

## 1820-1860

by Jerry Klinger

*"Today was a day of the most heartfelt sadness, of the bitterest pain for the local Israelite congregation. Six fathers of families with wives and children, altogether 44 individuals of the Mosaic faith, left home to find a new fatherland in far off America. Not an eye remained without tears, not a soul unmoved, as the bitter hour of parting struck.... They said that they were emigrating mainly because of their children"*

*"From Wurtemberg to America: A Nineteenth-Century German-Jewish Village on Its Way to the New World."*

*"If thou art one of that oppressed race, Whose pilgrimage from Palestine we trace, Brave the Atlantic--Hope's broad anchor weigh, A Western Sun will gild your future days Oh, not as strangers shall your welcome be, Come to the homes and bosoms of the free".*

- Penina Moise, Charleston, S.C. 1833

The American Revolution was a radical political and social infection that spread from the West to the East, from the New World to the Old World. General Lord Cornwallis, deeply humiliated, surrendered to General George Washington on October 19, 1781 at Yorktown, Virginia. The defeated British marched out piped to the popular British tune of "The World Turned Upside Down." The French monarchy had risen to the aide of the American struggle to injure and weaken England. The French monarchy was to be the first "victim" of the American infection. The French revolution and the Napoleonic years turned Old Europe upside down. Eventually the armies of France were defeated. The radical ideals of the American infection spread by the marching armies were not.

Germany, after the fall of Napoleon, was not the unified Germany of today. Germany was a collection of small independent states bonded by language, culture and certain common unifying elements. Rabid anti-Semitism, the European disease, was one of the common unifying elements. Napoleon had torn down the Ghetto walls; with his defeat they were speedily rebuilt. How to get rid of the Jews was a central consideration and varied from state to state. As early as 1813 Bavaria, for example, established a Matrikel, or quota system, to force Jewish emigration. Severe restrictions were placed upon the Jews living within its borders to find work, marry, establish businesses, get an education etc. A Jew's life was made as difficult as possible. The alternatives were conversion or emigration.

By the tens of thousands, German Jews emigrated. Many young single men emigrated to America supporting themselves as backpack peddlers to the American interior. Some became successful others failed under the emotional and backbreaking work. Success brought over families and then entire communities to America. In 1820 the American Jewish population was about 10,000. By 1860 the Jewish American population, heavily German, had risen to 150,000.

The flood of German Jews changed the American Jewish complexion from Sephardic to Ashkenazic.

America was extraordinary. In America, the Jew was not denied by a Matrikel system the opportunity to work where they wished, live where they wished, reach for any endeavor that they wished or pray to God in whatever form or language they wished. The Old World and its restrictions, political, social, economic and religious virtually vanished. Jews did encounter anti-Semitism but it was relative. Anti-Semitism was not institutionalized by either the church or the state. It was experienced on an individual basis and dispelled on an individual basis. Compared to the Old World, Jews had arrived in heaven.

Christian contact with the Americanized Jew helped dispel the anti-Semitic myths that were imported to American popular culture. Mark Twain, the great American 19th century writer, told about his own conversion from bigotry to toleration. As a young man Twain had grown up with the American popular cultural image of Jews as dishonest and sneaky, whose very presence could "desecrate" a place. Twain's attitude was changed in the wheelhouse of a Mississippi paddle wheeler.

He was training to be a riverboat pilot. His teacher, the master pilot George Newhouse, had evicted a passenger from the wheelhouse after the passenger made "a scurrilous general remark about Jews." Newhouse explained why he would not tolerate any anti-Semitism in his presence "This... was for the sake of one Jew, in memory of one Jew." Newhouse told Twain a personal story about a notorious Riverboat gambler who cheated and then tried to provoke an elderly Louisiana planter into a duel. A young Jew intervened on behalf of the planter. In the ensuing duel, the Jew shot the gambler. This and other real life stories left a deep impression on Twain. It erased the popular image of the Jew as self interested cowards from his mind. Twain's writings never again showed Jews in a negative light.

What was heaven in the New American world for the immigrants? What was Judaism? When freed of the European restrictions and definitions of the Kehilah, the Jewish semi-autonomous communities, Jewish immigrants needed to define who and what they believed in. To succeed in America, as Americans, Jews quickly understood that they needed to speak English and look like Americans in tradition and culture. In America a person could choose to be a Jew. They could choose not to be too Jewish. They could choose not to be a Jew at all; the same challenges face American Judaism to this day. How and why should a Jew choose to be a Jew .

The first American born and home grown Jewish clergyman was Reverend Gershom Mendes Seixas who became the religious leader of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City in 1768. Most Jewish communities conducted their own religious services under lay leadership. They searched for identity both as Jews and as Americans. Heavily influenced by both the German Synagogue reform movement in Germany and the American Protestant environment, Isaac Harby and a group of young members of Congregation Beth Elohim, Charleston, South Carolina, petitioned in 1824, for reform of the synagogue service. They petitioned that services be shorter, service honors were not to be bid upon, men and women should be permitted to sit together and that the service and the sermon should be in English. Their petition was rejected. Harby and his supporters split away and formed "The Reformed Society of Israelites."

Over the next two decades reform minded, German trained religious leaders came to America. Arguing for "a more rational system of worshipping God," along with the general American attitude against rigid religious structure their influence blended easily with many American Jews. From 1846, until his death 54 years later in 1900, Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise became the voice and dynamic leadership of American Reform Judaism. The center of American Reform Judaism was the "Queen City of the West," Cincinnati, Ohio.

American Jewish Orthodoxy did not have a single European trained Rabbi until 1840 when Rabbi Abraham Rice arrived. Rice struggled against the free forces of the American open religious structure to establish a firm foothold for Orthodoxy. Rabbi Rice died in Baltimore in 1862. Shortly afterwards his own children dropped away from Orthodox Judaism.

By 1880 almost 90% of all American Judaism was reform. Energetic efforts to find a united Jewish American front between Orthodoxy and Reform ended abruptly, July 11, 1883. A dinner reconciling the two religious views was catered by the finest hotel in Cincinnati. The caterer wanted to serve what they thought would be the best dinner possible at the historic reconciliation and unity dinner. The first course served was iced, jumbo shrimp. The patently non-kosher dinner and unified American Jewry collapsed in accusations and anger.

The massive immigration of Eastern European Jews from 1880- 1920, would change American Judaism again. The American Jewish Civil war - Orthodox vs. Reform, still has not been resolved. Who is a Jew is still not defined.

As the American frontier moved westward in a dynamic wave of energy, expansion and aggressiveness, fulfilling America's sense of Manifest Destiny, a nation stretching from sea to sea, Jews were there. Jewish fur traders, frontiersman and even at times Jews marrying into Indian tribes became part of Western life. Moses Henry and Isaac Levy fought with Lt. Col. George Rogers Clark, 1779, gaining the Old Northwest from the British, an area that stretched from Ohio to Wisconsin.

Samuel Judah moved to Indiana from New Jersey about 1818. In time he was elected to the Indiana House of Representatives six times and eventually became speaker of the House.

President Thomas Jefferson can best be described as an intellectual idealist. He proved himself the manifest pragmatist. When presented with the opportunity to purchase the Louisiana territory a vast area that stretched through much of middle America from France he did so immediately in 1803. American control of the Louisiana territory ended the French Code Noir prohibiting Jews from settling in its Catholic territory.

Jewish merchants and settlers soon migrated down the father of waters, the Mississippi River, to New Orleans. The best known of these early businessmen was a small reclusive but very astute young man from Rhode Island - Judah Touro. His father, Isaac Touro, had been a poor hazzan at Yeshuat Israel, the Newport, Rhode Island synagogue. Touro, as a patriotic citizen of New Orleans, along with numerous other Jews of that city, volunteered to fight and repel the British invaders in 1814. He was severely injured by a British canon ball during the lopsided American victory at the Battle of New Orleans, Jan. 8, 1815.

A fellow soldier, a Christian from Virginia, Rezin Shepard, retrieved the wounded Touro from the battlefield. Shepard gently layed Touro in a hand drawn cart and took him to a farm house where he stayed with Judah for weeks nursing him back to health. The brave and unselfish act of that Christian to save a Jew led to a lifelong bond of friendship between them. Touro eventually became one of the wealthiest men in America. He set the example of American Jewish philanthropy and ecumenical generosity. At one time a small church, in New Orleans, was being evicted for the inability to pay rent. Touro purchased the building and permitted the Christian community to stay and worship rent-free.

Touro's generosity extended later in his life to his own Jewish community after his identity as a Jew was reawakened. He gave generously to fund many young Jewish communities in America and abroad. Today, outside of the old city in Jerusalem is an area known as Yemin Moshe. There is a windmill structure there that is a museum. Inside the windmill is a tribute to Judah Touro whose generosity funded the first Jewish settlement outside the walls of Jerusalem in modern times.

The fight for Texas in 1836 against the Mexicans was supported by an estimated 200 Jewish soldiers in the ranks of the army of Texas. "Remember the Alamo" would not be part of the American lexicon had it not been for a Jew; but that is one part of a later story, "The Jews of American West."

One word changed the pattern of American migration west almost instantly. One word cried out by John Sutter in 1846 when he bent down to examine the riverbed rocks of the American River high up in the remote Sierra Nevada mountains of California. The word was "GOLD" and it electrified the world. Wealth was in California for the brave to come and take it. The world flooded to California and so did the Jew. A synagogue was established in California before Massachusetts, or even Washington, D.C. In 1849, Moses Hyman, assembled a handful of Jews in his Sacramento store for the High Holy Days. The next year Hyman and Louis Shaul founded a Hebrew Benevolent Society and purchased land for a Jewish cemetery. In 1852, the little congregation purchased a church on 7th Street, named it Congregation B'nai Israel, "Children of Israel.

Levi Strauss was born in Bavaria in 1829. His family emigrated to American in 1847. Strauss, a tailor by profession, borrowed all he could on a venture to California to make his fortune. By the time his boat had arrived in San Francisco in 1850 he had sold all the clothing material he had brought with him, all he had left was very sturdy sail cloth which he hoped to sell to a tent maker. Instead he realized that the material could be made into durable pants for the miners and an industry was born. Today Levi's are worn around the world.

So many Jews came to California that by 1870, one sixth, of San Francisco's population, was believed to be Jewish. Henry A. Lyons, 1849-1852 and Solomon Heydenfeld, 1852-1857, served as justices on the California Supreme Court. Jews were settled in more small towns in California than even New York State until late in the 19th century.

**America is an extraordinary place for Jews.**

President Martin Van Buren was the first President to order an American consul to intervene on behalf of Jews abroad. In 1840 he instructed the U.S. consul in Alexandria, Egypt to use his good offices to protect the Jews of Damascus who were under attack because of a false blood ritual accusation; A French diplomat had first suggested to the Syrians the possible "Blood Libel" connection. President John Tyler, in 1844, was the first President to nominate a U.S. consul to Palestine; Warder Cresson, a Quaker convert to Judaism and who established a pioneer Zionist colony.

President Franklin Pierce was the first and only President whose name appears on the charter of a synagogue. Pierce signed the Act of Congress in 1857 that amended the laws of the District of Columbia to enable the incorporation of the city's first synagogue, Washington Hebrew Congregation. The first president of Washington Hebrew Congregation was Commodore Uriah Levy, the first Jew to reach that high rank in the United States Navy. His political connections were needed to get Congress to change the law. Levy, is best known for abolishing corporal punishment in the U.S. Navy and saving Thomas Jefferson's home, Monticello, for the posterity of the American people. Monticello had fallen into decay and financial destitution after the President's death. Jefferson had died virtually insolvent.

Small in numbers, Jews were very much a part of American life. In America freedom to choose one's faith and freedom for opportunity and political equality did not mean human equality. Slavery was a reality in America until 1865. Bigotry never far below the surface was focused on Blacks and Indians first. Jews, Orientals suffered from American Nativism but Jews to a lesser degree because Jews were white. To be accepted as American, Jews adopted the cultural trappings of the world they lived in. To be accepted as Americans, Jews could be religious or not, Jews could reach for the golden ring or not.

Like their Christian neighbors, Jews could and did own slaves. Like their Christian neighbors, Jews abhorred and fought against slavery.