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# Adolph Edlis—A Hungarian Jew in Pittsburgh Politics

*Ida Cohen Selavan*

On April 18, 1905, Governor Pennypacker of Pennsylvania signed into law the following act:

If any male person having no apparent trade, occupation or business, or being without any means of subsistence, shall stay, frequent or loiter in or about any bawdy-house; or if any male person whatsoever shall ask for, demand, take or receive any money or other valuable thing, except in the course of lawful business, from the proprietress or inmate of any bawdy-house; he shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and, upon conviction thereof, shall be sentenced to undergo an imprisonment not exceeding three years and pay a fine not exceeding one thousand dollars, or either or both, at the discretion of the court.

The man for whom this act was named, Adolph Edlis, is the subject of this essay.

Adolph Edlis was born in 1860 in Lichik (Lutchko), Hungary (now part of Czechoslovakia), as Avraham Yitskhak, son of Shimshon Yehiel. The name Edlis is a matronymic. Shimshon Yehiel had come from another town. A poor but brilliant scholar, very pious, and a *khassid*, he had married Etil, daughter of Shlomo Zalman Spiegel. The family of his bride was very prestigious in the town, as shown by the fact that Shlomo Zalman Spiegel had been appointed to an important county office by Emperor Franz Joseph. Thus it seems reasonable to assume that Shimshon Yehiel was known as “Etil’s,” and this was probably the origin of the name Edlis.<sup>2</sup>

There were about one hundred Jewish families in Lichik, out of a total population of one thousand. Most of the people in town were Slovaks, with some Swabians. The Jews spoke Slovak, Hungarian, Yiddish, and German. German was taught in the elementary Hebrew schools because most boys would go into the Austro-Hungarian army, where the commands were in German.

And so Avraham Yitskhak grew up in a comfortable home, son of a scholar, grandson of a prosperous man who hired private tutors to

teach all the children in the family. His grandfather even built a new synagogue for the town. After bar-mitsva, Avraham Yitskhak was apprenticed as a dry goods clerk, for he was expected to go into business.

Then, when he was fifteen and a half, his mother died and his father remarried. He found life very difficult with his stepmother, so he left home, not running away, but taking some money from his father and leaving with his blessing.

His first stop was New York. He started, as so many young immigrants did, as a peddler, selling notions from a basket, house to house. Among the things he sold were styptic pencils, and he studied their manufacture. Soon he was making styptic powder and distributing it himself.

In 1882, at age twenty-two, Avraham Yitskhak, now Adolph, met and married Amelia Lehman, twenty, American-born daughter of Bohemian-born German-speaking Jews. Her family was not observant, but they respected Adolph's orthodoxy and served him fruit on a paper plate. From 1883 to 1886 he worked as a salesman for a New York barber-supplies house, then became a buyer and salesman for Smith Brothers of Boston. As a fluent speaker of German he did very well among the German-speaking barbers of such cities as Milwaukee and St. Louis.

On one of his trips west he decided that Pittsburgh would be a good place for a barber-supplies business. He moved there, then brought his wife and four children. The Edlis Barber Supplies business (now Edlis, Inc.) was founded in 1888. Eventually four more children were born. The last-born, Jerome, now eighty-three, runs the family business at present, out of the Edlis Building on Smithfield and Boulevard of the Allies.<sup>3</sup>

While "the overwhelming majority of the Jews arriving in America came from apolitical backgrounds,"<sup>4</sup> many of the Jews of Austria-Hungary had some acquaintance with politics. The trend toward liberalization had begun in the 1860's when Adolph was still a young boy. And his maternal grandfather, Shlomo Zalman Spiegel, had, after all, held a political appointment. Adolph seemed to gravitate to organizations. While still in New York he joined the Knights of Pythias. In Pittsburgh he founded the first Knights of Pythias lodge there. He joined the Oddfellows, the B'nai B'rith, the Knights of Joseph, the Hungarian Congregation Poale Zedeck (then in its first year), and

became a leader in all these organizations.<sup>5</sup>

After his first few years in Pittsburgh, Edlis became aware that Jews simply did not get any recognition from local politicians. Around 1896 he went to Senator William Flinn (known as Boss Flinn) and asked him why the more than five thousand Jews in Allegheny County were being ignored. Flinn told him that they would get recognition if they would get out the vote.<sup>6</sup>

Thereupon Edlis decided to encourage his fellow Jews to become citizens. He gave lessons on the naturalization examinations to candidates for citizenship,<sup>7</sup> he took out advertisements in the local Yiddish newspaper, *Der Volksfreund*, and he explained in Yiddish, why they must register and vote. He also decided to run for the Common Council. He was supported in this decision by his friend Joseph Selig Glick, the editor and publisher of *Der Volksfreund*.

Just before the primaries, scheduled for Saturday, January 16, 1897, Glick explained to his readers that the Jews of the Seventh Ward did not have to desecrate the Sabbath and vote in the primaries. Edlis was not running in the primaries, and furthermore, "policemen and firemen come there and look at all the voters and how they vote and want them to vote their way." Jews were admonished to stay at home, but to come to vote on February 16, when they would be able to vote undisturbed. "It is time for our Jews to show that they understand what is good for them and what is bad."<sup>8</sup>

All through January of 1897, Glick ran pictures of Edlis and editorials and articles urging his readers to vote for Edlis. (In the photographs, Edlis has a fine-drawn, scholarly look. According to those who knew him, he was over six feet tall, dressed very fashionably, and looked "like he belonged in the Duquesne Club.") He spoke English very well, with a slight accent, but his spelling was somewhat erratic.) On January 29, 1897, Glick assured his readers that it was a "mitzvah" (religious obligation) to vote for Edlis.

Every Jew should bring along his friends and acquaintances on election day and should go with joy to the ballot box to vote for a Jew and to make a *shehekehyanu* [blessing on having achieved something new] because God has given us the *zkhus* [privilege] to have officials from among our own brothers for which we would spend millions in Russia and other dark countries if only we were allowed. . . . Rabbi M. S. Sivitz of Pittsburgh, and Rabbi Hershler, of

Philadelphia, asked us to ask you to vote for any Jews running for office, especially Mr. Edlis, who has done so much for us Jews. . . . and God will grant you much *mazal* [good fortune].<sup>10</sup>

And then, on February 19, 1897, came the announcement: “MAZAL TOV! Hurray for Edlis! Elected with Great Majority, 316 votes, to the Common Council from the Seventh Ward.” In writing about the victory, the election of the first Jew to serve on the Common Council, Glick used the language of the Book of Esther. “And the City of Pittsburgh shouted and was glad. The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor.”

In the same issue, Edlis addressed his constituents:

Worthy brothers and fellow citizens of Pittsburgh! I thank all my friends, because I do not see any enemies, especially among my own brothers, for your support of me with your votes. I hope to serve you at every opportunity.

Sincerely, your thankful friend,  
Adolph Edlis<sup>11</sup>

Edlis had received no support from the more widely read *Jewish Criterion*, the organ of the Reform, mainly German, Jewish citizens of Pittsburgh. Their attitude generally was that immigrant Jews should stay out of politics as a group, “for there is nothing as distasteful as this to the good Christian and the better class of Jews.”<sup>12</sup> However, when Edlis was elected, a nice editorial appeared in the *Jewish Criterion*.

Mr. Edlis has been identified for years with the various charitable and educational institutions of the city and has also been actively engaged in promoting communal affairs. Elected on the Municipal League ticket, he will undoubtedly add impetus to the reform movement and be a valuable member of the City Fathers.<sup>13</sup>

One of the fringe benefits of election came the following month, when Adolph and Amelia Edlis were invited to Washington to attend the inauguration of President McKinley.<sup>14</sup>

One of the first things Edlis did was to found the Allegheny County Political Club (also known as the Hebrew Club). The *Pittsburgh Dispatch* thought this was a grand idea.

Besides there is something in the particular plea that in Western Pennsylvania the element of Hebrew citizenship seems unreasonably and unjustly to suffer exclusion from judiciary or executive functions such as is nowhere else in the United States the case. If there were enough Hebrew votes this policy would not be continued.<sup>15</sup>

The *Jewish Criterion* disagreed.

And right here I wish to say to the editor of the *Dispatch* that the representative class of Jews in this community does not in any way countenance using religion as a pretext to secure political offices. We want no Hebrew political clubs. . . . The Allegheny County Political Club is not calculated to reflect any credit on the Jews of our community and the quicker it is realized by its officers and members, the better it will be for all concerned. . . . In State affairs we are Americans; in religion we are Jews. . . .

The editors of some of the local newspapers must be troubled with a desire to make Jews a potent political factor, judging by some of the matter that is permitted to appear in the columns of their papers. The *Pittsburgh Dispatch* in particular seems to take special delight in publishing column after column of matter concerning Hebrew political clubs. . . . I am of the opinion, however, that the *Sunday Leader* is entitled to the palm for publishing misinformation concerning Hebrews. One of their reporters wrote several sketches of representatives of the various foreign nationalities who reside in this city. . . . Among others he had a picture of a Jew. It would interest me very much to learn wherein the Jew is a foreigner and to which nation he belongs.<sup>16</sup>

When one of Rodef Shalom's own, Josiah Cohen, Esq., was appointed judge, and when L. S. Levin became assistant city attorney, the *Jewish Criterion* showed its pleasure.

It is gratifying to note that many of our young men are beginning to take an interest in public affairs. . . . L. S. Levin, Esq., who has been an important factor in the recent political campaign. . . . has rapidly forged to the front in the political arena. For years he fought the party in power, and he has been an active opponent against the coupling of the name "Hebrew" with political clubs.<sup>17</sup>

In an editorial on December 16, 1898, the *Jewish Criterion* used very strong language in its opposition to Edlis and his organization. The editorial bore the heading, A WARNING.

In view of the coming mayoralty contest we deem it advisable to utter a warning to those misguided co-religionists who, to their infinite discredit, persist in making political capital out of their religion. . . . The title "Hebrew Political Club" is an insult to every intelligent Jew, and brands its authors as

men of ignorance—and worse. If these political mountebanks are devoid of all self-respect let them, at least, accord decent consideration to their faith, and to the feelings of the remainder of their people. The Jews are not a political party, neither are they a faction, but merely a religious people. And as a people they encourage morality, philanthropy, education, and other objects of like nature, but politics never. . . We trust therefore, that in future political campaigns we shall not again be forced to witness the degrading spectacle of irresponsible persons besmirching their religion in order to advance their selfish ends.<sup>18</sup>

While serving as councilman, Adolph Edlis became the man to whom Jews turned when they had problems with authority. The most common problem for observant Jews was the Sunday blue laws, which prohibited “any worldly employment or business whatsoever on the Lord’s Day, commonly called Sunday.”<sup>19</sup> Orthodox Jews were fined for doing business on Sunday even though they did not do business on Saturday. Edlis realized that the only way to relieve the pressure on his constituents would be through legislation. He decided to run for the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. Although he was supported in his first try by the *Jewish Criterion* as well as by *Der Volksfreund*, he lost by 92 votes. But on his second try, in 1904, he was successful, with a plurality of 5,600 votes, and became the first Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe to be elected to the state legislature.<sup>20</sup> However, his attempt to amend the blue laws was unsuccessful.

There was another, more painful problem, in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, where Edlis and most of Pittsburgh’s Jews lived. This was the presence of many houses of prostitution. The neighborhood was not considered a respectable residential one by the police, and it was not carefully policed. Many of the alleys were filled with “houses.” The “social evil,” as it was called, had been investigated, described, preached about, and even outlawed from 1860 on, but still the “houses” abounded.<sup>21</sup>

Jews were involved too, usually as landlords, occasionally as madams and pimps, rarely as prostitutes. But Jews had always had a special sensitivity to actions of their co-religionists which could bring notoriety. Moreover, there were many heartbreaking stories of young girls who had been seduced and corrupted, and who sometimes committed suicide as a result. Edlis decided to do something about this. On March 1, 1905, he proposed the bill which Governor Pennypacker signed into law on April 18, and which became known as the Edlis Act.<sup>22</sup>

He also involved himself in local policing. Joined by Rabbi Coffee of Tree of Life and a local minister, he formed an informal Vigilante Committee to see that the law was enforced. One of the weapons that could be used against Jewish owners of houses was the threat of excommunication from the Jewish community.<sup>23</sup>

The Edlis Act was hailed by the press and police.<sup>24</sup> In his report for the year ending February 1, 1911, the director of public safety, J. M. Morin, stated:

Morally speaking, Pittsburgh is the cleanest large city in the United States. We have no slums such as are found in other large cities. The streets are free from that class of women known as street walkers and other undesirable persons. . . . Many massage parlors which were formerly dens of iniquity have been obliterated.

Morin gave credit to “the stringent provisions of the Edlis Act, an ordinance that has antedated all governmental regulations of the White Slave evil and which has been stringently enforced in Pittsburgh for years.”<sup>25</sup>

The legislative sessions in Harrisburg were relatively short. During his period of service Edlis paid his dues to the machine, voted the party line, and introduced some innocuous bills for appropriations for local hospitals and orphanages. He did not, however, participate in the popular acceptance of graft, gifts of money thrown over the transoms into the hotel rooms of compliant legislators.<sup>26</sup> Indeed M. Clyde Kelly, who excoriated graft and corruption, was one of his best friends.<sup>27</sup>

During 1907 and 1908, after leaving the legislature, Edlis ran his barber-supplies business and continued being active in the Republican Party. In 1909 he was appointed city treasurer by Mayor William A. Magee. Alexander Moore of the *Pittsburgh Leader* made some snide remarks about a “barber becoming treasurer.” This time the editor of the *Jewish Criterion* leaped to Edlis’s defense.

For the first time in the history of Pittsburgh, a member of our community (speaking in the narrower sense) has been appointed to a responsible position in the Mayor’s Cabinet. Mr. Adolph Edlis is the man thus signally honored by receiving the appointment of City Treasurer at the hands of Mayor-elect William A. Magee.

There seems to be an inclination on the part of the daily press in commenting editorially on the Mayor’s appointees to adversely animadvert on the selection of Mr. Edlis to the important office of City Treasurer. But we fail to see any

reason for this attitude. He has been a member of Council and also of the Legislature and his record in these two legislative capacities shows that he possesses much ability in the transaction of public business. The Edlis Act affecting the infamous White Slave Traffic has been the means of effecting much good along the proper lines.

The Mayor, in appointing Mr. Edlis to this office, must have realized the great responsibility attached to its administration, and Mr. Edlis, in accepting, must have fully appreciated the task he has undertaken. Under these conditions we fail to see any necessity to criticize or to object until the results are shown. Mr. Edlis enjoys a good business reputation, his private life is clean and without a blemish.

Mr. Edlis came to this country in 1880 and came to Pittsburgh in 1888, and we feel that he deserves great credit for the progress he has made. It requires no mean measure of ability to come to occupy such a prominent place in the public life of the city, when one has to climb the ladder unaided except by one's own determination to forge ahead and succeed.

We congratulate Adolph Edlis on his appointment and we sincerely trust that his record will confuse the critics who have taken snap judgment and will rebound credit, not alone upon himself, but upon his city and his community.<sup>28</sup>

Edlis served as city treasurer from 1909 to 1914. He saved the city a great deal of money. A new pre-billing system for the collection of taxes was introduced, banks holding city funds were made to pay the maximum interest, and the number of city depositories were increased. His most striking innovation was in abolishing the separate Delinquent Tax Office, thus saving the city hundreds of thousands of dollars.<sup>29</sup>

Since Edlis, Inc., was located not far from City Hall, Edlis was able to continue his practice of making his own creams and shampoos. Sometimes he would leave the city treasurer's office at lunchtime, go to his laboratory, stir up a new batch of supplies, and then come right back.<sup>30</sup> Among Jews and non-Jews alike, his reputation was one of honesty, kindness, and willingness to help. His department was responsible for issuing all kinds of licenses—from dog licenses to peddlers' licenses—and in this he was helpful to Jews in particular, for peddling tended to be a Jewish occupation.

Although there had been some anti-Semitism shown toward him in the press, there was never any doubt cast upon his honesty. He was very sensitive to being in a position of handling public funds. As a prosperous businessman, he felt the time had come to move into a new house. He made sure to buy the house before entering office, so that no one could accuse him of using city funds.



It was customary for each incoming mayor to appoint new city officials. When Joe Armstrong was elected mayor of Pittsburgh (which now included Allegheny City) Edlis decided to run for county treasurer. He felt that he had the credentials for the job. His slogan was, "If you want maximum efficiency in office at a minimum of cost . . . an end to broken promises and mismanagement . . . vote for Adolph Edlis."<sup>31</sup>

However, astute politician as he was, he did not realize how important a patronage and graft source the Delinquent Tax Office was, bringing in an extra \$200,000 to \$300,000 a year to the party coffers. Because of this "lapse," his own Republican Party did not back him. He ran as an independent but was not elected.

During the next sixteen years Edlis withdrew from active political life. He concentrated on his business, which prospered, and on local Jewish affairs. He became one of the founders of a new Orthodox synagogue, Adath Jeshurun, was on the board of his old synagogue, Poale Zion, and helped it move from the Hill District to Squirrel Hill, where most of Pittsburgh's Jews live now. He was one of the founders in 1921 of the Pittsburgh branch of Keren Hayesod (the fund-raising arm of the World Zionist Organization), chairman of the Western Pennsylvania Region of the Zionist Organization of America in 1929, and active in B'nai B'rith. He made two trips abroad, the first in 1922, when he was a delegate to the World Zionist Congress, visited his family in Lichik, and went on to visit Palestine, and the second time in 1929, when he visited Europe only.

In 1931 he was approached by Senator Guffy and Mayor Wilson of Philadelphia to organize an Independent Republicans for Roosevelt. He became chairman of the organization and financed a local office out of his own pocket. After Roosevelt was elected he waited for some recognition for his services—perhaps even a Cabinet appointment—but he was passed over in silence. Three years later he died, after a short illness.

Perhaps the best epitaph for Adolph Edlis comes from his own pen, from an unpublished draft of a speech or letter dated August 21, 1905.

My political career is clean. I have never played "sham reform" neither do I do so at present. I have not put myself up as a politician or political leader for any party but have taken active part in politics to be able to drive out the unworthy ones; those that bring a curse on the Commonwealth. . . . This is my

political decency; to protect the ones that cannot protect themselves; to save some innocent child from being murdered.<sup>32</sup>

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### Notes

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1. *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, April 19, 1905.

2. A "Family Book" in the possession of Jerome Edlis lists the names and parents' names of family members in Hebrew. Sam Klein told about his hometown of Lichik. A relative of the Edlis family, he was still working at Edlis, Inc., in his eighties. The name Edlis is found in a slightly different form as the family name of a famous scholar, and its origin was explained in a personal communication from Rabbi David Cohen, my brother.

3. *Beauty Culture's* "Edlis Inc. Golden Jubilee," a special issue of *Beauty Culture*, "the leading beauty shop magazine of the East," 1938.

4. Daniel J. Elazar, "American Political Theory and the Political Notions of American Jews: Convergences and Contradictions," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 1 (June 1967): 10.

5. "A local lodge of the Knights of Joseph was instituted . . . Pittsburgh Lodge . . . with a membership of 100. The following officers were elected: A. Edlis, commander." *Jewish Criterion*, January 21, 1898. "At a meeting of the Order of the Knights of Joseph, one of the largest Jewish fraternal organizations in the United States . . . Mr. Adolph Edlis was honored with the election of Supreme Commander." *Jewish Criterion*, August 24, 1906. On the list of Board of Directors of the Odd Fellows Home of Ben Avon, published in the *Jewish Criterion* of July 22, 1898, Edlis's name is included. "He was considered the 'Father of Pittsburgh Pythians'," Jerome Edlis. "Mr. Edlis is a prominent member of the IOOF and Knights of Pythias." *Memoirs of Allegheny County*, vol. 1 (1904), p. 53. At the convention of the Grand Lodge of International Order of B'nai B'rith, District Three, January 1918, Adolph Edlis was elected a member of the General Committee.

6. Interview, Jerome Edlis.

7. Interview, the late Jacob Kalson, Esq.

8. *Der Volksfreund*, January 15, 1897. All translations from Yiddish are mine.

9. Interview, the late Jacob Kalson, Esq. The club did not admit Jews!

10. *Der Volksfreund*, January 29, 1897. Rabbi Sivitz was the leading Orthodox rabbi of Pittsburgh, a great scholar, greatly honored in his community. His support of Edlis continued through the years. Glick, Edlis, and Sivitz were all about the same age at this time, between thirty-seven and forty-one.

11. *Ibid.* February 19, 1897. Glick knew that his readers would make the necessary analogy to Mordekhai in the Book of Esther, savior and hero.

12. Although this quotation is from the *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, June 3, 1892, it fits the general tendencies of the *Pittsburgh Jewish Criterion* as well. William J. Leffler, "The Attitude of the Older Immigrants and Natives to the Immigration of the Eastern European Jews as Reflected in the Anglo-Jewish Press of New York and Philadelphia," unpublished essay, May 1, 1959, in American Jewish Archives.

13. *Jewish Criterion*, February 19, 1897.

14. *Der Volksfreund*, March 5, 1897. Glick, who was fiercely partisan, added the comment that all Jews were happy that such a Jew was elected except for one, who could not manage his anguish. He may have been referring to Rabbi J. Leonard Levy of Rodef Shalom, who was not a supporter of Edlis, and had preached against Jewish involvement in politics from the pulpit.

15. *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, August 19, 1898. Jerome Edlis has flyers printed by this club, calling Jews to mass meetings, in English and Yiddish, none of which, unfortunately, are dated.

16. *Jewish Criterion*, October 21, 1898. This was written by Charles Homer Joseph, editor of the *Jewish Criterion*, in his regular column, "Random Thoughts," rather than as an editorial.

17. *Ibid.*, June 24, 1898, and February 20, 1903. It should be mentioned that two of the leaders of the Voters' League, an anti-machine reform group, were A. Leo Weil and Enoch Rauh, members of Rodef Shalom.

18. *Ibid.* December 16, 1898.

19. *A Digest of the Acts of Assembly relating to and the General Ordinances of the City of Pittsburgh from 1804 to November 12, 1908*, prepared by Robert T. McElroy. The first Sunday law was passed in 1794, and succeeding amendments made it even more stringent. As late as 1927 the Pittsburgh Symphony Society was arrested for holding a concert on Sunday.

20. "Jacob Gratz was a member of the Pennsylvania State Legislature in 1824 and in 1839 went to the State Senate." Personal communication from Professor Jacob R. Marcus, Director of American Jewish Archives, July 5, 1973.

21. Ida Cohen Selavan, "The Social Evil in an Industrial Society: Prostitution in Pittsburgh, 1900-1925" (master's thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1971).

22. *Pennsylvania General Assembly Legislative Record*, 1905, p. 755.

23. Jerome Edlis allowed me to read and translate a notebook of his father's which listed the addresses of houses of prostitution, the aliases of owners, madams, and girls who worked there. Unfortunately, the book is undated.

24. *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, April 19, 1905. "Another unique act may be of assistance to police."

25. *Annual Report of the Department of Public Safety*, Pittsburgh, January 31, 1911, pp. 238-239. The Mann Act, passed by Congress in 1910, which forbade importation of women for prostitution and transporting them in interstate commerce, is often mentioned by people as being patterned upon the Edlis Act. It is not, but the Edlis Act, which was designed to fight pimps and procurers, was often mentioned together with the Mann Act which it preceded. Pittsburgh was the first city to secure a conviction against some men (Italians and Jews) under the Mann Act.

26. Interview, Jerome Edlis.

27. M. Clyde Kelly, *Machine Made Legislation* (Pittsburgh: Press of Percy F. Smith, 1912).

28. *Jewish Criterion*, April 2, 1909.

29. "By Ordinance No. 385 of 1913 the Mayor was authorized to appoint the City Treasurer as the Collector of Delinquent Taxes, without additional compensation. The City Treasurer now fills that additional office." *Digest of the General Ordinances and Laws of the City of Pittsburgh*, compiled and edited by Hiram Schock, p. 70.

30. Bessy Sak Bernstein, who was his secretary; personal interview.

31. Advertisement in *Jewish Criterion*, September 16, 1915.

32. Unpublished document, possession of Jerome Edlis.