
Rethinking the American Jewish Experience

“The Bayer and the Pollack”: The Debate Continues

William M. Kramer and Norton B. Stern

Professor Lou Silberman said (*AJA*, November 1986) in a comment on our recent article, “What’s the Matter with Warsaw?” (*AJA*, November 1985), that Harriet Levy may have thought of her family as “Pollacks,” but no member of his mother’s family, who were from Inowroclaw, Province of Posen, did so, because for them “Posen was Prussia.” The professor believes that while Warsaw “was . . . a problem for those who were ‘passing’ as Germans,” Jews from the Prussian-occupied Polish province of Posen did not need to escape the Polish label, since they felt themselves to hold an alternative Prussian identity. Certainly, Polish Jews were unfairly looked down upon. Inowroclaw was Polish then, though occupied, and is Polish now, as it has been for about seven decades and from time immemorial.

In Germany, in the 1840’s, when Western Poland was occupied by Prussia, the Berlin Jewish publication, *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* said: “The Polish Jew is the dirtiest of all creatures,” and in America an early B’nai B’rith lodge of Chicago “declined to accept Polish and Russian Jews as . . . they were not yet civilized.” No wonder that Poseners preferred to be thought of as Prussians rather than Poles, and as Silberman said, they “spoke German [certainly in America] not Yiddish, although they also had their own *Posen Judisch*,” which is a Yiddish dialect.

There is a telling point to the words of California editor Victor Harris, who observed at the end of the nineteenth century that poor Jews “remained Polish all their lives, while those who acquired wealth are taken into the German coterie.”

In 1862, writing in his San Francisco weekly, the *Gleaner*, Rabbi Julius Eckman defined Polish Jews as consisting of “Prussians, Poles and English,” the latter of whom were almost all from Russian or

Prussian Poland. As genealogist Dr. Malcolm H. Stern wrote in the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* of March 1977: "Prussian Jews, most of whom came from the Province of Posen [were by German Jews] snobbishly referred to . . . as 'Polanders'."

Silberman stated of his own experience that "one had only to be brought up in such a [Prussian Jewish] household to recognize how fatuous the German-Pole distinction is." He suggested that we "had built more on Harriet Levy's [Polish Jewish] self-identification than is called for." We suggest that given the prejudice against Eastern European Jews held by their German brothers, Polish Jews from Posen and elsewhere in Prussian-occupied territory softened the blow of discrimination for themselves and their children by Germanizing their background.

New York Jewry's historian Hyman Grinstein correctly stated that many who were Polish Jews "came from the Province of Posen, which was at that time, an appendage of Prussia. Despite this German affiliation, the Jews from Posen were always called Polish. . . . apparently they had not been 'Germanized' in their old home." Dr. Arthur Hertzberg wrote that "many of the . . . mid-century German Jews turned out to be Polish-Prussian Jews who had 'assimilated' somewhere on their journey to the supposedly more prestigious identities."

In San Francisco and the rest of the early West, some Polish Jews took on a Prussian-German identity to aid in the Americanization process and to enjoy the benefits of American-Jewish Germanic society, adding to it Jewish scholarship and piety. Silberman's family, who worshipped at Sherith Israel of San Francisco, used the Polish *minhag* (rite), which was the common heritage of all Polish Jews in a synagogue which was well known as the Polish congregation.

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Professor Silberman replies:

Although it may have been unwise for me to have attempted to answer Stern and Kramer's rhetorical question, I could not have anticipated their irrelevant and condescending response. My modest suggestion was that their emphasis on "the main subethnic rivalry among Western Jews . . . between the Germans and the Poles," "Prussian-occupied Poland," and "German Jewish snobbishness" did not entirely reflect all of the realities of Jewish life in San Francisco. The Jewish inhabitants of the Grand Duchy of Posen, as it was incorporated into Prussia after the Congress of Vienna, were effectively Germanized in the several generations before they were granted Prussian citizenship. Thus they did not think of themselves as Polish Jews, although they may have been thought of as such by the Jews of non-Prussian German states such as Baden and Bavaria. This, indeed, may have been carried over to San Francisco. Certainly the existence of two congregations in 1850 indicates that distinctions did exist, although the primary distinction was that between Minhag Ashkenaz and Minhag Polin. That Sherith Israel used the latter ought to occasion no surprise. So did most north German and English (other than Sephardic) congregations.

Messrs. Stern and Kramer did not have to exert themselves to demonstrate the existence of prejudice against Polish Jews on the part of *Yahudim*, i.e., south German Jews. I have no argument with that. All I suggested was that in the minds of the members of Sherith Israel congregation they were Poseners or Prussians, not Poles. The same could be written of Heinrich Graetz, the historian, born in Xions, Posen; Leo Baeck, the theologian, born in Lissa (also called Polnisch Lissa), Posen; and Ismar Elbogen, the liturgical scholar, born in Schildberg, Posen. All one needs do is walk through the older section of Home of Peace cemetery and read the inscriptions to understand this.

Warsaw, as I noted in my previous comment, was another story. Jews from that region could not think of themselves as Prussians, hence the problem for the two families mentioned in the first article. Parts of the Greenberg family were members of Congregation Emanuel and had achieved some social prominence, hence a Warsaw, i.e., Polish, connection may, I surmise, have been embarrassing. In the case

reported by Kenneth Zwerin, it was his maternal not paternal family that was involved. As he indicated in a letter to me, his great-uncle, son of the deceased, was applying for membership in the Concordia Club. For anyone who knows the San Francisco Jewry of the time, no more need be said.

As to the minor point whether Posen Judisch is Yiddish and whether that proves anything, I leave it to the experts. Suffice it to write, it was ornamental, not “mama loschen.” Incidentally, the south German Jews had their Judisch, too.

Finally, I do not wish to sail under false colors. My father’s family was a latecomer to San Francisco, arriving from Cleveland, Ohio, in 1906, after the fire. My paternal grandparents were members of Congregation Beth Israel, the Geary Street Shul, a left-wing Conservative synagogue with an organ, whose rabbi, M. S. Levy, educated in Jews College, London, was a member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. His brother, J. Leonard Levy, was rabbi of Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh and represented a rather radical wing of the Reform movement. My parents belonged to Congregation Emanu-el rather than my mother’s family’s congregation, Sherith Israel, because my father disliked Rabbi Jacob Nieto. Of course, my knowledge and understanding of San Francisco Jewry is anecdotal, nor archival, hence hardly fit for historians’ consideration.

There is a talmudic adage, *kinat soferim tarbeh hokhmah*, “the zeal of scholars increases wisdom.” This does not mean that civility is an unnecessary commodity in scholarly exchange.

Lou H. Silberman