
American Jewish Personalities

Amelia Greenwald: The Jewish Florence Nightingale

Leo E. Turitz

Hailed in the *Paris Times* of January 9, 1927 as “capable and efficient . . . ‘a born nurse,’ an organizer, and a leader of women,” Amelia Greenwald was, indeed, a remarkable woman who deserves her place in history along with Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton. In American Jewish history she belongs side by side with such prominent women as Rebecca Graetz, Lillian Wald, and Henrietta Szold. Born in Gainesville, Alabama, in 1886, the daughter of Joseph Greenwald, a Confederate soldier, and Elisa (Haas) Greenwald, she became one of the outstanding women in the history of nursing.

Against her family’s wishes, she enrolled in 1908 in the school of nursing of the Touro Infirmary in New Orleans, Louisiana. After completing her course of studies, she did postgraduate work in psychiatric nursing at the Phipps Clinic at John Hopkins University in Baltimore. This was followed by more postgraduate work in public health nursing at Columbia University, New York City, where she had opportunity for service at the famous Henry Street Settlement. Later she was called upon by the Council of Jewish Women to organize and direct its rural activities in several states. The *Paris Times* reports also that she directed the New Jersey Public Health Association at Longbranch and organized the first hospital at Pensacola, Florida.

During World War I, she saw service with the American Expeditionary Force as chief nurse in several evacuation hospitals and, after the signing of the Armistice, she accompanied the First Army of Occupation to Germany to establish its first hospital in Coblenz.

Following the war, she was selected by a committee headed by Herbert Hoover and Dr. Lee K. Frankel to go to Warsaw, Poland, to establish, with the aid of the Joint Distribution Committee, Poland’s first school of nursing at the Jewish Hospital. The *Paris Times* records that the hospital was “noted for its famous doctors . . . but modern nursing

was lacking until Miss Greenwald organized the first class of student nurses there in 1923, after superintending the building of suitable quarters, laboratories, diet kitchens, and other features for the presentation of a complete and scientific nursing course." During the three years that she was in Poland she graduated three classes of nurses.

The *Palestine Post*, December 18, 1932, tells of the awards earned by her achievements. The school itself "was decorated by the Division of Public Health of the League of Nations for its standards," and Miss Greenwald "was publicly decorated by President Moscicki with the Golden Cross of Merit, being the first woman to receive that decoration."

When she returned to the United States, she was active until the early 1930's in public health work in the state of New York. Then she accepted the invitation of the Hadassah Medical Organization to come to Palestine to spend a year there and, in the words of the *Palestine Post*, "to take part in a comprehensive survey of the nursing service in its hospitals and of its training school for nurses."

Upon her return from Palestine, her brother urged her not to retire from activity and convinced her to open a ladies' ready-to-wear store in Eunice, Louisiana.

Amelia Greenwald never married. In 1939 she brought over from Germany a young girl, a distant cousin, Liselotte Levy, whom she adopted a few years later. Liselotte Levy Weil (her husband died recently) still conducts the business and lives in Miss Greenwald's home, which she says is filled with treasures accumulated in the course of Miss Greenwald's travels and rich and interesting life.

The eulogy in the Eunice newspaper recalled that "she was a member of one of the first American Legion Posts ever organized."

Miss Greenwald died in 1966 at the age of eighty and lies interred alongside other members of her family in the Beth Israel cemetery in Meridian, Mississippi. Her gravestone bears the simple inscription: "Nurse, Army Nurse Corps, World War I."

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