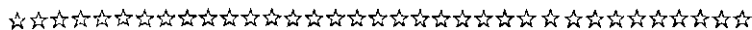


THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY



the history
of Baltimore Jewry
from
1773 to 1920



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The Cohens

The importance of the Ettings was matched and even surpassed by that of the Cohen family, whose history in Baltimore was also started by a widow. Israel I. Cohen (1750–1803), born in Oberdorff, Bavaria, and his wife, Judith Solomon (1760–1837), born in Bristol, England, settled in Richmond, Virginia, about 1784.⁷⁴ After Israel's death, his forty-three-year-old widow and her children, of whom the oldest, Jacob, was only fourteen years old, moved to Baltimore. During the thirty-four years she spent in the city, Judith Cohen, like Shīnah Etting, witnessed the phenomenal rise of her sons and grandchildren. As in the case of the Ettings, nothing is known of the causes that made the Cohens uproot themselves and move to Baltimore. In both instances, however, it was a step that enriched the city and brought glory to the families.⁷⁵

The first business venture of the family was into lottery, an important method of raising public funds in those days. The enterprise was a success, and a branch was opened in Philadelphia. In 1831 lottery gave way to banking. At the head of the firm stood the eldest of the brothers, Jacob (1789–1869), and the banking firm was known as Jacob I. Cohen, Jr. and Brothers.⁷⁶ It became one of the most reputable financial concerns in the country and the fiscal agent of the Rothschilds in the United States.⁷⁷ The Cohen bank proved its reliability, especially in the crisis year of 1837. It was one of the few banks that paid its depositors at the time of the suspension of specie payments.

The careers of Solomon Etting and Jacob Cohen, Jr., were very similar. Like Etting, Cohen was engaged in many important financial ventures. He too was a director of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. In addition, Cohen served as president of the Baltimore-Philadelphia Railroad, the Baltimore Insurance Company, and other important companies. His abilities were widely recognized. He was elected to many important public posts, including the presidency of the convention to promote the trade and commerce interests of the city of Baltimore.⁷⁸ For many years he served as secretary-treasurer of the board of the city's public schools.

Also like Etting, Jacob Cohen and his brothers were active in the German Society of Maryland. Jacob was one of its founders, his brother Benjamin served as treasurer for twenty years, and Benjamin's

son Israel, in turn, succeeded him and served for more than thirty years. When the Germans in the city celebrated the 1848 revolution in their fatherland, Cohen, a native American, was the vice-chairman of the organization committee.⁷⁹ In addition, both Etting and Jacob Cohen fought the long battle for Jewish civic equality, and upon winning it both were elected to the City Council in 1826. Moreover, Cohen served as president of that body from 1845 to 1861.

Jacob Cohen followed the pattern set by Solomon Etting, who was a quarter of a century older, in other respects as well. He was a seat holder in the Mikveh Israel Synagogue in Philadelphia and assisted other out-of-town congregations.⁸⁰ He did not, however, play any part in a Baltimore congregation or in any other local Jewish organization. William Rayner, who came to Baltimore in 1840, related that when he arrived

*there were about a dozen of native Jews. . . . Though of German origin, they kept to themselves, strictly apart from the newcomers, considering it rather below their dignity to have any social relations with them.*⁸¹

The only exception was Cohen's participation in a short-lived attempt of the 1850s to establish a Sephardic congregation in the city.⁸²

Both the Cohens and the Ettings established private cemeteries for their own families. The latter family acquired a plot on the north side of North and Pennsylvania Avenues in 1799. The Cohens purchased a tract for the exclusive burial of Judith Cohen and her posterity on Saratoga near Carey Street. Both cemeteries are still maintained.⁸³

In the history of the Baltimore Jewish community, Jacob Cohen will be remembered primarily for the role he played in winning civic equality for the Jews. His younger brother Joshua continued the fight to eradicate from the statute books any laws which might be construed as an abridgment of Jewish equality. In 1846, twenty years after the consummation of the struggle for Jewish rights, Dr. Joshua Cohen brought about a change in an antiquated 1717 law. According to that law, a Negro was not permitted to testify in court against a white Christian. Dr. Cohen succeeded in his efforts to change that law, and the Maryland Assembly, by an act of January 23, 1847, expunged the word "Christian" from the old law. Thus, Maryland Jews were in this respect placed on a par with white Christians.⁸⁴

Dr. Cohen continued his lobbying activities at the subsequent two state Constitutional Conventions in 1851 and 1864. On both occasions he was anxious to eradicate old discriminatory laws. When the Con-

stitutional Convention of 1864 convened in Annapolis for the purpose of drawing up a new constitution for the state, Joshua Cohen was active in an effort to revoke the special Jewish oath. He "mentioned the subject to several of the Baltimore delegations and to some few others." In his memorandum to Governor Augustus William Bradford, a follow-up to his personal visit, he expressed the hope that Bradford would assist in removing "this last remnant of a by-gone prejudice." He suggested that the law be changed to read: "No religious test should be required as a qualification for office."⁸⁵ In this effort he, like others in later generations, succeeded only in part. Some of the old laws are still part of Maryland's legal code, even if not observed.⁸⁶

Unlike his older brother, Jacob, Joshua did not confine his Jewish activities to the defense of Jewish political rights. He was also very active in all local Jewish affairs, carried on a lively correspondence with Isaac Leeser, and amassed one of the finest Jewish libraries of that day.⁸⁷

An eminent physician (one of the first ear specialists in the country), Dr. Joshua Cohen served a term as president of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of the University of Maryland. He was a charter member of the Maryland Historical Society and held many other important civic positions. In his obituary in *The National Medical Journal* he was praised as a great doctor, a man devoted to the "teaching and piety of the Law given to Sinai." This journal paid tribute to his broadmindedness, praising him because "no narrow boundary of creed closed around his heart, shutting out the claims and brotherhood of humanity."⁸⁸

Two other brothers, Benjamin (1797-1845) and David (1800-1847), were founders of the Baltimore Stock Exchange in 1837. Benjamin married Solomon Etting's daughter Kitty (1799-1837), who died at the age of thirty-eight, leaving him with eleven children.

Another brother, Mendes (1796-1879), left the field of finance and retired while still a young man. For six years (1829-1835) he traveled abroad. During these years he reported in long and detailed letters to his mother and brother about subjects as far afield as the different dialects used in England and the Jewish situation in the countries he visited. (There is a wealth of information in these communications about Jews in Russia, Turkey, Palestine, and Egypt, as well as practically all countries of Central and Western Europe.)⁸⁹ Mendes Cohen was the first American to enter and investigate the Nile Valley. His collection of 689 relics collected in Egypt was given in 1884 to Johns Hopkins University. Like his older brother Jacob,

THE STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY

Mendes served in the government. He was a member of the Maryland legislature in 1847/1848.

The Cohens were observant Jews. They held daily services in their palatial residence on North Charles Street. When short of a *minyan*, they invited Jews from the neighborhood to participate in the services.⁹⁰ They made their observance of rituals known on appropriate occasions. Mendes Cohen took exception to an auction sale of a theater in which he was interested, for the sale took place on the Sabbath, and it was impossible for him to attend.⁹¹ When David Cohen served on the Committee on Rules of the Baltimore Stock Exchange, he brought about the adoption of a rule that a member was not to be fined if he absented himself from a meeting on a day when his business was closed. Thus he enabled Jewish businessmen to observe their religious obligations without penalty.⁹²

The early Cohens and the Ettings presented to the non-Jewish community an image of Jews as public servants, loyal and dependable people. All this, however, did not prove to be sufficient when the question of Jewish equality came up in the Maryland legislature.

The same happened to the leading Cohen family. While Mendes Cohen belonged to the Peace party (a camouflaged secessionist group) and was a delegate to the State Peace Convention,⁷⁸ his brother Edward went one step further and served in the Confederate army.⁷⁹ The third brother, Joshua, was a strong pro-Unionist.⁸⁰ Similar events happened in many Jewish families. It was a frequent occurrence that

*the son who had charge of the business left it and went South, taking the money with him, which he spent in helping the Rebel cause.*⁸¹

Most Jews were small merchants and peddlers and were hard hit in the early period of the war. There were naturally exceptions. One was a provision dealer, Mr. Rosenstock, who was able to donate five thousand pounds of the "best flour to distribute among the city poor, without distinction of faith or politics."⁸²

The economic situation changed considerably with the progress of the war. Some Jews became extremely wealthy within a very short time.

*Fortunes were made quickly in those days . . . there were a great deal of speculators notably among our leading coreligionists. . . . Some men arose from obscurity and became multimillionaires in a very short time.*⁸³

Some Baltimore Jews became real estate operators, bankers, railroad magnates, and above all manufacturers of ready-made clothes—a business which grew tremendously as a result of government orders for uniforms. The economic situation improved so much that a local correspondent wrote, "The Jews on the whole, by their intelligence and their activity, have acquired some wealth."⁸⁴

This correspondent overlooked an entire group, although a small one, which became much poorer as a result of the war. Once the salaries of the clergy were cut, they were not raised even when conditions improved. Characteristic was the case of Cantor Leucht of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, whose salary was reduced "for one year" from one thousand dollars to eight hundred dollars.⁸⁵ Over four years passed but the cantor's salary was not restored. In 1865 he addressed a letter to the board of his congregation in which he asked for a raise of five hundred dollars, since contrary to all expectations "most articles of necessity are held at higher figures." Leucht made it clear that the increase was "to be discontinued . . . at such a time as a return may be had to settled and satisfactory conditions of financial affairs." Fearing that as a result of this request he might lose his position altogether, the cantor concluded the letter by saying:

to the question of Jewish rights.⁹² On September 24, 1857, a Baltimore committee (consisting mainly of leading members of Einhorn's congregation, with Dr. Arnold acting as chairman) issued a call to committees from other cities to convene in Baltimore "in order to proceed in a body to Washington and to lay our grievance before his Excellency, the President of the United States."⁹³

On October 29, 1857, a convention of "delegates of the Israelites from various States of the Union" was held in Baltimore. The memorial that was drafted, which was presented to the then president, James Buchanan, bears the signatures of the following Baltimoreans: M. I. Cohen, Rev. Dr. H. Hochheimer, and Phillip Herzberg.

Neither the memorial nor the subsequent delegation to Buchanan nor his vague promises to protect the rights of American Jews in Switzerland—about which he did nothing—brought about any change.⁹⁴ The treaty remained as originally worded. The interests of American Jews in Switzerland remained unprotected until 1872, when the new Swiss constitution placed the jurisdiction over aliens in the hands of the federal government.⁹⁵

THE MORTARA CASE

The Swiss treaty issue was still on the agenda when another case attracted the attention of American Jewry. In this instance the reaction was one of pain and indignation at an outrage that had been committed against one of their own faith, even though the event took place in a faraway land.

In 1858, in Bologna, Italy, then a part of the Papal States, a six-year-old Jewish boy by the name of Edgar Mortara was forcibly taken away from his parents by the Church authorities. The child had apparently been secretly baptized by his Christian nurse when he was about one year old. This made him a Christian from the Church's point of view; hence it was considered both legal and proper to take the boy away from his parents.

Mass meetings protesting the abduction took place in every major Jewish community in the United States.⁹⁶ In Baltimore a mass meeting took place on November 28, 1859, at Independence Hall. Col. Mendes Cohen, one of the most active communal workers, presided, and A. Nachman, a leader of the Har Sinai Congregation, acted as secretary.⁹⁷

It was a stormy meeting. Those present could not agree on a course of action. A committee of twelve was elected to draft a petition to be presented to President Buchanan. Some of the delegation members

*noble work. No more sacred title can [be] bestow[ed] than that of Rabbi-teacher. What an index is all this of the intellectuality of the Russian Jew.*³⁰⁴

Wolman's speech was a historic one. It marked the first time that a new kind of Russian-born Jew was presented to a cross section of the community, Jew and non-Jew alike. Here was not the stereotyped Jewish peddler or even a merchant prince. This was an intellectual, who pointed with pride to his kin in Russia as a noble people who held learning above all else. Wolman was a harbinger of many others.

Cardinal Gibbons sent a message that "only enforced absence" from the city prevented his coming to the meeting. He wanted his Jewish friends to know that he deplored the Russian atrocities and regarded them to be a "blot upon civilization."³⁰⁵

An important note was struck by Senator Rayner. In his message he asked the assemblage not to limit their activities to relief and resolutions but to resort to political action. He expressed his belief that

*an earnest appeal from this government emanating from its legislative branches . . . could bring about the desired result and every effort ought to be made to obtain this action. It has been done at other times in our history, and it will be done now if a combined pressure is brought upon Congress to take action in the matter.*³⁰⁶

It was the senator who reminded his constituency that legislators were sensitive to its pressure.

Baltimore Jewry followed Rayner's advice only in part. It did not press its chosen representatives to act in the matter, but the resolution did call upon the United States "in all available ways to bring such influence to bear on the Russian government as may tend to bring about a cessation of these inhumanities." The Baltimore Jews assembled at the mass meeting also issued an appeal "to the people of the United States to call upon their Representatives in Congress" to protest against "the outrage to which the Jews of Russia have been subjected."³⁰⁷ The local press unanimously joined in denouncing the Russian government for tolerating such massacres.³⁰⁸ Baltimore Jewry began a financial appeal for the pogrom victims at the meeting. Three thousand dollars was raised that night.³⁰⁹

The Baltimore Committee of the Alliance Israélite Universelle forwarded four thousand dollars to Paris "for the Kishinev sufferers."³¹⁰ The organization of such a committee was first suggested to Rabbi

Benjamin Szold in a letter from the Central Committee of the Alliance. In it the parent organization pointed out that

*the movement of intolerance . . . has developed with . . . strong intensity recently, and the incessant attacks to which Judaism has been exposed, impose upon the Jews the urgent necessity of mustering all their forces and of lending fraternal support.*³¹¹

Baltimore Jewish leaders were well attuned to such appeals. A committee consisting of Dr. Aaron Friedenwald, president, Rabbi Benjamin Szold, vice-president, Mendes Cohen, treasurer, Hugo Steiner, secretary, and Cyrus Adler, Simon Dalsheimer, Rev. Alois Kaiser, and William Rayner became very active in the community in behalf of the Alliance. Indeed due to the high caliber of its leaders it became "one of the best organized committees in the United States. . . . The Committee was conspicuous in its personnel and . . . made many friends for the Alliance."³¹²

NATIONAL DEFENSE ORGANIZATIONS

Events at home and abroad pointed to the need for a representative body which could speak in the name of American Jewry when Jewish rights were threatened. In 1906 such an organization, the American Jewish Committee, came into being. Its stated objective was "to prevent the infraction of the civil and religious rights of the Jews in any part of the World." This, however, was not a representative body. It was an organization of a few important, established leaders of the old German families who believed that they were entitled to speak in the name of all American Jews. Two leading Baltimore Jews, Harry Friedenwald and Jacob Hollander, played a very important role in the organization's activities. Because of their *connections with prominent Americans*, the two were often entrusted by the American Jewish Committee with very delicate assignments. The relationship between the national office in New York and the Baltimore branch was cemented by Herbert Friedenwald. A Baltimorean and a first cousin of Dr. Harry Friedenwald, he served as the secretary of the organization during the first seven years of its existence.³¹³

The first major issue in which the American Jewish Committee involved Baltimore Jews was the Literacy Test Bill. It was the intent of those who introduced this measure in Congress to curtail immigration by banning illiterates. A bill to that effect was first introduced in 1897. It passed both houses but was vetoed by President Cleveland, and his veto was sustained. The same bill in a much stricter form was re-

chaplain for the institution.³⁶⁸ Another of the most active Jewish community workers, David Hutzler, occupied many civic posts. He was the treasurer of the State Relief Committee after the great Baltimore fire of 1904. The conflagration, which continued for thirty hours, burned out seventy blocks in the city and destroyed 1,343 buildings. Many Jews lived in the area destroyed by the fire, and consequently the suffering in the Jewish community was great.³⁶⁹

The city showed great stamina in its ability to restore itself. Along with the rest of the city the Jewish community responded to the needs of the burned area. As treasurer of the relief committee, Hutzler contributed much to the rehabilitation of the city. Despite all his other civic activities he remained most active in Jewish community affairs.³⁷⁰ William Levy, a great force in shaping Jewish life in Baltimore and at one time president of the large Chizuk Amuno Congregation, also served on the State Board of Charities.³⁷¹

The most prestigious civic position in the city was that of president of the Maryland Historical Society; the city's regard for Jews can perhaps best be measured by the fact that a Jew was chosen for this post. It was only natural that such an office should be occupied by a member of an old family in the city, and the man chosen was Mendes Cohen (1831-1915), a scion of the first Cohens in the city. A president of the American Society of Civil Engineers, member of the Municipal Art Commission of Baltimore, trustee of the Peabody Institute, he served as secretary of the Maryland Historical Society for twenty years, from 1884 to 1904, and for the following ten years as its president.³⁷² Along with his interest in Maryland history, Cohen had a keen interest also in American Jewish history. He was one of the founders of the American Jewish Historical Society and served as one of its vice-presidents. Although not an official in any Jewish organization, he was a contributor to various Jewish causes.³⁷³

There were those who feared that Jews would be suspected of trying to further Jewish interests by having one of their own appointed to a civic post. They felt the need to allay these suspicions. When the active Jewish communal worker Eli Frank was appointed commissioner of the Baltimore school board in 1911, for instance, an influential local Jewish weekly commented:

*Jews are not interested to have a Jew on the School Board. There are no Jewish problems there. . . . We are glad that Eli Frank was appointed commissioner. We are glad because he is a good man, not because he is a Jew.*³⁷⁴

For a better understanding of the situation in the Jewish community it is important to single out a few professors who either themselves were born in *Eastern Europe* or were the first generation of American-born of that extraction. Among these were Aaron Ember, professor of Egyptology, born in Kovno, Lithuania; David Macht, professor of pharmacology; and the three Wolman brothers, mentioned above, of whom the oldest, Samuel, was born in Poland. These and others of the same origin mingled freely with Jewish professors of German extraction. The measure of importance was not place of birth but scientific achievement. As in the business world, in academe also the importance of genealogy was continually diminishing.

Some of the academicians showed little or no interest in Jewish affairs. Of them it was said that they "no longer count themselves among the Jews, who belong to no Jewish organization . . . to whom even a pogrom can't penetrate in their non-Jewish seclusion."³⁸¹ In a similar vein Rabbi Rosenau complained eight years later that the students did not identify themselves with the Jewish community and were estranged from the synagogue.³⁸² As against these there were others who took a keen interest in Jewish affairs generally and in those of the local community specifically. Professor Blondheim was a lifelong Zionist and translated some Zionist classics from German into English. Aaron Ember was very active in the local Hebrew Education Society, and in 1912 David Macht organized a Union of Jewish Academicians, whose objective was "to encourage the study of Torah . . . to enlighten and give moral and religious support to fainthearted and otherwise erring Jewish academic men."³⁸³

While some Jews served as teachers, others contributed to educational institutions in another manner. In 1884 Mendes Cohen presented Hopkins with the "Cohen Collection of Egyptian Antiques," a large number of valuable articles brought back by his uncle Mendes I. Cohen from his trip to Egypt in 1829.³⁸⁴ A collection of rabbinics was given to Hopkins by Leopold Strouse, and a collection of ceremonial objects donated by Henry Sonneborn and one of Semitics from the families of Professors Ember and Blondheim were among other important gifts to the university. The Rayner fellowship in Semitics was established by William Rayner's children after his death in 1899, and a chair in political economy endowed by Abram G. Hutzler in 1925. Benjamin Henry Hartogensis, one of the most devoted community workers, established a Jewish legal section in the Baltimore Law Library.³⁸⁵ All in all, in one way or another many Baltimore Jews were quite prominent in all fields of education.