
Rosa Sonneschein
and *The American Jewess* Revisited:
New Historical Information on
an Early American Zionist and Jewish Feminist

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In response to my earlier article on Rosa Sonneschein, I have uncovered new information on the life of an almost forgotten American Jewish woman.¹ She was an early admirer of Theodor Herzl and thus one of the first American Zionists; she was an early Jewish feminist as well as the founder-editor of *The American Jewess* (1895-1899);² and she was one of the most independent and fascinating of women I have encountered in American history. Someday, someone should write a biography or even a novel about her, but as it stands, we have only fragments of her life and her journal to remember. One of her living descendents, David Loth of Boulder, Colorado (born in 1899), a grandson, has sent me material on Rosa's life, and the material presented here is from my exchanges with him.³

Rosa Sonneschein was born in Hungary on March 12, 1847. Her father, Dr. H.B. Fassel, was a prominent Hungarian rabbi as well as a scientist. She was married at a young age (17 years old) on Oct. 30, 1864, to Rabbi Solomon Hirsch Sonneschein. They had four children: Ben, who was born

¹ See Jack Nusan Porter, "Rosa Sonneschein and *The American Jewess*: First Independent English Language Jewish Women's Journal in the United States, *American Jewish History*, Vol. LXVIII, No. 1 (September, 1978), 57-63. My piece contained a few errors concerning Rosa's life, including the spelling of her name. I had based my information on two sources, both of which contained wrong information, and this misinformation was passed on in my article as well as in other books and essays dealing with the history of Jewish women in America. The source that should be scrutinized carefully because it contains many errors about Rosa's life is Anita Libman Lebeson, *Recall to Life: The Jewish Women in America* (South Brunswick, N.J.: Thomas Yoseloff, 1970), pp. 228-33. Lebeson's account
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in Prague in 1865, the oldest child; Fanny (David Loth's mother), also born in Prague in 1866; Leontine, the third child, born in 1868 in Prague and left with Rosa's sister in that city until 1870, when she came to America after the Sonnescheins had been in the country for a year; and finally, the youngest child, Monroe, born around 1878 in St. Louis. All the other children were born in Europe. Rosa and her husband came to America in 1869. The youngest son, Monroe, committed suicide in 1923 or 1924, according to Mr. Loth. Ben was alive as late as 1927, but Loth has no knowledge of his year of death. Fanny lived until 1953 and died in old age at 86. Both daughters survived Rosa's death in 1932, and Mr. Loth assumes that Ben did so as well. Monroe died eight or nine years before his mother.

As Loth points out in his long quote, the marriage was disastrous from the start. The quarrels between Rosa and her husband had nothing to do with differences over Zionism and Reform Judaism. (He maintained a strong anti-Zionist perspective, not unusual for Reform rabbis at the time.) The real reason for their quarrels was complete incompatibility.

The abuse Rosa took plus other problems led her to leave him in September, 1891, and to a final divorce in January, 1893. She was 46 years old at the time. He remarried later; she did not. He went on to assume a pulpit position in Des Moines, Iowa (Temple B'nai Yeshurun) afterwards, and eventually died on October 3, 1908.⁴

is based on the research of Jacob Zausmer, *Be-ikve ha-dor* (New York: 1957), in the section on American observers and delegates to the First Zionist Congress in 1897. The basic errors included the issue of the Sonneschein children (when they died — before or after the parents) and the reason for the divorce between Rabbi Solomon and Rosa Sonneschein. My information corrects both the Lebeson/Zausmer books as well as my own article in *American Jewish History*. It is based, by and large, on the word of David Loth, Rosa Sonneschein's grandson. His knowledge is based on actual discussions with Ms. Sonneschein, hence his veracity seems quite strong.

² Copies of this rare journal can be found in Brandeis University library. It lasted from April, 1895, to August, 1899, only four years, before she gave up ownership. She had sold it before it ceased publication, but remained on as editor.

³ Much of the new material on Rosa Sonneschein in this article is from correspondence with Mr. Loth, especially the long quote from his letters. His earliest memories of her date from 1904 in St. Louis where she lived with her daughter (Mr. Loth's mother) on and off for about eleven or twelve years. Mr. Loth's family moved to Chicago, and he saw her on every vacation he had from the University of Missouri (where he went to school) from 1917-1920 and on every subsequent visit to St. Louis from then until 1930. Rosa died in St. Louis in 1932.

The American Jewess was started because Rosa Sonnenschein needed some form of income. The journal was an important contribution to both Jewish and Zionist affairs, and such European thinkers as Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau gained their first American audiences in the pages of Rosa Sonnenschein's journal. She had been introduced to Herzl well before the First Zionist Congress by her nephew Berthold Frischauer. She thought Herzl "inspiring" and was pleasantly surprised that such a polished boulevardier-type should be the Zionist leader. Nordau also impressed her. As it was, Rosa was a delegate to the first congress in Basle in 1897, and her picture can be seen on the official photograph of the delegates.⁵ By 1898, there was a strong Zionist presence in America. In July of that year, two Zionist organizations in New York City merged to form the Federation of American Zionists (FAZ) under the presidency of Richard Gottheil, with Stephen S. Wise as secretary. Rosa Sonnenschein and her journal were active in the swirl of political and cultural events of those days.

⁴ There is a brief mention of an S.H. Sonnenschein in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), Volume 8, page 958 under the heading of "Homiletic Literature" as the author of *Homiletische Monatsschrift fuer Rabbiner* (1868). There is also a short biography of him in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York and London; Funk and Wagnalls, Volume XI, 1925, p. 469) and *The American Jewish Yearbook* (New York 1903-1904, p. 101). He is not mentioned in the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: 1943, 1948) or the *Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* (Cecil Roth, ed., Garden City: Doubleday, 1959). The *Dictionary Catalog of the Klau Library*, Volume 24 (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1964: pp. 175-77), does contain 33 cards on his writings — sermons, lectures, confirmand manuals, papers read at meetings, and book reviews. They are in German and English and span the years 1866-1909. Most of his writings are on Reform liturgy, homiletics, and Jewish history. Of special interest is an open letter to Prof. Felix Adler and the Temple Israel (St. Louis) *Golden Jubilee History of Temple Israel 1886-1936*, published in 1937 and commemorating the 50th anniversary of the synagogue, thirty-six pages, illustrated. See also a biographical reminiscence by Leopold Wintner, *S.H. Sonnenschein* (New York: Hebrew Standard Press, 1909), 16 pages long; reprinted partly from *The Jewish Voice* of St. Louis.

Solomon H. Sonnenschein was an American rabbi, born in Szent Marton (St. Martin) Turocz, Hungary, June 24, 1839. Educated in Moravia and later in Hamburg and the University of Jena (Ph.D., 1864), he came to America and assumed pulpits in New York, St. Louis, and Des Moines, Iowa. He was the son of Moses Sonnenschein and Charlotte Jassinger. From 1886-1888, he was vice-president of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in the United States, and he contributed to many German and English periodicals as writer and editor for over forty years.

⁵ Her only mention in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* is in reference to this picture, where she is seen on the bottom row (seemingly the "women's row"), seventh from the left,

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The journal lasted only four years and that may be one reason why it has been overlooked by most American historians interested in Zionism. The journal died for financial reasons but there may have been a more tragic reason: Rosa Sonneschein was losing her hearing toward the last years of *The American Jewess* and within a few years after its demise, she was quite deaf. Conversation of the sort this vibrant woman was used to and had thrived on was now impossible. According to her grandson, Mr. Loth, verbal and written exchanges with others had been the prime inspiration of her writing. Deprived of them, her pen ran dry, and she is little heard from again after 1900 until her death, thirty-two years later.

David Loth – Reminiscences

The following are more vignettes from her life by David Loth.

What was GM like as a person?⁶ She was a wonderfully charming woman, a great story-teller and an entertaining if sometimes acid commentator on people and events, parochial or global. Although by the time I knew her, deafness had shut her off from conversation such as she had enjoyed in her prime, the give and take of a group, she could still converse with an individual although one had to talk directly at her, enunciate clearly and sometimes speak into a sort of trumpet-like hearing aid which she hated to use. She had great beauty and vivacity still; I remember that my mother resented not so much that people took GM for her sister, but for her younger sister. This was when we lived in St. Louis and GM would have been in her late fifties (my mother was 19 years younger and said so.) GM went out a lot to visit friends, but not so much to theaters, concerts and lectures

standing between Clara Shapira of Heidelberg, Germany, and Rachel Alkalai of Belgrade, Yugoslavia. See Volume 16, under the heading of "Zionist Congresses," pages 1165-66. *The American Jewess* is not mentioned at all in the 1971 encyclopedia.

Rosa Sonneschein is not mentioned in any encyclopedia prior to the 1971 *Encyclopedia Judaica* even in places where her husband is mentioned (see footnote 4). However, in the *Dictionary Catalog of the Klau Library*, Vol. 24, mentioned above, on page 175, there are three cards on her. One is a short speech: *The Pioneers: An Historical Essay*, read before the Society of Pioneers, May 18, 1880 (St. Louis: Woodward, Tiernan, and Hale, 1880), 16 pages long. The other two cards show holdings of *The American Jewess*, volumes 1-4, 6-9, Chicago, 1895-1899; volumes 4-6, New York, with several volumes incomplete. Thus, the Hebrew Union College Klau Library as well as the Brandeis Library have incomplete sets of the journal. I have found no other books or articles written by her that did not appear in the journal.

⁶ Loth writes that he called Rosa Sonneschein "G.M." because she didn't like to seem as old as "grandma" implies.

as once she had. I recall as a six-year-old hearing rumors of men admirers.

She and her husband met when she was visiting her older sister in Warasdin where Sonneschein had his first synagogue, and they lived there briefly after their marriage, before he got a congregation in Prague. She told my mother that they came to America in the hope that he would drink less here!

I believe many of the contacts that helped her in Europe as a journalist were through two nephews who were only a few years younger than she and were devoted to her. Berthold Frischauer was a top member of the staff of the *Neue Freie Presse* and a friend of Crown Prince Rudolph. GM went to visit her family nearly every year, and the nephews made much of her. Emil Frischauer was a prominent lawyer and man of business for the Emperor's mistress, the actress, Katerina von Kiss Schrott. Berthold, she once told me, introduced her to Herzl, a fellow journalist.

As a young matron in St. Louis, she was a dashing figure, one of the few women who brought new clothes from Europe every year, and she always had a coterie of young male admirers. . . .

As to marital discord: GM talked to me about her marriage twice. Both times I was grown up. The first was about her husband's remarriage. Apropos of what I no longer remember, she told me that she had called upon Sonneschein's new bride to give her good advice about how to handle the man. GM was obviously pleased that she was better looking and better dressed than the new wife, and also that the new wife accepted her advice to flatter the Rabbi always and admire him openly, with seeming gratitude. GM told me she herself had never done this; she would tell her husband when he asked her opinion of a sermon or an article how much better her father would have put it. She ended by saying that perhaps she was as bad for him as he for her. The second mention of her marriage came when she was telling me what a lovely, spoiled childhood she had as the youngest of (I think) nine children by two wives and the favorite of a plain childless third wife. She said she was much indulged by everyone. As proof, she said her father even allowed her to reject the first two men to whom he wanted to betroth her. But after the second, he told her that this would have to be the end. She was almost 17 and they could not have her an old maid, so the third one she would have to accept. "The third one was your grandfather," she said in effect, "and was much the worst of the three."

However, I heard plenty about the unhappiness of the marriage from my parents. Fanny (his mother) described him often as a drunkard and a savage who beat his children with a cane when in his cups (although she doubted he ever struck his wife.) He was also a lecher in her opinion, although in her own old age she excused him a little on the ground that his wife rejected him sexually as well as intellectually. She told me she had heard him once cry out at GM: "If I could find the man who would arouse you, I'd bring him in off the streets." The divorce, however, did not take place until all the children were grown and after my mother's marriage in 1891. As my mother got the story from GM, she told him she wanted a divorce but if she got it on grounds of adultery and cruelty, as she could, it would ruin

him. So she was willing to let him get it if she picked the grounds. The grounds she selected were "refusal to cohabit." According to my mother, he balked; he would not go into court and admit there was a woman who refused to sleep with him. But a desire to keep his very good job overcame pride, and he yielded. As the defendant, she got no alimony and I always understood that she launched *The American Jewess* partly because she had to earn a living.

To what extent other differences contributed to discord, I do not know. I gather Sonneschein was anti-Zionist and abandoned the old Sabbath observances. Of course she was just the opposite, as you can see in her magazine. She was still an interested Zionist when I came back from an assignment in 1925 to find out what the Jews were doing in Palestine. It was for *The New York World*, of which I was then cable editor, and I saw her in St. Louis early in 1926 and she of course wanted to know all about it. She was glad to hear of successes I could report but was distressed by the opposition of Arabs. Just how far her generation of Zionists had anticipated that was not at all clear then, but I remember she did express a wish (perhaps only of the moment) that Jews could have selected some uninhabited part of the world for their new homeland.

As to Sabbath observance, she did not do it when she lived with us, perhaps out of respect for the fact that my parents did not, although it would not have been like her to submit without complaint. It never bothered her to light up her little after-dinner cigars on Friday evening, and she was the only smoker in the household. She did not like cigarets but was very fond of the very small cigars — her brand was appropriately named "Between the Acts" because they lasted just about an intermission. She had begun to smoke, she said, on the advice of her doctor many years before I was born. He told her if she smoked after each meal it would prevent the attacks of indigestion she suffered because of quarreling while eating. By the time I knew her, she did not need them for that reason, but she never in my experience let a meal go by without smoking afterwards and sometimes in between the meals. She spoke of her cigar as "my consolation."

Even in her lonely and far from affluent old age, she did not live in the past. She was intensely interested always in world events, and she was a keen commentator on them. She would reminisce only in answer to a direct question unless an experience of earlier days had relevant application to something that was going on today. She did not talk much about her own journalistic career, but she gave me a lot of good advice about mine when at age 15 I had decided to go to the University of Missouri and become a journalist. She urged me to study history, literature, and economics, keep abreast of all advances in science, industry, scholarship and the arts, and learn to listen.

She often said that she had little if any maternal feeling and that babies especially bored her. She said without apology that she supposed she had not been a good mother, except perhaps for her youngest, who obviously was her favorite. I have heard both her daughters recalling how rejected

they felt because they were not allowed to approach their beautiful mother lest they soil her dress or imprint too wet a kiss upon her cheek.

I have no information about the source of her income. She once mentioned as an aside on some industrial discussion that she had been one of the first shareholders of U.S. Steel. Somewhere I got the impression that well before the First World War she had bought an annuity. Whatever it was, at the end it barely sufficed to keep her in a rather shabby room in an old hotel on Lindell Ave. in St. Louis.⁷

Despite her personal tragedies and social obstacles, I hope historians will agree with me that Rosa Sonneschein should be regarded as an important figure in American Jewish history not only as a writer-editor on Jewish women's issues but also as a pioneer in early American political Zionism. *The American Jewess* was more than just a woman's magazine, one of the first to spread the Zionist message of Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau to United States audiences.

⁷ It must be emphasized that this letter is based on what Loth's parents told him as well as conversations with Rosa Sonneschein herself. Some of the provocative statements may be hearsay and should be checked for reliability; but most of it seems correct and I have no reason to doubt its veracity.