boys found themselves and became fine, good, outstanding men—prominent each in his own way. And now at ninety-eight, I live in the Rosa Coplon Jewish Home and Infirmary in Buffalo, New York, thinking my thoughts, dreaming my dreams for my children, my grandchildren, and my great-grandchildren, and reliving my memories.

MONOGRAPHS STILL AVAILABLE

- No. II. *An American Jewish Bibliography*, by Allan E. Levine
- No. VI. *Selected Items of American Jewish Interest in the Yiddish Periodicals of Russia and Poland, 1862-1940*, by Leo Shpall
- No. VII. *Commerce and Contraband in New Orleans during the French and Indian War*, by Abraham Nasatir and James R. Mills

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