
The Pioneers of a Community:
Regional Diversity Among the Jews of Pittsburgh,
1845-1861

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Were the pioneer Jews of Pittsburgh Bavarians? Not necessarily, although it was stated as such in a recent article touching on the question.¹

During the Mexican War (1846-1848), many Jews settled in booming Pittsburgh, which had been rebuilt over its ashes. While born in Europe, they had of late lived in the Philadelphia area and especially Ohio as well as in Maryland, Virginia, and New York.²

Congregation Rodef Shalom of Pittsburgh obtained a charter in court in October of 1859. Yet, only one of its 23 charter subscribers, Louis Stern, had appeared in a city directory before Pittsburgh's great fire of 1845. He was a native of Hamburg, Germany. His wife was Bavarian, however.³

Even earlier, twelve pioneers of the local Jewish community in 1847 organized the Bes Almon (Burial) Society, the earliest known Jewish organization in Pittsburgh. They had decided to spend their limited funds on a cemetery rather than maintain a congregation. One of them, a shochet by training, offered his services to the small community.⁴

¹ See Ida Cohen Selvan, "The Founding of Columbian Council" (*American Jewish Archives*, April, 1978).

² *Charter Book I*, Allegheny County, Pa., p. 162; *U.S. Census Population Schedules, 1860*, Pittsburgh, vol. 3, p. 464; Isaac Harris, *General Business Directory Of The Cities Of Pittsburgh and Allegheny 1844*, p. 31.

³ Jacob Feldman, *The Early Migration And Settlement of Jews in Pittsburgh, 1784-1894* (Pittsburgh, 1959), pp. 13, 91, and 92.

⁴ *Israelite*, August 25, 1854, p. 54.

Jacob S. Feldman, the leading historian of Pittsburgh Jewry, has recently completed a history of the Jews of Western Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh to 1924.

But his name and the names of the majority of the twelve pioneers are not disclosed in the available sources. A key, in learning who they were, is the 1847 city business directory, listing approximately 10 Jews. What is known about their place of birth? Two of them, Ancker and Mayer, partners in a clothing store, moved away from Pittsburgh before 1850. Available local records do not indicate where they were born. Mitchell Ancker had resided in the city as early as 1839, but the 1840 census for Pittsburgh is illegible.⁵

Four dry goods dealers in the 1847 directory, the brothers Jacob and Emanuel Klein and the brothers Solomon and Emanuel Reis, were listed in the census only as having been born in Germany. It is impossible to determine their native principality or town.⁶

But Louis Hirshfield, the proprietor of the Shirt Emporium and reputedly the first president of the burial society, and his wife had been born in Prussia. Mrs. William (Paulina) Frank and her brother, Ephraim Wormser who did not appear in the 1847 city directory but seems to have been here that year, were the forerunners of a sizeable local colony from the German kingdom of Wurtemberg. Nevertheless, two of the three men purchasing the cemetery on Troy Hill for the burial society, the dry goods dealers William Frank and David Strasburger, were Bavarians.⁷

Since more Jews settled in Pittsburgh in a short space of time, the first Jewish congregation here, Shaare Shamayim, was organized in 1848; and an expensive rented hall above the Vigilant Fire Engine House was dedicated as the house of worship in an elaborate ceremony on August 3, 1849. It has not been learned who the first synagogue president was; but Nathan Gallinger, a Bavarian who had moved to Pittsburgh and recently from Somerset, Ohio, near Cincinnati, was reputedly elected president of the burial society

⁵ Feldman, op. cit., p. 10; Harris, *Pittsburgh Directory, 1847*, p. 15

⁶ *1850 Pittsburgh Census*, vol. 2, p. 691. (Reis's); *1860 Pittsburgh Census*, Armstrong County, Pa., Kittaning, p. 80 (Klein's).

⁷ *1860 Pittsburgh Census*, vol. 1, p. 263 and 356; Harris, *Pittsburgh Directory, 1847*, pp. 56, 73, and 147; *Deed Book 79*, Allegheny County, Pa., p. 46; *Jewish Criterion*, April 3, 1903, p. 3 (The early records of the burial society seem to have then been in existence and available to the magazine.)

⁸ *Pittsburgh Press*, July 1, 1910, p. 4 (Necrology of Samuel Gallinger, born around 1845 in Somerset, Ohio); Feldman, op. cit., p. 87; *Criterion*, Apr. 3, 1903, p. 3.

in 1848.⁸

Although the minister and hazan, Rev. Moses Sulzbach, was listed in the 1850 census only as having been born in Germany, more has been ascertained about the regional backgrounds of other Jews in Pittsburgh arriving after 1848. The first known president of Shaare Shamayim, Charles V. Arnsthal, a tobacco dealer, who left office in 1852, was a native of Hamburg.⁹

At that time slightly over 30 Jewish families lived in Pittsburgh. But 12 men, who were mostly Posener (Prussian-Polish natives), broke off from this synagogue and organized the short-lived Beth Israel Congregation because they believed that the burial society and Shaare Shamayim should not have been separate entities. Lithuanians and Posener were collectively termed as Polanders, yet Alexander Fink (Vilna, Lithuania) remained with Shaare Shamayim and was elected as its president in September of 1852. Soon the misunderstandings were reconciled. While the burial society would continue on as a separate entity, the Beth Israel faction rejoined Shaare Shamayim in April of 1853, when Leopold Jaroslawski, a Posener, took office as its president.¹⁰

In 1854, William Armhold (Baden) was hired as minister and hazan. Eventually, the Polanders and some Germans became disenchanted with him. A small classified ad was entered in the *Occident* of October, 1855, advising that Louis Hirshfield, president of Shaare Shamayim, was taking applications for a new minister. The South Germans — the Badener, Wurtemberger, Darmstadter, and most of the Bavarians — had not been able to muster a majority vote on behalf of Armhold. Therefore, evidently in September of 1855, they created a new Orthodox congregation, Rodef Shalom, retaining Armhold as minister. Marx Arnold (Wurtemberg), a clothier, would serve as its president from April, 1856, to April, 1859.¹¹

In April of 1856, 20 children were enrolled at its Hebrew school and 22 at the Shaare Shamayim school. Rodef Shalom, at first slightly smaller, began outgrowing its rival by garner-

⁸ *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, Sept., 1849, p. 332.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, May, 1852, p. 108; Sept., 1852, p. 317; *1860 Pittsburgh Census*, vol. I, p. 18.

¹¹ *Occident*, May, 1852, p. 108; Nov., 1852, p. 414; Apr., 1853, p. 77; *Israelite*, Aug. 25, 1854, p. 54; Feldman, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

ing as members the many new South Germans in Pittsburgh. Some of the Prussians, primarily those from German areas, also joined Rodef Shalom.¹²

In April of 1859, Joseph Myers, a drover (livestock dealer), began a successful one-year term as president of Rodef Shalom as membership rose to 35 families. He and his brother, Louis, had resided in Pittsburgh continuously since 1850 or earlier and were the forerunners of a sizeable colony from the German principality of Baden.¹³

A few Darmstadter, namely the 3 Oppenheimer brothers, also settled in town; and the most prominent of the few English Jews here, 20-year-old Josiah Cohen, started as an English studies teacher at the Rodef Shalom Parochial School on April 3, 1860.¹⁴

At the same time, Shaare Shamayim was not increasing in membership. "We rather look for encouragement keeping it up," Leopold Jaroslowski lamented in 1858, "we are few in number."¹⁵

The situation did not improve when Jaroslowski, his father Solomon, and his brother Jacob, who also had been synagogue president, moved from Pittsburgh. Furthermore, the

¹² *Occident*, May, 1854, p. 116; Mar., 1855, pp. 617-18; Oct., 1855, adv. 5; *Israelite*, May 22, 1856, p. 374; Jacob R. Marcus, *Memoirs Of American Jews*, vol. 1, pp. 303-308 (Here, William Frank's autobiography is recorded. He wrote it approximately three decades after the split in the synagogue had occurred; and his memory for dates was faulty. Rodef Shalom could not have been founded prior to Rosh Hashanah of 1854 as he declared. The article in the March, 1855, *Occident* verified that Shaare Shamayim was still the only congregation in Pittsburgh. But William Frank's narrative information seems correct. The classified ad in the Oct., 1855, *Occident* for a new minister is an indication that there had been a problem in Pittsburgh at that time. Thus, to place the creation of the original Rodef Shalom as Sept. of 1855 is quite logical.

But the *Israelite* of May 22, 1856, reported that Rodef Shalom had been organized "April last." The editor, however, was not on the scene in Pittsburgh and may have drawn the conclusion because Marx Arnold had begun serving as synagogue president in April, 1856.

The minutes of all synagogues of Pittsburgh prior to 1858 are lost, so that other sources must be relied on.

¹³ *Israelite*, May 27, 1859, p. 326; Aug. 10, 1860, p. 46; *1860 Pittsburgh Census*, vol. 2, pp. 331 and 353.

¹⁴ *Occident*, Apr. 11, 1860, p. 17; *1860 Pittsburgh Census*, vol. 2, p. 644; Charles I. Cooper, "The Story of The Jews of Pittsburgh," *Criterion*, May 31, 1918, pp. 21-22 (Jacob Affelder, a resident of Pittsburgh since 1858, recalled the birthplace of many early Jews here. His good memory greatly coincided with the census records.)

¹⁵ *Occident*, Oct., 1858, p. 353.

local colony of Lithuanian Jews, which supported Shaare Shamayim, was not increasing. Only two Lithuanian men, Adolph Burkhart, a liquor dealer, and Henry Hershberg, a partner with the Finks in a clothing store, settled in Pittsburgh on a permanent basis between 1856 and 1860; and Fink's former partner, Jacob Silverman, died a young man in 1856. His oldest son, 21-year-old Alexander, taking charge of a brood of orphaned brothers and sisters, did, however, attend Shaare Shamayim.¹⁶

The 60 Jewish families in Pittsburgh in 1858 were too few to support two religious bodies adequately. Compromising their differences, the rival congregations reunited in the early autumn of 1860, so that construction of a new synagogue building could properly be financed. Rodef Shalom was chosen as the name since it had been chartered in court. In 12 years of existence, Shaare Shamayim had never procured such a charter. Despite the ethnic variety within the reunited synagogue, an observer wrote, "There is prevailing a good spirit among all members."¹⁷

The Jewish community of Pittsburgh was a partnership of people from several regions of Europe. Neither Bavarians nor Posener set the tone or "ruled the roost." A member of each representative grouping was given a chance to be president of the synagogue, culminating with the election of William Frank, a Bavarian, in 1861.¹⁸

During the 1860's, the ethnic background of the new Jews in Pittsburgh would change considerably. A colony of Dutch Jews and the first Galicians (Austrian-Poles) arrived. More of the Germans would emanate from Prussia instead of southern Germany. The Lithuanians emerged in larger numbers; whereas their major earlier representatives — the Finks, the Silvermans, and Hershberg — had been from Vilna Province, the newcomers began to emanate primarily from Kovno and Suwalk provinces along the German border and sometimes from Grodno province.¹⁹

Until 1861, the great majority of Jews in Pittsburgh had

¹⁶ Feldman, op. cit., p. 18; *Minutes*, Tree of Life Congregation of Pittsburgh, April, 1858, and April, 1860 (These are merely membership lists of Shaare Shamayim).

¹⁷ *Israelite*, Jan. 15, 1858, p. 222; Aug. 10, 1860, p. 46; *Occident*, Nov., 1860, p. 113.

¹⁸ *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, March 21, 1862, p. 3.

¹⁹ Feldman, op. cit., pp. 19, 21, 22-25; Pfeffer, *Distinguished Jews Of America*, p. 443.

been German citizens. A few of them were Darmstadter or Hamburger; more were Badener, Wurtemberger, or German Prussians; and the largest proportion were Bavarian or Posener. The combination of these four elements from southern Germany, not Bavarians alone, made the original Rodef Shalom congregation a much larger and diversified congregation in the Pittsburgh of 1860 than has been thought. The Jewish pioneers of Pittsburgh reflected the regional diversity of the congregation.