

The Man From Kovno

DAVID B. ALPERT

Abraham Alpert was born in Kovno, Lithuania, where, for the first thirteen years of his life, he shared the vibrant Jewish life of that city with the great Talmudist, Rabbi Isaac Elchonon Spektor. In 1882, as a boy of Bar Mitzvah age, Alpert arrived in Boston, alone and without any relatives. Ultimately, he was joined there by his three younger sisters and, in 1920, by his widowed mother.

Every day for fifty years, Alpert—known as *Ish Kovno*, the man from Kovno—published articles, chiefly in the Yiddish press, on the religious life of New England Jewry. When newspapers like the *Tageblatt* did not publish on the Sabbath and Holy Days, Alpert's week-end articles appeared in other papers such as the *Forward* and the Canadian Jewish *Adler* (*Eagle*). The Boston *Jewish Advocate*, started in 1902 by Jacob de Haas and Leo J. Lyons, for several years featured a Yiddish section written by Alpert.

These day-by-day accounts of Jewish life in New England were close to the hearts and interests of immigrant families. The immigrants learned from them what other groups were doing and were encouraged in their own efforts. Alpert's Yiddish articles held a wide and loyal following of readers among the newcomers, who were eager for themselves and their children to become true Americans and to remain strong in the Jewish faith.

Alpert was associated with George Selikovitsch in the *Jewish Eagle*, started in 1893. When Selikovitsch went to the *Tageblatt*

of New York City, Alpert and Samuel H. Borofsky started the *Jewish World* at Boston in 1895; other short-lived papers followed under other names. Financial difficulties made the newspaper business precarious; through all these efforts, Alpert continued to write daily about Jewish life. From start to finish, Alpert displayed as much enthusiasm when dealing with the average and the typical as he did when writing of celebrities. His accounts were couched in a vivid style, with a light touch and much humor. The influence of Sholom Aleichem and of Isaac Loeb Peretz was strong among most of his readers, who turned to Alpert's accounts for up-to-date vignettes of Jewish immigrant life in this land.

A Hundred Speeches A Year

The immigrant, in the process of an inner transformation to Americanism, sought to overcome the stigma and epithet of "foreigner." Many emotional and intellectual disturbances were involved in the process. The Jewish immigrants had come from small medieval towns, where Jews had few protections under law and had to develop their own codes and schools. They came to America, to the growing cities of the modern world, where they were promised the protection of law and the opportunity to send their children to the public school. Not invariably, however, was the promise of protection under the law fully kept. In the Old-World countries, a person in uniform (a policeman, mailman, or military official) could peremptorily demand to examine one's documents and identity papers. Though in America it was not necessary for the immigrant to carry such documents on his person, he still faced many questions and uncertainties in dealing with the authorities, even on simple matters. Seeking to qualify both as Jew and as American, the immigrant often needed counsel from someone close to him, someone who had shared his experience, knew the local politicians, could explain matters as an intermediary, and could be trusted completely. In this capacity, Alpert served constantly among the "plain" people and never left them.

All his days, Alpert befriended newcomers and recent arrivals. East Boston (originally Noddle's Island), where he made his home, was where the Cunard and other passenger steamers docked. His

work on behalf of immigrants and their families started even before the organization of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, with which he was associated for much of his life. Many a day he spent at the piers waiting for the arrival of ships carrying Jewish immigrants. As representative of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Alpert worked closely with the immigration, public health, and customs officers, and did much to expedite for the immigrants the tedium of going through the long lines. He reunited families, gave friendly "tips" to new arrivals, and made the necessary arrangements with the transportation and railroad people for immigrants going some distance from Boston. This also involved preparing telegrams to their distant families.

Other tasks which Alpert assumed in connection with his duties for the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society included attending hearings and appeals for immigrants who were detained or threatened with deportation (usually for health reasons) and arranging for such medical care as was necessary. Alpert personally prepared many people for naturalization and for citizenship. Beginning in 1908, he also undertook for John Hays Hammond, president of the North American Civic League, a series of evening illustrated lectures in the public schools of Boston to familiarize newcomers with the United States government and American customs.

In addition to his work as newspaper correspondent and editor and his services to immigrant families, Alpert became a distinguished platform speaker. Much sought after for public meetings, he averaged a hundred speeches a year. At every milestone in the life of a congregation or Hebrew school, Alpert was the spokesman for the hopes and gratitude of his people. He attended cornerstone and dedication ceremonies, mortgage burning festivities, installations of officers, congregational anniversaries, religious-cultural affairs like the *siyum* of a *Hevra Shas* (the celebration held by a Talmud class after concluding its study of talmudic texts), holiday celebrations of Hebrew schools, Zionist occasions, and public affairs. Alpert spoke in Yiddish, English, and Hebrew as *folksredner*, employing the stories and anecdotes of a storyteller without the chant of the *maggid*.

Not only did he remain close to Yiddish-speaking immigrant families, but himself typified the foreign-born in their process of becoming fully American as well as Jewish. He was of the common

people, in tune with their drives and interests, and articulate in expressing what was on their minds. Never did he seek office—although he often served organizations as secretary. The “plain” people turned to him for counsel and advice about the synagogue and other institutions important to them. How did one go about starting a Hebrew school, or a congregation, or a mutual aid society for *landsmen* (people from the same Old-World district)? How could one enlist the support of others? Such questions regularly came Alpert’s way.

Harbor Trips and Politicians

Before World War I, the East Boston Jewish community had seven functioning synagogues, the largest of them the Ohel Jacob Synagogue at Paris and Gove Streets. The building was rebuilt in 1908 on the site of the wooden church which had been converted to use as a synagogue about 1897. That East Boston is actually an island enhanced the compactness of the Jewish group. As a resident of East Boston, Abraham Alpert applied for citizenship and registered as a voter. In the very year that he became a citizen, Alpert opened a small “lunch room” on Chelsea Street where he sold newspapers, soft drinks, ice cream, tobacco, sandwiches, and tea. To this store, Alpert brought his bride, and for twelve years she was in charge of it. The Alperets lived above the store, and here their children were born. The store was the first in the district to have a telephone and was used for many family messages. Actually, the store served as an informal club room, where many committees met and determined their course of action over a glass of tea. In 1897, Alpert was commissioned a justice of the peace (a commission which he held to his death), and was thus empowered to administer oaths in connection with official documents. Many were the occasions when this service was needed by immigrants.

Within the one-square-mile area in which the Jews of East Boston lived in the decade before and after 1900 were quite a few Jewish-owned retail stores. The occupational distribution of Jewish ownership included Hebrew books and religious articles, meat markets, a chicken house, drugstores, plumber’s offices, shoe stores, shops for hardware and simple household appliances, furniture stores, bakeries, men’s and women’s clothing and dry goods shops, jewelry and pawn shops, groceries and vegetable

stores, wheat and grain stores, livery stables, delivery and "express" wagon establishments, insurance agents, dentists, lawyers, and physicians. In addition to the self-employed, some found employment in stores and factories elsewhere in Boston.

The list of Jewish entrepreneurs indicates that the immigrant, in his own business, sought to meet household needs and everyday essentials. There was then no call for luxuries or frills. East Boston, before 1914, was also the locale for Jewish weddings, which brought to that area Jews from other parts of the city. As questions arose on immigration, citizenship, business, congregational affairs, or city departments, they found their way to Alpert at his lunchroom.

Well remembered among the first generation (the sons and daughters of the immigrants) is their direct and personal association with Alpert through the summer outings he was able to arrange by means of his political connections. Alpert had entire charge of the distribution of tickets for an all-day boatripe and excursion to one of the islands in Boston Harbor. Some 500 to 800 children were taken on each trip. The city provided part of the lunch. The games, the athletic contests, and the supervision were Alpert's full responsibility. The harbor trips and visits to an island proved real vacation treats to the children of immigrant parents.

Even before they were old enough to vote, Alpert and a group of *landsleit* (fellow immigrants from Lithuania) established a Hebrew Literary and Civic Club in East Boston; Alpert served as secretary. Anxious to learn English and the ways of the United States government, they looked to the local politicians for models of English speech. In this way, the young men (each of whom later became distinguished in the life of the city) came to know politicians. They also had a part in removing East Boston from the rule of Protestant Republican politicians and putting the district under Irish Democratic control. The Hebrew Literary and Civic Club endorsed John F. Fitzgerald for Congress in 1893 and re-endorsed him in 1895. Fitzgerald was the maternal grandfather of the late President John F. Kennedy. Abraham Alpert's first employment in this country was as an unskilled laborer in the city yards managed by Patrick Kennedy, the paternal grandfather of the President.

Alpert appeared in the United States courts more than 3,000

times to witness citizenship applications. Among these whom he helped naturalize were many rabbis, cantors, physicians, and journalists. Why in national politics were the Jewish immigrants likely to vote Republican on becoming citizens? Alpert offered an explanation. The Constitution of the United States guarantees “a republican form of government”—which the immigrants understood to refer to the Republican Party! Not until the days of Woodrow Wilson did the word “democracy” find wide acceptance, and by then Jews were ready to vote Democratic without fear of being thought anti-Constitutionalist.

Much In Little

The Kishinev pogrom of 1903 stirred the Jewish community of Boston, and the Jews appealed to the consciences of their neighbors. Abraham Alpert urged and organized a large protest meeting at historic Faneuil Hall, where he appeared as one of the speakers. After that, and for many years, Faneuil Hall was the place for many important Jewish meetings, including those held by the Zionists. Alpert arranged and chaired the first public discussion of Zionism in East Boston at the Ohel Jacob Synagogue in 1909. A very large audience came to hear Rabbi Charles Fleischer, of Boston's Temple Israel, oppose Zionism while Rabbi Menahem M. Eichler, of Temple Ohabei Shalom, espoused Zionism. The idea for the meeting originated with Alpert, who invited the speakers and served as chairman. The meeting generated considerable interest and brought more than momentary fame—and revenue—to the East Boston congregation. The discussion, all in English—one of the earliest meetings at which no Yiddish was spoken—stimulated enthusiasm and strong support for Zionism. Soon after the meeting, *McClure's Magazine* published a large photograph of the 400 children of the Ohel Jacob religious school standing on the steps of the congregation. This, too, Alpert accomplished.

From that time on, Alpert addressed many public meetings. His favorite themes were Zionism, immigration, and Jewish religious education in America. He reached the hearts of his listeners with his humor and flashes of true insight. Through his speeches, he offered a lofty vision of Judaism in this country. On the platform, Alpert rose to the heights; he rarely repeated

himself, and each speech seemed fresh and spontaneous. No theoretician in his speeches, Alpert filled the everyday with beauty and radiance. Some incident or remark at the meeting would be used by him imaginatively. Invested with all the best qualities and narrative powers of the *maggid*, Alpert aroused the sentiments and loyalties of people with his ideal of Jewish religious education for all ages in this land. Among the famous with whom he shared the speakers' platform were Chaim Weizmann, Zvi Hirsh Masliansky, Nahum Sokolow, Shmaryahu Levin, Louis D. Brandeis (before he ascended the bench), and Stephen S. Wise.

In his speeches and writings, Alpert developed a vigorous literary style of saying "much in little." He spoke and wrote with an economy of words. A strong sense for news guided him in his concept of what was newsworthy. As editor, he was a writing journalist rather than one who assigned others to report stories. Most of what he wrote about came from intimate first-hand knowledge. Alpert had been at the meeting or affair; he had been consulted on all the preliminaries and summarized the essential ideas of other speakers. His own speeches he left unquoted. What Alpert did as representative of HIAS, as newspaper editor, and as orator bespeaks his public role as servant of the community. In private life as husband and father, he would work at his writing late at night and early in the morning. When he returned at night from meetings, he always wrote his reports or "copy." As he wrote, he kept beside him a Hebrew Bible and a volume of the Talmud, which he often consulted and from which he drew his initial inspiration. His handwriting, in Yiddish or English, was always very clear. Every speech that seemed so spontaneous had actually been most carefully prepared, except for topical allusions.

Alpert loved the Yiddish theatre and concert stage. He took his children to hear Mischa Elman, Efrem Zimbalist, Cantor Gershon Sirota on his tour, and plays by Jacob Adler, Boris Thomashefsky, and the other greats of the Yiddish stage. According to the father of Leonard Bernstein, the first rave notice of Leonard's musical genius was written by Abraham Alpert. Often the family went along with Alpert when he addressed a public meeting. He befriended many cantors and was very fond of this association. Many students were taken under his wing, and he encouraged many men of promise to enter professional life or politics. To his

children as well he presented incentives and opportunities. His talk at the dinner table was wide-ranging to stimulate his children intellectually. He was devoted to his wife as his most appreciative audience. Never did she cease to be astonished at the entirely new material in his speeches. She was the only person in the family circle upon whom he bestowed no nickname. All the rest were accorded nicknames. Without any notice, Mrs. Alpert was always prepared for extra guests at dinner. They might be the famous, a student, or several new arrivals. Alpert, however, was never demonstrative; he had no mechanical skills nor did he possess any interest in sports or physical activities.

Poland is Finished

At the onset of World War I, in 1914 and 1915, Alpert's sympathies were against Russia and therefore with Germany. He was then a regular reader of *Harvey's Weekly* and turned against Germany only after the sinking of the *Lusitania*. From his notes, it is evident that he was attracted to the language of Robert Ingersoll, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William Shakespeare. In his friendships, he remained very close to those of strong religious leanings—but also to the labor union-socialist-nonreligious people, though he disagreed with their views. Regularly, he pronounced the *kiddush* on Friday night, conducted the Passover *seder* with éclat for many guests at his home, and always attended Sabbath morning synagogue services. There he was always surrounded by admirers, but always refused an *aliyah*. The chanting of the prayers, the Torah readings, the rabbi's sermons all gave him deep satisfaction.

Why, with all his marked literary ability, did Alpert decline to write a book? Early in his life, before marriage, he had written a slim volume of poetry in Yiddish. No second book of his ever appeared. There were frequent English letters to the editors of metropolitan newspapers on matters of interest; there were his many articles for the Yiddish press and his speeches. It always seemed to him that a book would be distant and that only newspaper items would reach the hearts and minds of the people to whom he wished to address himself. That, too, was part of his concept of news. The English newspapers were always read by foreign-born Jews, but only the Yiddish papers and Alpert's

writings treated the news as they wished, with full emphasis on religious life and the various causes which most concerned them. Alpert was often asked whether our people were best designated Jews or Hebrews. The old American families of Protestant stock preferred "Hebrews"—rather patronizingly—as reminiscent of the Bible, and that word, Hebrew, long clung in Massachusetts hospitals to the religious description of Jewish patients.

From 1910 to 1913, Alpert was assigned a special task in connection with Mayor Fitzgerald's plans for a "Bigger, Better, Busier Boston 1915." This was dropped because of the war, but in the course of his duties, and long before pictorial news became so frequent, Alpert made photographs of every single Boston Jewish institution along with descriptive notes. During the years of the First World War, Alpert served as president of the first Negro association in Boston and also of the New England Sons of Lithuania (composed chiefly of Christians). In both cases, he was a compromise choice—as it were, a "dark horse" who had not sought the office, but was impressed into duty to help both the Negroes and the Lithuanians develop their goals.

In all that he did, Abraham Alpert, *Ish Kovno*, was close to immigrant Jews. He was always their mouthpiece; he shared their hopes and sentiments. His struggles and successes were typical of the immigrant group, and he never grew away from them. He himself had gone through the inner transformation from foreigner to loyal American and faithful Jew. Through the Yiddish press and the spoken word, Alpert galvanized the efforts of the immigrants and spearheaded their ideals.

On the September morning that the newspapers reported in 1939 that Poland had been invaded by Nazi Germany, Alpert spoke his last words: "Poland is finished." His death came quietly soon after.