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THE JEWS OF OMAHA: THE FIRST SIXTY YEARS

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of History

and the

Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies

University of Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by 784

Carol Gendler

March, 1968

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Accepted for the faculty of the College of Graduate Studies of the University of Omaha, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

Frederick W. Adams History
Chairman Department

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Wayne White Sociology
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PREFACE

The topic for this study was suggested more than three years ago by members of the Department of History of the University of Omaha. It has involved not only a study of American Jewish history in general, but also further research into a variety of local historical sources and subjects.

The study of a Jewish community is much more than a religious history--it is social, economic, political, and cultural history as well. Since it is difficult to evaluate contemporary history and to deal with living personalities, this study covers the subject through the year 1915. By that time the Jewish community of Omaha was well-established, and many of its institutions were at least in the initial stages of their development. It is my hope eventually to bring the history of the Jews of Omaha closer to the present.

There were two previous attempts to compile information on the history of Omaha Jewry. The first was an article by Nathan Bernstein that appeared in a special issue of the Reform Advocate in 1908. The second was an unpublished manuscript, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," written in 1927 by Ella Fleishman Auerbach. Since both are undocumented and apparently based to a considerable extent on personal reminiscences and hearsay, they have been consulted with care. In some instances, however, these sources provided the only available

information on certain aspects of Jewish life in Omaha, and Mrs. Auerbach's manuscript, in particular, provided a wealth of names and details of early settlers and religious practices. The local press proved the most valuable source of information, in addition to local histories, minute books, reports of organizations, and other primary references.

A number of persons contributed both in interest and materials. Paul Veret, Executive Director of the Omaha Jewish Federation, provided many of the pamphlets, reports, and minute books. Ella Fleishman Auerbach furnished a large variety of newspaper clippings, as well as her vast personal knowledge of the Omaha Jewish community. Ronald Gladstone of Nebraska City kindly furnished copies of letters written by members of his family. The Omaha Jewish Federation generously underwrote some of the expenses involved in this research, and provided a microfilm reader which enabled me to do most of the newspaper research in my home.

I am indebted to Dale Portschy, former chief reference librarian and now head of adult services of the Omaha Public Library, who kindly allowed me to borrow freely from the library collection of microfilmed newspapers. Miss Ella Dougherty, inter-library loan librarian of the Gene Eppley Library at the University of Omaha obtained for me a variety of materials that were not available locally. Isidore S. Meyer, editor of the American Jewish Historical Society, provided a list of periodical references, and Lloyd P. Gartner of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America kindly located for me a copy of Amerikanishe Shtedt. Dr. Simon Cohen, reference librarian of the

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, arranged the loan of several items from their collection.

I am especially grateful to the gracious and efficient staff of the American Jewish Archives on the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and its assistant director, Dr. Stanley F. Chyet. They provided not only warm hospitality but also access to their Omaha collection, which includes the early minute books and correspondence of the Congregation of Israel, and the vast and well-cataloged Rosewater Collection. The Archives also furnished copies of all the Omaha references found in the collection of the American Jewish Periodical Center at the Hebrew Union College Library.

Rabbis Sidney Brooks, Myer Kripke, and Isaac Nadoff, Cantor Manfred Kuttner, and many others, too numerous to mention, offered encouragement, advice, information, and interest in the completion of this project. I am also indebted to those who took the time to grant personal interviews and to answer the questionnaire which I circulated in hope of eliciting additional material. My adviser, Frederick W. Adrian, Professor of History at the University of Omaha, provided cheerful encouragement and constructive criticism over a long period of time.

Finally, I wish to thank my husband, Lee, and my three children, David, Steve, and Amy, who at times during the past three years must have thought themselves less important to their wife and mother than the history of the Jews of Omaha, but without whose understanding, patience, interest, and encouragement this project would have been immeasurably more difficult.

It is my sincere hope that the writing of this history will constitute a meaningful contribution to the Omaha Jewish community and to the total history of the city of Omaha.

University of Omaha
March, 1968

Carol Gendler

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INTRODUCTION

Jews have been closely identified with the history of Omaha since shortly after the birth of the community in 1854 as a potential gateway to the west. Although the Jewish population has probably never exceeded 10,000, the influence of Jewish citizens on the growth of Omaha has been considerably greater than would seem to be indicated by numbers alone.¹

The settlement of Nebraska, which began when passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act designated Nebraska as a territory in 1854, coincided with a dramatic increase in the Jewish population of the United States. Though the number of Jews rose between 1820 and 1850 from about 4,000 to some 50,000, the next decade found an additional 100,000 Jewish arrivals. Political unrest in Europe was mainly responsible for the surge in Jewish emigration to the United States. Revolutions in Germany, Austria, and Italy caused large numbers of disenchanting "forty-eighters" to make their way to America. Between 1850 and 1860 almost two million immigrants arrived in the United States from Europe. About five percent of these were Jews,--many of them young, strong, and eager to assert their independence in the new world.²

¹Bureau of Jewish Social Research, "Jewish Communal Survey of Omaha, Nebraska" (unpublished typescript, November, 1929), pp. 33-38.

²Rufus Laersi [Israel Goldberg], The Jews in America: A History (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1954/7), pp. 64-65.

In general, there were four waves of Jewish immigration to the United States from the mid-nineteenth century until the first world war. The earliest group consisted mainly of the German Jews who began to arrive after 1848. The second phase involved immigration from Russia, which began in the early 1880's following the application of severe restrictions placed on Jews under the Czar. As a result of regulations that went into effect in May of 1882, subsequently known as the May Laws, Jews in Russia were forbidden freedom of movement even within the Pale of Settlement to which they had previously been confined. They were unable to live outside of towns, nor could they own rural lands. Thus they were permitted no contact with the peasantry, and they could not maintain businesses outside established areas. Other laws prevented Jews from attendance at institutions of higher learning or professional schools.³

The instigation of pogroms in 1881-1882 further outraged Russian Jewry and left great numbers of Russian Jews with little choice but to emigrate. A total of 26,619 Jews came to America from Russia in these two years alone, and by the end of 1882 the Jewish population of the United States had reached 250,000.⁴

The third wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in the United States from eastern and southeastern Europe between 1891 and 1900. The expulsion of 20,000 Jews from Moscow in 1891 was the immediate cause

³Samuel Joseph, Jewish Immigration to the United States from 1881 to 1910 (New York: Columbia University; Longman's, Green and Co., 1914), pp. 60-61. Cited hereafter as Jewish Immigration.

⁴Mark Wischnitzer, To Dwell in Safety (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1948), p. 66.

of this movement of population. Between 1890 and the fall of 1892, when an outbreak of typhus temporarily halted immigration from eastern Europe, more than 100,000 Jews, most of them from Russia, entered the United States.⁵ Toward the end of the 1890's, Roumanian Jews, too, began to feel the effects of severe discrimination, combined with depression, poor harvests, famine, and pogroms. More than 6,000 Jews arrived in America from Roumania in 1900.⁶

The fourth wave of Jewish immigration comprised the vast influx of Jews who fled the ghettos of eastern Europe between the turn of the century and the outbreak of the First World War. Most of these immigrants were natives of Russia, Roumania, and Galicia. An average of 100,000 Jews entered the United States yearly during this period.⁷ In addition to these large waves of immigration, lesser numbers of Jews were continually arriving on United States soil, having left their native lands to seek freedom and perhaps fortune in America.

In 1843, some ten years before the settlement of Nebraska, Julius Stern of Philadelphia, editor of the first German-Jewish publication in the United States, proposed that a colony of Jews be established in an area west of the Mississippi River. It was Stern's idea that if 70,000 Jews were to settle in a given region, they would be eligible

⁵Ibid., p. xi, 78.

⁶Ibid., pp. 83-85; Joseph Kissman, "The Immigration of Roumanian Jews up to 1914," YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science, II-III (1947-1948), 162. Cited hereafter as "Roumanian Jews."

⁷Wischnitzer, To Dwell in Safety, p. 98, 120.

to apply for statehood.⁸ Though Stern's suggestion was never taken seriously, the location of Jews west of the Mississippi had already begun.

Jews were among the hordes of German immigrants who began to populate the heart of the United States in the nineteenth century, and Cincinnati became the western limit of their travels in the 1820's.⁹ The first Jew arrived in Chicago in 1837, and in Iowa the first known Jew arrived in Dubuque around 1836.¹⁰ There were nearly fifty Jews living in St. Louis by 1844, and William Krause, a Jew, was one of twenty pioneers who settled Raccoon Forks, which later became known as Des Moines.¹¹

Indeed, Jews became part of the general western migration. A Jewish laborer was usually able to find a satisfactory livelihood in an eastern city. But he who started his business career as a peddler often found that he could trade his pack for a store, and find success as an entrepreneur in a frontier town. As new communities were established, retail and wholesale establishments were in demand. The town that had a need for his services often became the home of

⁸"Trail Blazers of the Trans-Mississippi West," American Jewish Archives, VIII (October, 1956), 59.

⁹B. D. Weinryb, "The German Jewish Immigrant to America," Jews from Germany in the United States, ed. Eric E. Hirshler (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, [c. 1955]), pp. 37-38.

¹⁰Peter Wiernik, History of the Jews in America (New York: Jewish History Publishing Company, 1931), p. 153.

¹¹Anita Labeson, Jewish Pioneers in America 1492-1848 (New York: Brentano's, [c. 1931]), pp. 310-311. Cited hereafter as Jewish Pioneers.

such a wanderer,--Jew and Christian alike.¹² As Anita Labeson has written:

From Florida to New England, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, there were Jewish builders and pioneers who wove the pattern of their lives into the picturesque design of American history. Stooping under the heavy burden of his pack, or walking erect behind an ox-team, the Jew marched into the wilderness beside the Christian pioneer. He too dreamed of the prairies awakened, and the forests and rivers quickened to life by the coming of new settlers. He gave of his best energies, of his tireless labor that new communities might survive. And if he prospered -- others prospered too. It was a common cause with Jew and Gentile -- this building of a new land.¹³

¹²Oscar Handlin, Adventure in Freedom (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., [c. 1954/]), p. 53.

¹³Labeson, Jewish Pioneers, p. 313.

CHAPTER I
THE PIONEERS

Jewish immigrants, as well as most others, came to the United States seeking a better way of life. The majority of those Jews who arrived on these shores in the 1850's and 1860's were young, single men, unencumbered by family responsibilities and thus able to travel and roam until they found a suitable livelihood. Many found some form of retail business the best way both to make a living and to adjust to a new community. Such a vocation satisfied the young immigrant's desire for independence, as it enabled him to be his own boss, and to assimilate more readily into the life of a frontier town.¹

Leopold May, who was probably the first Jew to settle, although temporarily, in Omaha, was just such a Jew,--a young bachelor who went into business in 1855 when the population probably did not exceed 300.² Though little is known of May's origin or background, he seems to have lived for a time in Philadelphia, and then wandered westward, settling briefly in Council Bluffs, where he opened a retail clothing store under the firm name of May & Weil.³ The company soon expanded

¹Handlin, Adventure in Freedom, p. 90; W. Gunther Plaut, The Jews in Minnesota (New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 1959), p. 41.

²Omaha Nebraskian, October 2, 1863; Omaha City Times, June 11, 1857.

³Council Bluffs Chronotype, October 29, 1856. May's partner apparently did not accompany him to Council Bluffs and Omaha.

their facilities to lower Douglas Street in Omaha and May joined a number of early Omaha settlers who lived for a time in the relative comfort afforded by the older community across the river, and who traveled across the Missouri to their infant places of business by ferry in summer and by foot over the ice in winter.⁴

May & Weil did a brisk business as an outfitting depot. The first issue of the Rocky Mountain News, dated April 23, 1859, carried an advertisement that May & Weil of Omaha and Council Bluffs offered "ready made clothing, boots and shoes, hats and caps, India rubber goods, blankets, buffalo robes and overshirts, revolvers and knives."⁵

Although he was apparently disinterested in participating in Jewish community life as it developed, Leopold May was active in a number of civic activities in early Omaha. He served as secretary of the Omaha Relief Association, the first organized charity in the city. He was also a charter member of an early, though short-lived, Board of Trade, and of the first fire department, the Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company.⁶ In 1867 May married Hannah Levi of Philadelphia and brought his bride back to Omaha, but within a few years he again set out westward and apparently made his way to Nevada.⁷

⁴Frank J. Burkley, The Faded Frontier (Omaha: Burkley Envelope and Printing Company, c. 1935), p. 71; Omaha Weekly Herald, January 2, 1868; Collins' Omaha Directory 1868-1869, p. 146.

⁵Allen Dupont Breck, The Centennial History of the Jews of Colorado 1859-1959 (Denver: The Hirschfeld Press, 1960), p. 9.

⁶Nebraska Republican, January 13, 1864; Omaha Weekly Herald, April 6, 1866; Burkley, Faded Frontier, p. 343.

⁷Weekly Herald, September 26, 1867; Omaha Daily Republican, June 17, 1875.

Meyer Hellman and Aaron Cahn, brothers-in-law, arrived in Omaha in late summer of 1856 and were the first Jews to become permanent residents. Hellman was born in Mühlhausen, Germany on November 9, 1834, and arrived in the United States in May of 1850 after a crossing of sixty-three days. He went first to Cincinnati where there was a sizable colony of German Jews and where he was employed as a traveling salesman for a clothing firm. After six years, the young man decided to seek his fortune farther west and he set out for Omaha.⁸

Times were prosperous in Omaha City in 1856. Both the population and business opportunities were growing, and Meyer Hellman must have been indeed pleased with the prospects for success.⁹ Land values and speculation had been increasing steadily in the infant community. While prime building lots were selling for \$100 in 1855, by June of 1857, when the population had reached some 3,000, similar lots were valued at \$4,000.¹⁰

Less than a month after Hellman's arrival, his brother-in-law, Aaron Cahn, whose wife Caroline was Hellman's sister, set out from Cincinnati, traveling from St. Louis to Omaha on a flatboat up the Missouri River. The Cahns were the first Jewish family to settle in Omaha, and their son, Martin, born in 1860, was the first Jewish birth

⁸Omaha Evening Bee, March 29, 1892; letter from Blanche Hellman Sachs, July 17, 1965.

⁹Alfred Sorenson, History of Omaha (Omaha: Gibson, Miller & Richardson, 1889), pp. 149-150.

¹⁰Omaha City Times, June 11, 1857.

in the city.¹¹ Aaron Cahn was born in Bleidenthal, Nassau, Germany, and came to America in 1848, stopping briefly in Hartford, Connecticut, and then taking up residence in Cincinnati.¹²

The population of Omaha at the time of the arrival of the Cahns and Meyer Hellman was probably around six hundred, and hotel and living conditions remained quite primitive. Upon Aaron Cahn's first arrival in Omaha late in the evening of September 7, 1856, he came to a hotel and found the floor covered with sleeping guests. When he objected to these accommodations, Cahn was shown to another room where piles of loose hay were spread on the floor for added comfort. The hotel manager considered this "a nice bed" for such a "fastidious gentleman" as Aaron Cahn.¹³

Indians were plentiful around Omaha City in 1856, and though they presented few major problems, harrassments such as horse thievery and the demuding of clotheslines were commonplace. On one such occasion, Caroline Cahn was reported to have waved her red petticoat in the face of an encroaching redskin and begged, "Take this and leave my horse." The native did exactly that.¹⁴

¹¹Unidentified newspaper clipping, dated 1905, supplied by Mrs. Robert H. Levi of Lutherville, Maryland.

¹²Questionnaire returned by Albert Cahn, Chicago, Illinois; Nathan Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," Reform Advocate (May 2, 1908), p. 13. Cahn reportedly had but forty-five cents in his pocket when he arrived in the United States (Evening Bee, February 3, 1879).

¹³Unidentified newspaper clipping, dated 1905, supplied by Mrs. Robert Levi; Omaha Daily Herald, July 20, 1879.

¹⁴Letter from Blanche Hellman Sachs, July 17, 1965; questionnaire, Albert Cahn.

Shortly after their arrival, the brothers-in-law went into the wholesale and retail clothing business under the name of M. Hellman & Company at the corner of Thirteenth and Farnam. The following year they doubled the size of their establishment by having a 20' by 80' building framed in Cincinnati and brought to Omaha by boat. Their Cincinnati home was also dismantled and transferred to Omaha in this way, since good building materials were in very short supply in Nebraska.¹⁵ M. Hellman & Company advertised that their firm would clothe the "most fastidious gentlemen" and promised to "compete successfully with any house in the Territory."¹⁶

On November 2, 1866, fire destroyed the entire block at Thirteenth and Farnam in which Hellman's store was located. Several property owners then combined to build a brick building which was for several years the most substantial structure in Omaha. In addition to M. Hellman & Company, the building housed several other firms and the Odd Fellows Hall.¹⁷

The legislative session of 1857 incorporated Omaha as a city, and it was known no longer as Omaha City, but simply as Omaha.¹⁸ Though

¹⁵Unidentified newspaper clipping, dated 1905, supplied by Mrs. Robert Levi; Arthur Cooper Wakeley (ed.), Omaha: The Gate City and Douglas County, Nebraska (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1917), I, 213. Cited hereafter as Omaha.

¹⁶Omaha City Times, June 11, 1857.

¹⁷Weekly Herald, November 2 and 9, 1866; Evening Bee, March 29, 1892.

¹⁸James W. Savage and John T. Bell, History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska (New York: Munsell & Co., 1894), p. 63. Cited hereafter as History of Omaha.

business was booming at the time that Hellman and Cahn arrived in Omaha, the panic of 1857 had a drastic effect on the new community, and nearly erased it from the map. Population decreased markedly, and many businesses failed or, at best, suffered severe strain.¹⁹ M. Hellman & Company managed to survive, however, and in 1858 gold discoveries at Cherry Creek in Colorado Territory began to bring about a renewal of the fortunes of Omaha. The city became an outfitting and freighting center for those setting out for the gold country. It has been estimated that nearly 50,000 people passed through Omaha enroute to Colorado in 1860.²⁰

As M. Hellman & Company prospered along with the rest of the Omaha business community, the proprietors became active in civic affairs and began to acquire a considerable amount of real estate. In August of 1866 Aaron Cahn sold to the city for \$2500 a site at the corner of Sixteenth and Farnam for construction of the first fire station.²¹ A branch store, managed by Hellman's brother, Ben, was opened in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Aaron Cahn was sometimes accompanied by "Buffalo" Bill Cody on his frequent business trips to the west.²²

In 1861, when J. Sterling Morton was acting territorial governor, Aaron Cahn had the dubious distinction of being the proprietor of a

¹⁹Burkley, Faded Frontier, p. 104.

²⁰Weekly Herald, March 25, 1868.

²¹Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 373.

²²Daily Herald, June 8, 1876; questionnaire, Albert Cahn.

saloon located in the territorial capitol building. According to Frank Burkley, "the line of business most numerous, most prosperous and one which always flourished in Omaha in both good times and bad, was the saloon business."²³ Cahn acquired the saloon, which was then located at Twelfth and Farnam, from a creditor who was unable to discharge his debts to M. Hellman & Company in any other way. Though the complete stock of the bar, including fixtures and liquor supply, fell to Cahn, it became necessary for him to vacate the building in which the business had been conducted.

Cahn happened to confide his problem to acting governor Morton, who suggested that the saloon be removed to the capitol building. Morton thought that the presence of such a facility in the capitol would enable the legislators to acquire their liquid refreshments on the premises rather than elsewhere. Thus a quorum would always be readily available. Cahn's saloon was therefore moved to the capitol building, and "although there was some opposition to its location there, it had a strong working majority in its favor among the members as well as an enthusiastic following among the spectators and lobbyists." Cahn found a manager and the establishment was maintained in the capitol until the debt was discharged. Ultimately a city ordinance was passed prohibiting the location of such a facility on state property.²⁴

²³Burkley, Faded Frontier, p. 155.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 155-159.

Aaron Cahn retired from the clothing business in 1886 and it was carried on by Hellman until the latter's death in 1892, at which time M. Hellman & Company was the oldest clothing store west of the Missouri River. Meyer Hellman had married Maria Rau of Louisville, Kentucky in 1871, and was survived by six children, all of whom left Omaha within a few years after their father's death. The Hellman home at Twenty-fourth and St. Mary's Avenue was an Omaha landmark for forty years. Aaron Cahn remained a prominent Omaha citizen until his death in 1903.²⁵

As far as is known, Leopold May, Meyer Hellman, and the Cahn family were the only Jewish residents of Omaha until the arrival of Edward Rosewater in 1863. Rosewater, who would become one of Omaha's most noted citizens, was born Edward Rosenwasser in Bukovan, Bohemia in 1841.²⁶ Herman and Rosalia Rosenwasser and their eleven children emigrated to the United States and settled in Cleveland in 1853. Edward had received a good elementary education in Bohemia, and upon arriving in Cleveland he found employment first in a stove and tinware store, then in a grocery, and later in a retail establishment. In 1857, apparently dissatisfied with his position as a dry goods clerk at \$100 per year plus meals, the young immigrant took a commercial

²⁵Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 13; Wakeley, Omaha, I, 213; Evening Bee, March 29, 1892; Morning Bee, January 9, 1920.

²⁶Rosenwasser Family Tree, typescript compiled by Sidney C. Singer, August 1, 1942 (copy supplied by Edward Rosewater, Elkins Park, Pa.).

college course which he completed in four months. He then went to Cincinnati to study telegraphy.²⁷

At the start of the Civil War, Edward Rosewater was employed by the Southwestern Telegraph Company in Alabama. When the state seceded he was transferred by the same company to their office in Nashville. When Nashville was captured by the Union, Rosewater joined the United States Military Telegraph Corps. In this capacity, he accompanied Generals Fremont and Pope on the Virginia campaigns of 1862. After being transferred to Washington, Rosewater was responsible for the transmission of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.²⁸

In the spring of 1863 Rosewater was hired by Edward Creighton, superintendent of the Pacific Telegraph, as manager of the Omaha office. For seven years Rosewater served as local manager of Western Union, and the Atlantic and Pacific and Great Western telegraph lines. During this time he was also a correspondent for the Associated Press and several eastern newspapers.²⁹

When Edward Rosewater arrived in Omaha in 1863, he described the city as a "thriving business center" which stood as a "monument of

²⁷Ibid.; Daily Republican, June 17, 1877; J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, Illustrated History of Nebraska (Lincoln: Jacob North & Co., 1907), I, 744-745. Cited hereafter as History of Nebraska.

²⁸Daily Republican, June 17, 1877; Rosenwasser Family Tree; Alfred Sorenson, The Story of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time (Omaha: National Printing Co., 1923), p. 437. Cited hereafter as Story of Omaha.

²⁹Daily Republican, June 17, 1877; Sorenson, Story of Omaha, p. 438.

western progress and enterprise." He mentioned the wide streets, "creditable" buildings, the existence of two daily papers and several weeklies, and that the town was a major trading post in gold dust.³⁰

Rosewater was married in 1864 to Leah Colman of Cleveland, and he brought his bride to Omaha as the only female passenger in a stagecoach across Iowa. Upon first arriving in Omaha as newlyweds, the Rosewaters lived with the Aaron Cahns, and Leah Rosewater spent her first evening on the frontier at a Thanksgiving ball at the Herndon House hotel.³¹ For nineteen years the Rosewater family lived in a house at Seventeenth and Farnam streets, and here their five children were born. This house was moved to make way for construction of the Bee Building, home of the newspaper Edward Rosewater founded in 1871. After living for five years at Nineteenth and Harney, the family moved into a house at 1711 Douglas Street, just north of the Bee Building, where they remained until Edward Rosewater's death in 1906.³²

With the inauguration of the Union Pacific railroad the growth of Omaha gained further momentum, and the population, which had dwindled to somewhat under 2,000 as a result of the depression of

³⁰Letter from Edward Rosewater to Daily Cleveland Herald, October 6, 1863, in Victor Rosewater, "The Life and Times of Edward Rosewater" (unpublished typescript, Nebraska State Historical Association, copy supplied by Paul V. Peterson), p. 52. Cited hereafter as "Edward Rosewater."

³¹Questionnaire returned by Blanche Rosewater Newman, Los Angeles, California; Morning Bee, July 29, 1914; Rosenwasser Family Tree.

³²Morning Bee, July 29, 1914; Rosewater, "Edward Rosewater," pp. 65-66.

1857, by 1870 exceeded 16,000.³³ A Jew named Henry Siegel, for example, had come to the United States with his two brothers in 1841 from Bavaria, and had settled in Baltimore. When the Union Pacific was started, he went west to Omaha and opened a store on Douglas Street. Siegel followed the railroad westward, selling goods to the construction workers, and eventually became a resident of Salt Lake City, and an active member of the community.³⁴

By the mid-1860's Omaha was literally overflowing. There were not enough houses for the permanent residents, and not nearly enough hotels or boarding houses to lodge the transients. In the spring, travelers were to be found camping in vacant lots while they outfitted for their westward journey. Though houses were under construction, the supply simply could not meet the demand.³⁵ Paved streets and sidewalks were unheard of, and school capacity was drastically short. The two schools, each consisting of four small rooms, accommodated 350 children and only four teachers.³⁶ A local paper reported that large numbers of workers were needed,--common laborers, carpenters, bricklayers, stone cutters, as well as women for housework, laundry,

³³Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 213.

³⁴Nebraskian, October 30, 1863; Leon L. Watters, The Pioneer Jews of Utah (New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 1952), pp. 138-139. Cited hereafter as Jews of Utah. In reverse of this western movement two Jews, Morris Elgutter and Isaac Oberfelder, who originally lived in Salt Lake City, eventually became Omaha residents (ibid., p. 18).

³⁵Weekly Herald, May 15, 1866; Daily Republican, October 20, 1865.

³⁶Weekly Herald, January 29, 1864 and March 23, 1865.

and dressmaking.³⁷ By 1867 the city was said to have a population of 12,000 plus some 3,000 transients. The twenty churches, some of which were rather tenuously organized, had an attendance of less than 3,000, though an estimated 127 saloons seemed to attract more patronage than did the churches.³⁸ Omaha was now here to stay.

After the close of the Civil War, Jews began to arrive in Omaha in increasing numbers. The four Meyer brothers, who would play an active part in the growth of the city as well as in Jewish affairs, were born in Prussia and came to the United States on their own when they were still boys in the 1860's.³⁹ Max Meyer worked first in a glove factory in New York, and then went to Rouseville, Pennsylvania, where he hoped to find success in the oil country. He came to Omaha in 1866 with \$300 and went into the tobacco business at the corner of Eleventh and Farnam. Adolph and Moritz joined Max in 1869, and the business was expanded to include jewelry and musical instruments. Max Meyer and Brothers Company was for many years the largest business of its kind in the west.⁴⁰ In 1878 the firm became the first in

³⁷Daily Republican, August 2, 1866.

³⁸Daily Herald, July 21, 1867.

³⁹[Alfred Sorenson, ed.], Omaha Illustrated: A History of the Pioneer Period and the Omaha of Today (Omaha: D. C. Dunbar & Co., 1888), n. p. Cited hereafter as Omaha Illustrated. Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 13. Max, apparently the oldest, was born about 1848.

⁴⁰Ibid.; Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 469; Daily Republican, April 16, 1873. Max and Moritz Meyer married sisters, Sarah and Emma Fisher of New York (Daily Herald, January 23, 1879; Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 13). Mrs. Max Meyer died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of thirty-two (Morning Bee, December 14, 1891). Adolph was married to Rosa Thalmessenger of New York (Daily Republican, November 16, 1882). Julius never married.

Omaha to install a telephone.⁴¹ A branch was eventually opened in Cheyenne, and the Meyers employed five salesmen to travel the territory west of Omaha. By the 1880's the Meyer brothers had seventy-five employees and were doing an annual business of \$750,000.⁴² In 1880 a three story brick building was constructed across the street from the original location at Eleventh and Farnam. A local newspaper described this as "unsurpassed by any structure between Chicago and San Francisco."⁴³ This store was almost completely destroyed by fire in 1889, and the business was then moved to the Paxton Block at Sixteenth and Farnam. But Max Meyer and Brothers Company had already passed its peak, and failed completely in the depression of 1893, after which Max and Adolph left Omaha.⁴⁴

Julius Meyer was a well-known Omaha personality for many years. He came to Omaha early in 1866 and opened the Indian Wigwam, where he sold a variety of trinkets, souvenirs, and Indian artifacts. Meyer became a good friend of the Indians in the area, learned to speak several Indian tongues, and was so highly regarded by the natives that he was given the position of Indian interpreter. He was known among his red-skinned friends as Box-ka-re-sha-hash-ta-ka,

⁴¹Daily Herald, January 24, 1878.

⁴²Daily Republican, July 6, 1877; Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 469.

⁴³Daily Herald, March 20, 1881.

⁴⁴Evening Bee, January 17, 1889; Morning Bee, February 16, 1900.

meaning "curly haired white chief with one tongue" and indicating that the Indians trusted him.⁴⁵ Indian chiefs such as Spotted Tail, Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, and Swift Bear were frequent guests at Julius Meyer's Indian Wigwam. At one time Spotted Tail, a Sioux, presented to Meyer his pipe and tobacco pouch,--"the warmest protestation of friendship that an Indian can make to a friend."⁴⁶

A photograph of Julius Meyer and his Indian friends gained wide circulation despite the fact that it had cost Meyer several ponies to convince the Indians to pose with him.⁴⁷ Meyer made many trips to the reservations, and was once guest of honor at a dog feast, "regarded as a mark of the highest esteem toward a white man."⁴⁸

Meyer closed his Wigwam in 1880, but retained his association with the Indians. In 1883 he was hired by the French government to accompany a group of Omahas and Winnebagos to Paris, and they remained in Europe for three months.⁴⁹ After many years of active participation in both civic and Jewish affairs, and a brief career as a life

⁴⁵Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 15; Daily Republican, December 19, 1877; Daily Herald, December 19, 1877; Evening Bee, May 15, 1873.

⁴⁶Daily Herald, December 5, 1876.

⁴⁷Morton and Watkins, History of Nebraska, II, 227, 234, 234n; Daily Herald, May 16, 1875.

⁴⁸Daily Republican, August 9 and 13, 1873; Daily Herald, July 24, 1877.

⁴⁹Daily Herald, April 25, 1880; Daily Republican, November 7, 1883. The father of the Meyer brothers died in Germany in 1880. Julius brought his mother to Omaha when he returned from Europe in 1884 (Daily Herald, April 29, 1880; Daily Republican, February 15, 1884).

insurance salesman, Julius Meyer was found dead in Hanscom Park on May 10, 1909, having apparently taken his own life.⁵⁰

A number of Jews arrived in Omaha at about the same time as the Meyer brothers, and the following few years saw the development of a considerably larger Jewish community than had existed since Leopold May first arrived in 1855. While the Omaha city directory for 1866, the first of its kind to be published, listed but a few citizens who are positively identifiable as Jews, the directory for 1868 contains the names of nearly fifty individuals of probable Jewish origin. Those who were not in business for themselves were usually employed by Jews, and boarded with Jewish families as well.⁵¹ Of fifteen retail and wholesale clothing establishments doing business in Omaha in 1870, approximately half were of Jewish ownership, and all were located within two square blocks of one another on lower Farnam and Douglas Streets, which at that time comprised "downtown" Omaha.⁵² Among a listing of eighty-seven Omahans whose gross incomes in 1870 were in excess of \$4,000 were the names of Aaron Cahn, Meyer Hellman, and Edward Rosewater.⁵³

⁵⁰Morning Bee, December 4, 1900 and May 11, 1909. There is an undocumented tale that Julius Meyer was killed by an Indian who was disappointed in love by a maiden who wished to marry Meyer.

⁵¹Collins' Omaha Directory, 1866-1867, 1868-1869. Since directories often omitted names and included only heads of families and single adults, the number of Jews at this time can probably be assumed to have exceeded this total.

⁵²Omaha Directory for 1870, p. 256. Besides Hellman and May, some of the other proprietors were S. Hable, P. Hart, I. M. and A. J. Frank, Kahn and Co., Polack, Rich and Co., and Samuel Rothschild.

⁵³Weekly Herald, April 6, 1870. Specific incomes were Cahn, \$5,274.; Hellman, \$5,272.; and Rosewater, \$4,965.12.

Many of those Jews who arrived in the late 1860's became outstanding Omaha citizens, though all did not remain permanent residents, nor did they all participate in Jewish affairs. Isaac M. Frank, who came to Omaha in 1866 with his brother and opened a clothing store, became the first president of the newly organized B'nai Israel Congregation in 1868.⁵⁴ Morris Elgutter, whose son Charles became a prominent attorney, also arrived in Omaha in 1866. Elgutter was born in Germany and came to the United States in 1846. He traveled to California by way of the Panama Canal, where he conducted a wholesale dry goods business until he became one of the earliest gentile residents of Salt Lake City in 1864. There he was a founder of the Mount Moriah masonic lodge. Elgutter was forced to leave Salt Lake when he incurred the enmity of Brigham Young by indicating Mormon implication in the Mountain Meadow Massacre. After spending some time in the Bannock, Montana area, Elgutter came to Omaha, opened a clothing store, and became active in the organization of the Jewish community.⁵⁵

Andrew Rosewater, Edward's younger brother, came to Omaha in 1867 as a flagman in the Union Pacific engineer corps. Andrew was one of fourteen men who crossed the plains and conducted surveys to determine the location of the Union Pacific tracks. They were

⁵⁴Collins' Omaha Directory, 1868-1869, p. 20; Daily Herald, September 12, 1868. The Franks apparently left Omaha in the early 1870's.

⁵⁵Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," pp. 13-14; Morning Bee, May 25, 1890.

accompanied by a military escort for protection against the Indians.⁵⁶
 Andrew Rosewater was appointed assistant city engineer of Omaha in 1868, and held similar positions intermittently for many years. He was in charge of construction for the Omaha and Northwestern Railway in 1876, and served as resident engineer for the Omaha waterworks in 1881.⁵⁷

The family of Bernard Gladstone came to the United States from Hungary and lived for ten years in Cleveland and Fostoria, Ohio. Adolph Gladstone, the oldest son, went west and came to Omaha in 1867 to open a store. He found prices exorbitantly high, and was doubtful that he could start a successful business. Gladstone learned that he could not rent a store building for less than \$300 monthly, nor was a comfortable home available for less than \$150. The young pioneer was certain, however, that there was much money to be made in Omaha, which he wrote was "destined to become a large city." He thought that Omaha was twice as prosperous as any similarly sized city, and he enumerated the existence in Omaha of twenty-five hotels, two hundred saloons, fifteen cigar stores, six "fine millinery stores," and six wholesale groceries.⁵⁸ Adolph Gladstone remained in Omaha and found life very "gay and lively"

⁵⁶ Morton and Watkins, History of Nebraska, I, 743.

⁵⁷ Omaha Sunday Bee, April 18, 1909.

⁵⁸ Letter from Irma H. Gross, July 15, 1965; letter from Adolph Gladstone to Fannie Simon, November 1, 1867, in possession of Ronald Gladstone, Nebraska City, Nebraska.

both in Omaha and in Council Bluffs, where he participated in a busy social life that sometimes included several balls weekly.⁵⁹

The remainder of the Gladstone family, which included eight children and a son-in-law, Emmanuel Simon, came to Omaha early in 1868.⁶⁰ The Gladstones opened the Omaha Hoop Skirt Factory on Farnam Street in March of 1868, managed by Emmanuel Simon.⁶¹ A few years later a wholesale and retail grocery, called A. H. Gladstone and Company, was begun and remained in business for forty-five years.⁶² Bernard Gladstone's wife, Hannah, died in 1870. Her body was disinterred from the Christian cemetery to which it was initially committed, and was the first burial in the Jewish cemetery, Pleasant Hill, after it was established in 1871.⁶³

Among other Jewish pioneers were Samuel Jacobs, who opened a clothing store after his arrival in Omaha in 1868, and Samuel Reichenberg, who established a restaurant and confectionery in 1869.⁶⁴ A local paper reported that Reichenberg had come to New York from Germany in 1867, and "after staying two years in the eastern metropolis he heard of a flourishing young town named Omaha, so he

⁵⁹Letter from Adolph Gladstone to Fanny Simon, December 29, 1867, in possession of Ronald Gladstone.

⁶⁰"The Gladstone Family," typescript by Irma H. Gross, in author's possession.

⁶¹Daily Herald, March 13, 1868.

⁶²"The Gladstone Family"; Daily Republican, March 21, 1879.

⁶³"The Gladstone Family"; tombstone inscription, Temple Israel Cemetery, Omaha, Nebraska.

⁶⁴Evening Bee, October 3, 1876; Morning Bee, July 22, 1916.

'folded his tent like the Arabs' and followed the star of empire until he came to the Gate City of the west."⁶⁵ John Merritt, another Jewish pioneer, opened a restaurant in Omaha in 1869 and specialized in "red hot peanuts." His advertising efforts prompted a local paper to pun that the "Farnham street peanut roaster has a great deal of Merritt about it."⁶⁶

Jewish pioneers of Omaha were involved in many activities that resulted in the further growth of the city. Esther Jacobs and Addie Gladstone, daughters of Samuel Jacobs and Bernard Gladstone, were among the eleven members of the first graduating class of Omaha High School in 1876. Both went on to become teachers in the public schools.⁶⁷

Jews were particularly active in the volunteer fire department and in early fraternal organizations. Meyer Hellman, Aaron Cahn, and Leopold May served with the Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company. Charles Schlank, a restaurant proprietor, served as assistant fire chief, and Meyer Goldsmith, a clothing merchant, was president of the Omaha Fire Department in 1879. Solomon Prince, Max Meyer, and M. Kellner were also active members.⁶⁸ Both Cahn and Hellman were charter members of Capitol Lodge #3 of Freemasons, which was organized in

⁶⁵Morning Bee, July 17, 1904.

⁶⁶World-Herald, June 14, 1923; Evening Bee, June 6, 1872 and October 13, 1873.

⁶⁷Daily Republican, June 22, 1876 and September 1, 1878. Also included in this class was Henry C. Curry, a negro.

⁶⁸Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, pp. 374-375; Daily Herald, September 25, 1879; Evening Bee, June 12, 1877.

1857.⁶⁹ Joseph Rosenstein, Leopold May, and Meyer Goldsmith were among those who participated in such organizations as Knights of Pythias and the local lodges of the International Order of Odd-fellows.⁷⁰

Aaron Cahn was one of a few early Omaha Jews who participated in politics. He served in the eighth territorial legislature which convened in December of 1861, and was an unsuccessful candidate for the office of Democratic councilman from the second ward in 1868. Cahn served also as treasurer of the city.⁷¹

Aside from Edward Rosewater, Max Meyer was probably the most civic minded of all early Omaha Jews. His efforts prompted a local publication to comment that "as a citizen and business man Mr. Max Meyer is conceded to be one of the most active and valuable to Omaha." The publication continued "that there is nothing in the shape of a business enterprise calculated to benefit Omaha that does not secure his attention and such aid as he can give it."⁷² Meyer was particularly active in the organization in 1877 of the Board of Trade, forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce, and served four terms as

⁶⁹Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, pp. 383-384.

⁷⁰Weekly Herald, September 15, 1869; Evening Bee, May 29, 1879; Daily Republican, July 14, 1866.

⁷¹Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 80; Weekly Herald, March 4, 1868; A. T. Andreas, History of the State of Nebraska (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), p. 760. Cited hereafter as History of Nebraska.

⁷²[Sorenson, ed.], Omaha Illustrated, n.p.

president.⁷³ In 1885, Meyer and architect Louis Mendelssohn, also a Jew, organized a company to plan the erection of an opera house and exposition building. They leased land between Fourteenth and Fifteenth streets, Capitol to Davenport, and a brick building was constructed which became the scene of a number of expositions and entertainments in succeeding years. An annex was leased by the city for office space and a police station.⁷⁴ Meyer was also a thirty-second degree Mason, a Shriner, Elk, and chief patriarch of the Oddfellows. In October, 1887, Meyer served on a committee that met President Grover Cleveland at the Northwestern railroad depot in Council Bluffs and escorted the party to Omaha.⁷⁵

Omaha's musical activities also claimed Jewish participants. Aaron Cahn was active for many years in a number of music groups. Along with Byron Reed, one of the city's most prominent early settlers, and several others, Cahn furnished the music at the weekly balls held at the Hamilton House.⁷⁶ Julius Meyer was a founder of the Omaha Musical Union, and took part, along with his brother Adolph and Albert Able, in the Concordia, the German

⁷³Meyer Hellman, Aaron Cahn, and Leopold May served on the very first Board of Trade in 1866 (Daily Republican, April 2, 1866).

⁷⁴Wakeley, Omaha, I, 263; Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, pp. 304-305.

⁷⁵Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 13; Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 164.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 253.

singing society.⁷⁷ The German Dramatic Society and the Omaha Chess Club also included Jews among their organizers.⁷⁸

Because their community was small, the practice of Judaism often presented problems for pioneer Omaha Jews. Most of the German-Jewish immigrants were young people who had experienced a traditional Jewish upbringing. The long sea voyages to America made very difficult the observance of such Jewish customs as kashruth, and often the immigrants had parted from some of their Jewish ways even before they arrived on United States soil.⁷⁹ Those who settled in larger eastern cities were able to join existing Jewish communities, but those who chose to settle on the frontier sometimes found themselves hard put to retain their identity as practicing Jews. As far as is known, there were no Jewish religious services in Omaha until 1867, and those Jews who had settled in Omaha prior to that time found it necessary to practice their faith within the home as best they could. It was entirely up to parents to provide a Jewish education for their children, as no religious schools were available for several years.

Young men, and indeed most of the early settlers were bachelors, had to find their wives elsewhere, as there were few eligible Jewish girls in Omaha. Marriage brokers, who maintain an important position

⁷⁷Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 15; Daily Republican, September 16, 1875 and January 13, 1876.

⁷⁸Daily Republican, January 7, 1877; Daily Herald, August 10, 1879.

⁷⁹Bernard D. Weinryb, "Jewish Immigration and Accommodation to America: Research, Trends, Problems," The Writing of American Jewish History, eds. Moshe Davis and Isidore S. Meyer (New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 1957), p. 388. Kashruth is observance of the Jewish dietary laws.

in Jewish tradition, often were responsible for the weddings that did take place. In 1870 a local paper noted such a "marriage of short acquaintance." A Miss Adler, who had arrived in Omaha from Chicago, was married to Abraham Israel after an acquaintance of but two days. The wedding was performed by a judge, and "solemnized according to the Jewish ritual by Mr. L. Frudenheim, a dry goods merchant on Douglas street."⁸⁰

Until the Omaha Jewish community was able to support a rabbi, Jewish marriage ceremonies were performed either by judges or by rabbis brought in from out of town. The Reverend Dr. Isaac Schwab of St. Joseph, and Reverend I. Fall of Davenport, Iowa, came to Omaha to carry out such duties on various occasions.⁸¹ When it was not possible to bring a rabbi from out of town, a judge would perform a civil ceremony and the proper Jewish prayers would be recited by a knowledgeable member of the community.⁸²

The keeping of the Jewish dietary laws was also very difficult for Omaha Jews until about 1881 when the first permanent shohet came to Omaha.⁸³ Prior to this, Jews who observed kashruth had meat

⁸⁰Weekly Herald, December 14, 1870. The writer commented that it was hoped such "love at first sight . . . may not illustrate the old axiom of 'marry in haste and repent at leisure.'"

⁸¹Evening Bee, February 24, 1877; Daily Republican, March 8, 1883.

⁸²Daily Republican, September 16, 1875 and September 16, 1874.

⁸³Ella Fleishman Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska: General Survey" (unpublished typescript, 1927), p. 24. Cited hereafter as "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska." A shohet is a slaughterer of animals and fowl in accordance with Jewish ritual. He must be an observant Jew and his proficiency must be certified by a rabbi.

brought from Des Moines where it was killed in the proper manner by a Jewish butcher.⁸⁴

The rite of circumcision also presented a problem. For a time in 1873 a Reverend Hertzmann apparently served the Jewish community of Council Bluffs, and at various times he performed circumcisions and marriages for Omaha Jews.⁸⁵ When the Meyer Hellmans had a son in 1884, a mohel was brought from Chicago to circumcise the boy.⁸⁶ By the early 1880's, however, when considerable numbers of east European orthodox Jews began arriving in Omaha, it was no longer necessary for Omaha Jews to import such practitioners.

There is little evidence of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews in early Omaha history. On one occasion, however, Reverend Hertzmann converted a gentile girl to the Jewish faith before she became the bride of a Jewish man.⁸⁷ At a similar occasion in 1885, considerable publicity was given to the conversion to Judaism of Mary Nevil, who shortly afterward married a Jew. Her conversion took place in a public ceremony at Sabbath evening services at the Congregation of Israel, and prompted the editor of the Omaha Bee to comment that the publicity attached to the conversion resulted "from the anxiety of the rabbi for cheap notoriety."⁸⁸ But both conversions

⁸⁴Daily Herald, September 21, 1876.

⁸⁵Evening Bee, February 13, 1873.

⁸⁶Evening Bee, July 3, 1884. A mohel is one who qualifies both in piety and experience to perform circumcisions.

⁸⁷Evening Bee, February 13, 1873.

⁸⁸Daily Herald, December 12, 1885; Evening Bee, December 12, 1885 and January 16, 1886.

and intermarriage, at least among the earliest Jewish settlers of Omaha, remained fairly rare.

As their numbers increased, and Jews became successful in business and active in the gentile community, they found that a nucleus of a Jewish community existed, and that there were now enough Jews in Omaha to consider the establishment of religious services and the formation of a congregation.

CHAPTER II
THE CONGREGATION OF ISRAEL

Religious services were first held in Omaha in August of 1854 at the St. Nicholas Hotel under the auspices of a Methodist minister from Council Bluffs. Most of those present were Council Bluffs residents who intended to move to Omaha.¹ Within a year Baptists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Catholics had organized churches. The first church edifice built in Omaha was St. Philomena's Catholic Church, which was constructed in 1856 on Eighth Street between Harney and Howard.² An Omaha newspaper in 1866 listed ten denominations as having organized congregations, and although there is no other evidence of the existence of Jewish services at this time, the article included the Israelites among these established religious groups.³

The first recorded Jewish services in Nebraska were announced in an Omaha newspaper on September 29, 1867:

Israelites' New Years' Day comes on Monday, September 30th (tomorrow.) There will be prayer by Mr. Rosenthal at his house, at 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. All brothers are earnestly solicited to take part in this festival, and help the organization of a synagogue in Omaha.⁴

¹Sorenson, History of Omaha, pp. 55-56.

²Ibid., pp. 187-192.

³Weekly Herald, July 13, 1866.

⁴Daily Herald, September 29, 1867.

There were twenty Jews present at these Rosh Hashanah services, and a similar number at the Yom Kippur observance the following week. Prayers were read both in Hebrew and in German. The Daily Herald noted that several Omaha Jews were out of town during the holy days, perhaps to attend more formal services elsewhere. The editor wished the Jews "a successful completion of their project to establish a Synagogue in Omaha."⁵

A year later, in September, 1868, the following notice was printed in an Omaha daily paper:

Khela B'ni Israel: -- To the Israelites of Council Bluffs and others: We are pleased to inform you that we have formed a Hebrew congregation called "B'ni Israel," and extend to you our cordial invitation to attend our Divine Services on Rosh Hashona and Yom Kippur at Masonic Hall, Pioneer Block.⁶

This notice was signed by Isaac M. Frank, president of the congregation, and Samuel M. Levy, secretary.⁷

During these early years, services were held only on the high holidays, and until 1871 the congregation remained rather loosely structured. In August of 1869 a group of eleven men met in a private home to reorganize the Omaha Jewish community for the conduct of

⁵Daily Herald, October 1 and 8, 1867. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year. Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, is the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. Rosenthal owned a restaurant on Farnam Street (Collins' Omaha Directory 1868-1869, p. 155).

⁶Daily Herald, September 12, 1868. "B'ni" might have been a misprint. "B'nai Israel" is translated as Sons of Israel. The Occident, XXVI (October, 1868), p. 333, also noted the formation of a Jewish congregation in Omaha.

⁷Daily Herald, October 2, 1868. Both Frank and Levy were in the clothing business.

religious services for that year. Frank remained president and services were again held at Masonic Hall.⁸ Max Abrahams, who had come to Omaha with his father shortly after the Civil War, served as reader for the services.⁹

In 1871 Omaha Jews formally organized both a religious congregation and a burial society. On the eighth of January, 1871, a meeting was held at which thirty Jews formed the Congregation of Israel. Officers were elected, and a drive was organized to raise funds for the purchase of land on which to build a synagogue.¹⁰ At monthly meetings of the synagogue members, plans for the future went ahead, and by March \$1,000 had been pledged toward the building fund. Meyer Hellman, president of the congregation, traveled east to solicit further contributions. At this time the congregation decided to operate according to the principles of Reform Judaism advocated by Rabbi Isaac M. Wise of Cincinnati, but the diversity of religious practice among its members precluded literal application

⁸Sunday Bee, May 17, 1908. The eleven included, besides Frank: Bernard Gladstone, Emmanuel Simon, Max Meyer, Simon Lehman, Meyer Hellman, Aaron Cahn, David Davidson, Morris Elgutter, Lewis Brash, and Meyer Goldsmith.

⁹Morning Bee, February 16, 1890; Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 40; questionnaire returned by Milton R. Abrahams; Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 337. The Bee and Savage and Bell erroneously refer to Abrahams as "L. Abrahams."

¹⁰American Israelite, XVII (February 3, 1871), p. 7. Officers were Meyer Hellman, president; Meyer Goldsmith, vice president; Lewis Brash, treasurer; and A. S. Brown, secretary. The minute books of the Congregation of Israel, which have been deposited at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, date from 1883. Few official records remain from the period prior to that time.

of reform customs.¹¹ In May, a committee was selected to find a lot for the construction of a temple.¹²

The B'nai Israel Burial Society was organized in the same year by a group of men almost identical with that which had shortly before organized the Congregation of Israel. The preamble to its constitution stated that

Whereas, The hand of providence is held over our nation as Israelites, we are prompted by a sense of duty, and to promote our interests and material assistance for the welfare, happiness and protection to each other

Therefore, We, the undersigned, do associate ourselves to provide in time of health, for each other in time of need, to which the human frame is liable, and to pay the last duty and homage in that which all living men must fall, and being creatures while life shall be granted to us, we have formed ourselves into a body corporate, by the name and style of the Society Bnai Israel of Omaha, in the county of Douglas, state of Nebraska.¹³

The original officers of the Burial Society were J. A. Hart, president; M. Goldsmith, vice president; J. C. Rosenfeld, secretary; and Emmanuel Simon, treasurer. Trustees were N. Rosenthal, Bernard Gladstone, and Samuel Jacobs.¹⁴

¹¹Daily Herald, March 9, 1871.

¹²Daily Herald, May 10, 1871.

¹³World-Herald, November 13, 1921.

¹⁴Ibid. The original membership list included the following names: J. H. Hart, M. Goldsmith, Abraham Adamsky, B. Gladstone, J. Newman, S. Rothschild, J. Reinhart, E. Simon, Andrew Rosewater, J. C. Rosenfeld, S. Jacobs, J. Schiller, M. Abrahams, L. Schwartz, Jacob Rosenthal, Samuel Friedlander, S. Reichenberg, Ph. Gottheimer, E. Bundschup, Abraham Israel, Albert Abel, P. Hart, Samuel F. May, S. Lehman, M. Hellman, A. S. Brown, Aaron Cahn, M. Freudenheim, Daniel Bernstein, Julius Rich, M. Goldstein, B. Goldstein, M. Klein, Morris Greenbaum, S. Brown, N. Rosenthal, and Jacob Phillips. Hart, the president, moved to St. Louis in August of 1871 (Daily Herald, August 31, 1871).

In July of 1871 the B'nai Israel Society purchased property at Forty-Second and Redick streets in Omaha for \$300, for use as Pleasant Hill Cemetery, the first Jewish burial ground in Nebraska.¹⁵ Within a short time the maintenance of two separate organizations became burdensome and the cemetery was deeded to the Congregation of Israel.¹⁶

For a short time in the summer and fall of 1871 the Congregation of Israel was served by Reverend Alexander Rosenspitz, who came to Omaha from Jefferson, Texas. Rosenspitz delivered a lecture "On Human Dignity" on a Sunday afternoon, to which both Jews and non-Jews were invited.¹⁷ On September 16, 1871, at ceremonies which took place at Rosh Hashanah services, seven young members of the Jewish community received certificates of confirmation signed by Reverend Rosenspitz.¹⁸ This was the first indication of any religious instruction for the Jewish young people of Omaha. High holiday services were again held at Masonic Hall in 1871, apparently conducted by Reverend Rosenspitz.¹⁹ A grand ball, sponsored by the

¹⁵Douglas County, Nebraska, Deed Records, Book 11, pp. 306-307.

¹⁶Sunday Bee, May 17, 1908; Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 40.

¹⁷Daily Herald, July 23, 1871.

¹⁸The seven were Esther Jacobs, Emmanuel Cohn [Cahn], Eva Rawitzer, Bertha Reinhart, Albert Cahn, Charles Rosenthal, and Addie Gladstone (Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 40; World-Herald, November 13, 1921; Congregation of Israel Confirmation Certificate, September 16, 1871). It is not known whether Rosenspitz was actually retained by the congregation, or if he was merely a visiting rabbi. There is no further evidence of his service to the congregation.

¹⁹Daily Herald, September 14, 1871.

Congregation of Israel, was given at Max Meyer's music hall in October of 1871, and was further evidence of the organization of the Jewish community.²⁰

The following year, in July of 1872, the four young ladies who had been confirmed by Reverend Rosenspitz organized a Hebrew Sunday School. Although it was short-lived, it was the first of its kind in Nebraska. There were only four pupils, and it was several years before Jewish education could be provided for Omaha children on a continuing basis.²¹

Having conducted an apparently successful fund raising campaign, the Congregation of Israel in 1873 purchased a lot on Cass, between Sixteenth and Seventeenth streets, for \$1,000. This property was never utilized by the congregation, however, and was sold two years later for \$950.²²

High holiday services in 1873 and 1874 were conducted by Reverend Hertzmann of Council Bluffs in Meyer's music hall, and most Jewish merchants closed their stores in observance of the holy days.²³ In November of 1873 the Congregation of Israel filed articles of incorporation with the Douglas County clerk.²⁴

²⁰Daily Herald, October 4, 1871.

²¹Addie Gladstone Record Book, 1872, American Jewish Archives. The pupils were Sarah Jacobs, Charles Elgutter, Victor and Max Gladstone.

²²Evening Bee, September 6, 1873 and November 27, 1875; Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 337.

²³Daily Republican, September 23, 1873; September 13 and 22, 1874.

²⁴Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, A251. A. S. Brown was listed as clerk. Trustees were Morris Elgutter, Bernard Gladstone, Max Meyer, Jacob Newman, and William Rawitzer.

For the next several years the Congregation of Israel held high holiday services in various public halls, but apparently there was little organized religious life during the remainder of the year. Meetings were held to discuss the purchase of another piece of property and the building of a synagogue, but no results were evident.²⁵

Early in 1877 the Jewish community of Omaha was host to Rabbi Elias Eppstein of Congregation B'ne Jeshurun in Milwaukee. Rabbi Eppstein spoke in Omaha under the auspices of Keshet Shel Barzel, a Jewish fraternal lodge that had been organized in Omaha two years earlier.²⁶ Eppstein suggested the organization of a Sunday school in Omaha. His idea was well received by the Jewish citizens. Books were ordered and classes were soon in existence.²⁷ Within seven years there were sixty students enrolled, and the Congregation of Israel Sunday School remained the largest of its kind in Omaha for many years.²⁸

Although the Congregation of Israel tended towards the practice of Reform Judaism, its membership necessarily comprised many factions

²⁵Evening Bee, October 9 and 11, 1875; April 8, 1876. Officers for 1876 and 1877 were: Meyer Goldsmith, president; Lewis Brash, vice president; Max Meyer, treasurer; and A. S. Brown, secretary (Evening Bee, September 18, 1876; Daily Republican, January 3, 1877). The membership of the congregation at this time comprised about twenty-five families (Daily Republican, January 3, 1877).

²⁶Evening Bee, February 28, 1877; Louis J. Swichkow and Lloyd P. Gartner, The History of the Jews of Milwaukee (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963), pp. 45-46. Cited hereafter as The Jews of Milwaukee.

²⁷Daily Herald, March 7, 1877; Evening Bee, March 6, 1877; Daily Republican, March 7, 1877.

²⁸Evening Bee, June 14, 1884.

until such time as the arrival of the east European Jews and the organization of Orthodox minyans.²⁹ The Congregation of Israel did not officially affiliate with the reform movement until 1889, and at least through the early 1880's an attempt was made to accommodate the religious services to all who attended. Dissent was inevitable, and in 1876 there took place in the congregation a major incident which received considerable publicity.

At this time the congregation, in accordance with its attempt to conciliate all factions, observed two days of Rosh Hashanah, whereas reform custom required the observance of but one day. In the absence of a rabbi, reader for the services was Morris Adamsky, a shoemaker who professed to be a reform Jew. Adamsky was assisted in his duties by a peddler named Forman. Services on the first day of Rosh Hashanah were uneventful. On the second day, however, before coming to Peyke's Hall at Twelfth and Farnam where the services were held, Adamsky "opened his shop as usual and began business the same as on any other secular day."³⁰ When the more pious members of the congregation learned that Adamsky had gone to work on a holy day, they regarded his action as "a grave breach of the Mosiac law . . . and they were in a state of great indignation that Adamsky should profess to be a good Israelite and yet openly violate the religious law."³¹ Two men, Abraham Bernstein and Jacob Meyer, determined that

²⁹Minyan is translated as "member." A minyan, or group of ten men above the age of thirteen, is required for public Jewish worship.

³⁰Daily Herald, September 21, 1876.

³¹Ibid. Adamsky was sometimes spelled Adamski. Meyer was referred to as Myers, Meyer, and Myer.

Adamsky was not fit to lead the congregation in prayer. A skirmish ensued, and both Adamsky and Forman were forcibly driven from the hall.³² According to a local paper, the reform Jews "came out of it with only a few physical bruises and a greatly damaged peace of mind."³³

In an interview with a reporter following the incident, Adamsky insisted that the congregation was reform, while Meyer claimed that it was an orthodox synagogue. Meyer and Bernstein were arrested for disturbing the peace and fined \$3.00 each plus costs in police court. They also received an additional fine of \$1.00 each for the use of "boisterous language." A complaint filed by Adamsky against Bernstein "for making threats against him" was dismissed on grounds of insufficient evidence.³⁴ There the matter ended. Dissension in the congregation apparently continued, however, though on a somewhat less public level, until those who professed to be orthodox Jews separated themselves from the Congregation of Israel and formed their own religious associations.

³² Abraham Bernstein was a rather notorious character, who was involved in a number of court actions on charges of renting rooms for purposes of prostitution, disturbing the peace, using abusive language, peddling without a license, and assault (Daily Herald, June 15, 1877; July 14, 1877; August 23, 1878; July 1, 1880; Daily Republican, May 5, 1877). A local paper referred to Bernstein as "the Jewish merchant . . . who will go into local history as a mysterious compound of the most unpleasant traits which a man ever had who kept out of state prison" (Daily Herald, August 23, 1878). He left Omaha in the 1880's, and subsequently had difficulties with the law in Covington, Kentucky, and Denver (Morning Bee, December 22, 1895).

³³ Daily Herald, September 21, 1876.

³⁴ Ibid.

Perhaps one of the most interesting facets of this factional dispute was the treatment accorded it by the three daily Omaha newspapers. The Daily Herald covered the affair in full, but the report was preceded by a lengthy explanation of the religious and social differences among Jews. The writer explained that

the idea, however, that the disputes and bickerings of some of the more ignorant and unpleasant members of the congregation need reflect upon the many intelligent men of education and high social position of the same synagogue is wholly without reason, and the reader will readily comprehend that the difficulty occurred among the lower class of society and is probably more personal than religious in its origin.³⁵

Thus the editor attempted to defend those Jews whom he considered more acceptable socially than the orthodox members. The paper went further, and in a separate notice informed the public that Jacob Meyer, who had been involved in the dispute, was totally unrelated to the prominent and reputable Jewish citizen, Max Meyer.³⁶

The Daily Republican carried no report of the dispute whatsoever, with the exception of a brief notice that

the facts about the unpleasantness at the Hebrew service on Wednesday were suppressed in THE REPUBLICAN at the earnest request of leading Jewish citizens. No good could be accomplished by such publication, and it would work injury to many, therefore we willingly consented not to publish the particulars in our possession. The Herald, however, did not look at the matter in the same light.³⁷

The Bee made no mention of the events at all, save for a brief notice of the impending court action.³⁸ Presumably the Bee, too,

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Daily Herald, September 22, 1876.

³⁷ Daily Republican, September 22, 1876.

³⁸ Evening Bee, September 22, 1876.

was requested by "leading Jewish citizens" to suppress the incident.

With an enlarging Jewish community, and perhaps in order further to try to conciliate the various factions represented within the congregation and prevent additional disputes, the Congregation of Israel began in 1878 to seek its first permanent rabbi. It was the desire of the members that regular weekly services be inaugurated in addition to the high holy day observance to which public religious worship had previously been confined.³⁹

In March of 1878 Reverend David Stern, formerly of Virginia, was engaged by the Congregation of Israel.⁴⁰ Stern was said to be a man of "considerable education and liberal views," and as a result he appealed more to the reform elements than he did to those who upheld the tenets of traditional Judaism.⁴¹ Though Stern remained in Omaha only a few months, regular Friday evening and Saturday morning services were inaugurated during his tenure and the Sunday School continued to operate.⁴² The twenty families that comprised the congregation at this time, however, apparently found that they could not afford the support of a religious leader, and Stern left

³⁹Evening Bee, March 11, 1878.

⁴⁰All earlier sources date Stern's arrival as 1875, an error which originated in the Bee history of the Congregation of Israel published in the newspaper on February 16, 1890. Later writers used this article as the source of their information.

⁴¹Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 41; Morning Bee, February 16, 1890; Daily Republican, March 12, 1878.

⁴²Evening Bee, March 15, 1878; Daily Herald, March 16, 1878; Morning Bee, February 16, 1890. Services at this time were held in Knights of Pythias Hall over Peyke's store.

Omaha in early fall of the same year. Services for the next three years were conducted by laymen and the sermons at the high holiday services were given by Simeon Bloom, a local attorney.⁴³

In February of 1879 the congregation took a major step toward the establishment of a permanent location by purchasing a lot at Twenty-third and Harney streets for \$1,400.⁴⁴ Until a temple was built in 1884, weekly and holiday services were held in various public halls and in the Unitarian Church.⁴⁵

The high holiday services conducted by the Congregation of Israel in 1879, which were attended by some 175 people, provoked some interesting discussion in the local press. Notices announcing that the services would be held at the church included an invitation that strangers and the public would be "cordially welcomed."⁴⁶ A subsequent article in the Evening Bee, signed "G", included the description that

public service. was rendered in the old Hebraic language; and a somewhat talented young man in a straw hat presided at the organ. Time was, when this essentially Christian instrument was prohibited in the Jewish church, but progressive ideas have wrought innovations

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⁴³Morning Bee, February 16, 1890; Daily Herald, October 6, 1878; September 27, 1879, and September 15, 1880. Stern returned to Omaha from his post in Peoria, Illinois to lecture in July of 1880 (Daily Republican, July 11, 1880).

⁴⁴Daily Republican, February 15, 1879; Evening Bee, February 15, 1879.

⁴⁵Daily Herald, September 22, 1879; Daily Republican, September 24, 1881 and November 24, 1883.

⁴⁶Daily Herald, September 17 and 27, 1879; Evening Bee, September 17, 1879.

A Congregation whose ancestors have for nearly 2,000 years denied that Christ was God, -- worshipping the Unitarian God of the Jew in the Unitarian church of the Christian, presents to America in the 19th century, an illustration of the old adage "Extremes meet."⁴⁷

A rejoinder, signed "Israelite," was printed in the Bee the following day. "Israelite" referred to the "malice and ignorance" demonstrated by "G," which, he wrote, must signify "goose." He added that the holding of Jewish services in a Unitarian church indicated an "advancement of mankind toward that enlightenment which shall one day unite Christian, Jew, Mahammedan [sic] and heathen in one common religion." "Israelite" further explained that "the Jewish church throughout the world ever opens its doors to welcome strangers, and ours is no exception."⁴⁸

A later notice announced that Jewish religious services would again be held at the church "through the courtesy of members of the Unitarian Church."⁴⁹ Perhaps inspired by the Bee article, the Daily Republican at this time remarked that "whatever may be said of the Jewish people, they have since time immemorial maintained a separate and distinct part, both in religion and politics,

⁴⁷Evening Bee, September 18, 1879. Edward Rosewater, Bee editor, never became a member of the Congregation of Israel or of any other synagogue, and apparently was not in sympathy with the practices of the congregation. The fact that Rosewater would sanction the publication of this rather derogatory article in his newspaper would seem to substantiate this view.

⁴⁸Evening Bee, September 19, 1879.

⁴⁹Evening Bee, September 26, 1879.

thus confirming the prophecy that the Jewish people would be and continue to be a separate and distinct people."⁵⁰

Announcements of Congregation of Israel services continued to invite public attendance, and no further comments were made by the Bee. Prayer services were conducted in Hebrew, with a lecture in English. The Bee subsequently softened its tone and in 1880 went so far as to congratulate the lecturer, Simeon Bloom, "on his eloquent contribution to the observance of Yom Kippur in Omaha."⁵¹

In the fall of 1883, as the congregation made plans for the erection of the first synagogue in Nebraska, it adopted a constitution which made a decided attempt to conciliate both the reform and orthodox Jews within its structure. The new constitution stated that the congregation was organized "for the purpose of perpetuating the cause of Judaism, in all its essential purity, and that we may cherish and promote its great and fundamental principle--the rock upon which our undying faith is founded--the belief in, and the worship of one God."⁵²

⁵⁰Daily Republican, September 27, 1879.

⁵¹Evening Bee, September 14 and 16, 1880.

⁵²World-Herald, November 13, 1921. Forty-five names were signed as follows: Isaac Oberfelder, Isaac Rubin, Louis Rubin, Leon Kopald, Julius Rothholz, D. A. Saly, C. Shaw, M. Elgutter, J. Harris, J. Merritt, M. Goldsmith, Moritz Meyer, Ferdinand Adler, A. Heller, Sol Prince, E. Klein, Ph. Gottheimer, M. Hellman, William M. Grunebaum, Jacob Jascalek, H. Phillips, E. Simon, A. Goldman, H. Spigle, S. Jacobs, B. Newman, J. Rosenfeld, L. Kalish, Lewis Brash, B. Kellner, Harry Sincere, Isaac Levi, Joseph Rosenstein, C. Schlank, H. Kalish, J. Brown, M. Rypinski, A. H. Gladstone, Julius Pepperberg, Samuel Katz, Isaac Schiff, Simon Oberfelder, John A. Freyhan, A. Jacobson, and J. L. Brandeis.

At high holiday services in 1883 the congregation was addressed by Reverend H. Saft, who was shortly afterwards engaged as spiritual leader.⁵³ In his initial sermon as rabbi of the congregation, Saft made known his awareness of the difficulties he faced in uniting the opposing factions.⁵⁴ Saft's tenure was short, however, as he proved within a year to be too conservative for the reform Jews who "largely controlled the affairs" of the congregation.⁵⁵

By June of 1884 construction was underway of a temple building on the property at Twenty-third and Harney streets. At this time the congregation had a membership of forty-five families with sixty children in attendance at Sunday School.⁵⁶ The temple was dedicated in ceremonies on September 18, 1884. The building was of Moorish architecture, of brick and frame, with three pairs of stained glass windows on each side and a seating capacity of three hundred.⁵⁷

Dedication ceremonies were presided over by Reverend Alexander Rosenspitz, who had briefly served the congregation in its infancy in 1871, and by Reverend George E. Harfield, its newly elected rabbi. There were some two hundred in attendance, and a choir directed by

⁵³Daily Republican, October 10, 1883; Evening Bee, November 24, 1883.

⁵⁴Daily Herald, November 25, 1883.

⁵⁵Morning Bee, February 16, 1890.

⁵⁶Evening Bee, June 14, 1884.

⁵⁷Evening Bee, September 6, 1884; Morning Bee, September 19, 1884.

Julius Meyer, and including both Jews and non-Jews, participated in the service.⁵⁸

The manner of worship in the new temple suggested the adoption of a number of the practices of Reform Judaism. Men and women were permitted to sit together, as had not been the case prior to the building of the temple. In the traditional practice of Judaism at that time, men and women were segregated during religious services, with the women viewing the proceedings from behind a curtain. An organ, prohibited at an orthodox Jewish prayer meeting, was now used at the Congregation of Israel services, and some men worshipped hatless.⁵⁹ Orthodox Jews unfailingly wear a hat or skull cap, and a tallit or prayer shawl, while engaged in prayer.

Reverend Dr. George E. Harfield, who had received his education in London and had most recently served the St. John's Street Temple in Cincinnati, was engaged as rabbi of the Congregation early in September of 1884, just prior to the dedication of the new temple. Harfield, who was twenty-eight years of age at the time, received a monthly salary of \$125.⁶⁰ During the eight months of Harfield's

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Evening Bee, September 29, 1884. This article also noted that there were at this time an estimated 1,200 Jews in Omaha, and that the Congregation of Israel included "the bulk in numbers, wealth and education." Since orthodox services were now regularly held, it was no longer necessary for the Congregation of Israel to practice conciliatory policies.

⁶⁰Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1883-1889, September 21, 1884 and October 5, 1884; Daily Republican, December 30, 1884.

service to the temple, he found it necessary to supplement his income by offering private lessons in French and German.⁶¹

A number of programs were inaugurated at the Congregation of Israel during Harfield's brief tenure. The Congregation of Israel Sabbath School Society was organized to give public dramatic and literary presentations. The young people of the congregation presented "Queen Esther" at a Purim celebration in March of 1885 and a children's Purim banquet, which became a tradition of the temple, was inaugurated.⁶² At services in the spring of 1885, Joseph Oberfelder, son of Isaac Oberfelder, president of the congregation, became the first young man known to observe his Bar Mitzvah in the new temple building.⁶³

Despite the fact that Harfield was reelected in March of 1885 to serve another year, the officers of the Congregation of Israel soon found "the action of Reverend Dr. Harfield in the Sunday School and language used by him from the pulpit, as unbecoming a clergyman and moved that . . . Harfield be requested to resign at once."⁶⁴ Harfield, who refused to tender his resignation until accorded a trial, was

⁶¹Evening Bee, November 7, 1884.

⁶²Daily Republican, December 30, 1884 and February 26, 1885. Purim, the feast of lots, is a minor Jewish festival commemorating the story of the Book of Esther.

⁶³Evening Bee, March 27, 1885. Bar Mitzvah is translated literally as "son of the commandment." A Jewish boy at age thirteen is called to read the Torah and is thereafter considered an adult member of the congregation.

⁶⁴Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1883-1889, April 5, 1885.

ordered not to officiate at subsequent temple services. At a special meeting of the congregation, three Sunday School pupils testified that Harfield had slapped them, and three members of the congregation attested to the fact that the rabbi had used improper language. The congregation, by unanimous vote, found Harfield guilty of both charges. Despite the rabbi's demand for three months' salary, he was paid \$200 in severance pay and dismissed.⁶⁵

After interviewing and listening to sermons by Rabbi Max Moses of Jacksonville, Florida, and Rabbi N. Davidson of Des Moines, the Congregation of Israel engaged a new spiritual leader.⁶⁶ Rabbi N. I. Benson of Owensburg, Kentucky, was elected as of September 1, 1885, at an annual salary of \$1,500.⁶⁷ Shortly after the high holiday services, Benson presided at a special memorial service for Sir Moses Montefiore, English philanthropist. Similar services were held in synagogues all over the United States. The program, which attracted an overflow crowd of both Jews and gentiles, featured addresses by a minister, a senator, Edward Rosewater, and the rabbi.⁶⁸

During Benson's four years at the Congregation of Israel, he was responsible for the organization of the Ladies' Sewing Society, under

⁶⁵Ibid., April 12, 1885 and May 5, 1885.

⁶⁶Evening Bee, June 26, 27, and 30, 1885.

⁶⁷Evening Bee, July 10 and 20, 1885; Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1883-1889, July 9, 1885. Benson's salary was raised to \$2,400 in 1887 (Evening Bee, April 4, 1887).

⁶⁸Evening Bee, September 30 and October 5, 1885. This was one of Edward Rosewater's few public associations with the Jewish community.

whose auspices a group of women, initially presided over by Mrs. Meyer Hellman, met weekly to sew clothing for the needy.⁶⁹ This group represented the first organized Jewish women's charity in Omaha. On June 9, 1886, the first confirmation ceremony took place in the new temple with ten young people included in the class.⁷⁰

By 1886 the Congregation of Israel boasted over one hundred members, and although there was talk of building a new and larger synagogue, repairs were made instead to the existing building, which was enlarged in 1887.⁷¹ Rabbi Benson, as the only Jewish spiritual leader within a large area, traveled widely to perform religious functions and give lectures in various parts of the state.⁷² Late in 1886 Benson inaugurated a series of monthly Sunday afternoon lectures, in order that those who were unable to attend the regular Friday evening and Saturday morning services would have the benefit of his religious leadership.⁷³

In the fall of 1887 the congregation found it necessary to raise funds for the purchase of land adjacent to Pleasant Hill Cemetery. It had become imperative to erect a caretaker's building to prevent such acts of vandalism as had been occurring on the

⁶⁹Evening Bee, October 22 and 26, 1886.

⁷⁰Evening Bee, May 27 and June 3, 1886.

⁷¹Evening Bee, October 1, 1886 and February 7, 1887; Morning Bee, August 26, 1887.

⁷²Daily Republican, November 19, 1886; Evening Bee, November 19 and 29, 1886.

⁷³Daily Republican, November 23, 1886.

cemetery grounds. Under the leadership of Rabbi Benson, Ferdinand Adler, Meyer Hellman, and Emmanuel Simon, \$1,100 was collected for this purpose.⁷⁴ In the fall of 1888 the first Hebrew Charity Fair was held and a total of \$4,000 was raised for the support of the congregation, which at that time was beginning to experience financial difficulties.⁷⁵

The Congregation of Israel affiliated officially with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the fount of Reform Judaism in the United States, in March of 1889. A new constitution adopted by the congregation indicated that worship would be according to Minhag America, the prayer book compiled by the leader of Reform Judaism, Rabbi Isaac M. Wise.⁷⁶ Although the circumstances are not clear, it is likely that this action on the part of the membership contributed to the decision of Rabbi Benson to resign his position with the congregation in April of that year.⁷⁷ It was Benson's announced intention to study law, and until such time as he was

⁷⁴American Israelite, XXXIV (April 27, 1888), p. 8; Evening Bee, September 27, 1887.

⁷⁵Evening Bee, October 16 and 22, 1888; Congregation of Israel, Treasurer's Report, September 1, 1889.

⁷⁶Letter to Max Meyer from Lipman Levy, secretary of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, March 23, 1889; Constitution of the Congregation of Israel, Omaha, Nebraska, March 3, 1889. Membership fees at this time were \$25 for families and \$12 for single men, with annual dues at the same rates. Members were required to purchase a pew in the temple. Non-members were allowed to rent pews.

⁷⁷Letter to Board of Directors, Congregation of Israel, from N. I. Benson, April 1, 1889, in Congregation of Israel Collection, American Jewish Archives.

able to enter law practice he expected to serve some of the small orthodox congregations which had developed in the 1880's, and to organize a Hebrew School for the children of the orthodox Jews.⁷⁸

Within a few months of his departure from the Congregation of Israel, Rabbi Benson apparently incurred the enmity of his former congregants by briefly becoming the rabbi of Congregation Bene Yeshurun in Lincoln. In this position, Benson was able to perform marriage ceremonies and other religious functions, the remuneration for which would otherwise have gone to his successor in Omaha. Since the Congregation of Israel was in need of additional income at this time, its board of directors appealed to the Lincoln synagogue to cooperate with them in this matter and dismiss Rabbi Benson from their service.⁷⁹

Rabbi William Rosenau, the first graduate of Hebrew Union College to serve the Congregation of Israel, succeeded Rabbi Benson in September, 1889. Shortly before Rabbi Rosenau took office, forty-six members of the congregation presented a petition to the board of directors requesting that the new rabbi wear a skull cap and tallit, or prayer shawl, while conducting services.⁸⁰ A motion to this effect

⁷⁸Morning Bee, May 15, 1889. This would seem to be further indication that Benson did not wish to serve a congregation that was officially affiliated with the reform movement. Benson became a member of the Douglas County Bar in 1892 (Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 227).

⁷⁹Letter to Congregation Bene Yeshurun, Lincoln, Nebraska, from Congregation of Israel, October 29, 1889, in Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1889-1908.

⁸⁰Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1883-1889, August 11, 1908.

was passed by the congregation but it was then decided that since Rosenau had been engaged under no such conditions, he should be permitted to conduct the services in accordance with his own beliefs and practices until a "full expression by all the Members" was heard. It soon became evident that the wearing of the garments of traditional Judaism was not in accordance with Rosenau's beliefs, and the matter was dropped.⁸¹ This was the final attempt on the part of those temple members who preferred a more traditional practice of Judaism to impose their views. From then on it was the practice of the congregation to discard the cap and prayer shawl.

Rabbi Rosenau remained in Omaha until 1892, when he resigned to become spiritual leader of Temple Oheb Shalom in Baltimore, a congregation of some three hundred families.⁸² Under his leadership in Omaha, the Congregation of Israel organized the Literary and Congregational Entertainment Society, called L.A.C.E., in order to further the knowledge of Jewish literature and history among the congregants, who Rosenau considered were suffering from "religious indifference."⁸³ During Rosenau's tenure the scope of the

⁸¹Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1883-1889, September 6, 1889.

⁸²Letter to Board of Directors, Congregation of Israel, from William Rosenau, March 10, 1892, in Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1889-1908; Morning Bee, March 8, 1892. Rabbi Rosenau married Mabel Hellman, daughter of Meyer Hellman (letter from Blanche Hellman Sachs, July 17, 1965). Rosenau later served on the Baltimore Board of Education, and as an associate professor at Johns Hopkins University. He was also elected president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (World-Herald, November 19, 1921).

⁸³Evening Bee, November 19, 1889.

Sunday School was enlarged and clarified, and students were required to spend two hours weekly studying Jewish history, the principles of Judaism, and Hebrew.⁸⁴

In 1891, in response to a need for a larger building, Rabbi Rosenau and the president and vice president of the congregation, Samuel Katz and John Merritt, canvassed the city and succeeded in raising \$3,600 in donations. The temple building did not nearly accommodate the membership of 117 families, and some thirty more were desirous of affiliation with the congregation. The intention was to move the original building and raise the foundation, and to build an addition in front of the original edifice. It was the plan of the officers of the congregation that every fourth pew in the enlarged building be reserved for strangers and those unable to pay.⁸⁵ These arrangements, however, were never realized, presumably because business conditions worsened to a considerable extent during the early 1890's and members were hard pressed even to pay their dues. By 1896 the temple roster had shrunk to eighty-four members, a decrease of twenty-nine from the previous year.⁸⁶ The need for a new building was no longer so great.

Rabbi Leo Franklin, a twenty-two year old graduate of Hebrew Union College, was chosen to succeed Rabbi Rosenau as of

⁸⁴"Rules and Regulations" of Sabbath School, in Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1889-1908.

⁸⁵Morning Bee, May 28 and June 1, 1891; Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1889-1908, May 31, 1891.

⁸⁶Ibid., July 5, 1891; Congregation of Israel, Budget Report, September 1, 1896.

September 1, 1892.⁸⁷ Shortly after Rabbi Franklin's assumption of the pulpit, and seemingly at his request, the congregation decided to adopt the Union Prayer Book and the ritual that had recently been formulated by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, representing the reform viewpoint.⁸⁸ Rabbi Franklin remained in Omaha for six years, when he resigned to become rabbi of Temple Beth El in Detroit.⁸⁹ During his service in Omaha he was active in a number of local educational and charitable organizations, and the temple building fund was considerably augmented.⁹⁰

Abram Simon, a native of Nashville, Tennessee, and a graduate of Hebrew Union College, who came to Omaha from a temple in Sacramento, California, was installed as rabbi of the Congregation of Israel on April 28, 1899.⁹¹ The financial condition of the congregation was considerably improved by the time of Rabbi Simon's arrival in Omaha, and by 1901 his salary had twice been increased.⁹² Under

⁸⁷Morning Bee, July 17, 1892; Congregation of Israel, Minute Book 1889-1908, July 7, 1892. Rabbi Franklin's starting salary was \$2,000 per year.

⁸⁸Ibid., November 20, 1892.

⁸⁹Ibid., December 9, 1898. Lean financial conditions prevented the Congregation of Israel from raising Rabbi Franklin's salary above \$2,400 during his service in Omaha (Morning Bee, March 2, 1896).

⁹⁰Morning Bee, March 6, 1898 and January 21, 1899. Rabbi Franklin married a former Omaha girl, Hattie Oberdorfer, in 1896 (World-Herald, July 19, 1896). He served eventually as president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and originated the unassigned pew system in reform temples (World-Herald, November 19, 1921).

⁹¹Morning Bee, April 21, 1899.

⁹²Morning Bee, March 5, 1901.

Rabbi Simon, the Sunday School was enlarged to an attendance of 170, opportunities for the study of Jewish literature and Bible were enhanced, the building fund was bolstered, and the Congregation of Israel Sisterhood was organized.⁹³

Rabbi Frederick Cohn of Fort Wayne, Indiana, who would remain with the Congregation of Israel for over thirty years, assumed his duties as rabbi of the congregation in March of 1904.⁹⁴ Under Rabbi Cohn the temple membership grew considerably, and a new building, known as Temple Israel, was dedicated at Park Avenue and Jackson streets in 1908.⁹⁵

As the Congregation of Israel developed and grew, Omaha Jews spread their roots and branched out in other directions. Before long, other organizations founded for purposes of philanthropy, fraternity, and recreation, were flourishing.

⁹³Daily News, December 9 and 16, 1899; Morning Bee, November 23, 1900 and March 3, 1901; World-Herald, November 13, 1921. Simon became rabbi of Temple Adah Israel in Washington, D.C. and served as president of the Board of Education in Washington (Morning Bee, November 30, 1903 and December 8, 1903; World-Herald, November 19, 1921). Rabbi Simon's wife, Carrie Obendorfer Simon, founded the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods in 1913 and served as its president for six years (Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, p. 545).

⁹⁴Morning Bee, March 2, 1904. Rabbi Cohn was born in East Attleboro, Massachusetts in 1873, was graduated from the University of Cincinnati and ordained at Hebrew Union College in 1896. He received a PhD. from the University of Nebraska in 1907. Rabbi Cohn was very active in Omaha charities and civic affairs.

⁹⁵Sunday Bee, May 24, 1908. The building at Twenty-third and Harney was sold for use as a garage (Morning Bee, February 11, 1908).

CHAPTER III

FRATERNITY AND PHILANTHROPY

Jews as a group are particularly sensitive of their collective needs as well as the necessity of preserving their group identity. While the wealthier members of the community participated actively in civic affairs, nearly all strata of Jewish society eventually combined to build a network of organizations which afforded a sense of belonging and provided not only for the social needs of the community, but also served purposes of charity and mutual aid.¹

A Hebrew Benevolent Society was organized in Omaha as early as January of 1869, in order to assist those needy Jews who were newcomers to the community. There were fifty members of this organization, and though its efforts were short-lived, it became the first Jewish self-help organization in the community.²

In 1881 an effort was made to organize a Hebrew Benevolent Society on a more enduring basis. Philip Gottheimer, the Aaron Cahns, and Albert Heller served as the initial officers of this group, which began its activities just as the first Jewish refugees

¹Handlin, Adventure in Freedom, p. 69.

²American Israelite, XV (February 12, 1869), p. 2. Officers were E. Rosewater, president; Aaron Cahn, vice president; Meyer Goldsmith, treasurer; Jacob Frank and Meyer Hellman, trustees. This was one of Rosewater's few affiliations with a Jewish organization.

began to arrive in the United States from eastern Europe.³ Within a year the organization found it necessary to enlarge the scope of its fund-raising activities, and in succeeding years a number of successful concerts, balls, and charity fairs were staged for the benefit of needy Jews in the community.⁴ By 1888 there were eighty members of the Hebrew Benevolent Society and a total of \$10,000 had been dispensed since its inception. It was described by the mayor as the best organized charity in town.⁵

A Jewish fraternal organization, Keshet Shel Barzel, was founded in Omaha in 1875.⁶ Meetings were held twice monthly, and one of the first activities of the newly organized group was the conduct of Passover services.⁷ The membership of Keshet Shel Barzel, which remained the only Jewish fraternal organization in the city until the founding of the local chapter of B'nai B'rith in 1884, was said to comprise "some of the best people in the

³Evening Bee, January 1, 1882; Andreas, History of Nebraska, p. 744. Trustees were M. Goldsmith, Charles Schlank, Julius Meyer, Mrs. A. Heller, Mrs. M. Goldsmith, and Mrs. Meyer Hellman.

⁴Daily Republican, January 15, 1882; Excelsior, February 7, 1885 and October 3, 1885; Evening Bee, January 21, 1887.

⁵Daily Republican, October 21, 1888.

⁶Evening Bee and Daily Republican, April 5, 1875. The first officers were T. Samuel, president; Emmanuel Simon, vice president; A. H. Gladstone, treasurer; and Simon Trostler, secretary. Charles Schlank, Bernard Gladstone, and L. Brown were trustees. Keshet Shel Barzel, which is translated as "Iron Knot," was organized nationally in 1860, by which time there were five Jewish fraternal orders (Swickow and Gartner, The Jews of Milwaukee, p. 56).

⁷Andreas, History of Nebraska, p. 745; Evening Bee, April 20, 1875; Daily Republican, April 22, 1875.

city."⁸ Balls were held, and speakers were brought to Omaha by the order, which in 1877 changed its name to Star of the West Lodge.⁹ Its activities continued until the early 1890's when poor financial conditions spelled difficulties for many of its members.

The first social organization in Omaha, the Centennial Club, held its initial functions in the fall of 1876.¹⁰ The club had an active agenda, celebrating the birthdays, anniversaries, and weddings of its members. In 1877, with a roster of about forty members and a "flourishing financial condition" the Centennial Club took over the upper floor of the building housing Brash's clothing store at Twelfth and Farnam streets. A ballroom, reading rooms, and facilities for billiards and chess were made available to the membership, which appeared to be entirely Jewish at the time.¹¹

In the summer of 1877 the members of the Centennial Club acted as hosts during the visit to Omaha of Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, who was on a lecture tour of the midwestern states.¹² Wise spoke on "The Wandering Jew" during the regular services of the First Methodist Church in Masonic Hall.¹³ Describing his Omaha visit, Wise wrote

⁸Daily Herald, February 28, 1877.

⁹Evening Bee, March 1 and 6, 1877. Rabbi Elias Eppstein of Milwaukee, whose trip to Omaha was sponsored by K. S. B., spurred the organization of the Congregation of Israel Sunday School (Supra, p. 37).

¹⁰Evening Bee, October 9, 1876.

¹¹Daily Republican, July 21, 1877 and January 16, 1878.

¹²Daily Herald, August 19, 1877.

¹³Daily Republican, August 26, 1877.

that "the Cincinnati rabbi must preach in a Methodist Church. But this is the West," he continued, "and the West is thoroughly liberalized."¹⁴

Early in 1878 the Centennial Club changed its name to the Standard Club and shortly afterwards some non-Jews began to be included in its membership.¹⁵ In the succeeding years the club rented rooms in a number of downtown Omaha buildings, and continued a busy social schedule. Parties were held twice each month, and an elaborate annual masquerade ball became one of the highlights of Omaha social life.¹⁶

The club was again reorganized in 1883 as the Metropolitan Club, and its membership limited to Jews.¹⁷ The scope of the organization was enlarged to include charitable and literary programs, and even a baseball team.¹⁸ A club house was built at Twenty-first and Harney streets in 1891. This building remained the scene of the many social activities of the Metropolitan Club

¹⁴American Israelite, XXIII (September 7, 1877), n.p. Wise probably preferred to speak in the more formal atmosphere of a church service, where he could expect a larger audience. The Jewish community at this time had no rabbi and since it was summer, no regular religious services were held. There is no evidence that Wise met formally with Omaha Jews. Wise spoke also in Lincoln, where he found but six Jewish families.

¹⁵Daily Republican, January 16, 1878; Daily Herald, August 29, 1878 and March 8, 1879.

¹⁶Daily Herald, January 15, March 6, and October 7, 1880; Daily Republican, January 16, 1880.

¹⁷Daily Herald, October 2 and 20, 1883.

¹⁸Daily Republican, September 24, 1886 and January 4, 1888; Morning Bee, May 28, 1888.

until its disbandment in 1911 following the death of Julius Meyer, who had served as president for twenty-six terms, and was apparently its most devoted member.¹⁹

After one previously unsuccessful attempt, a chapter of the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith was organized in Omaha in October of 1884 as Nebraska Lodge #354.²⁰ B'nai B'rith, the first Jewish fraternal order in the United States, was organized in New York in 1843 for the purpose of effecting some unity within the diversified Jewish community.²¹

The Omaha lodge, the first of its kind in Nebraska, was founded by Carl Brandeis, who had come to Omaha from a strong B'nai B'rith lodge in Milwaukee and was eager to see the order established in Omaha.²² Initially there were about thirty members of the local lodge, and Isaac Oberfelder, who had been active also in the organization of the Congregation of Israel, served as its first president.²³

¹⁹Morning Bee, February 22, 1891; January 18, 1892; August 21, 1908; August 10, 1911.

²⁰Evening Bee, October 20, 1884; Daily Republican, October 21, 1884; Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," pp. 49-50.

²¹Edward E. Grusd, B'nai B'rith: The Story of a Covenant (New York: Appleton-Century, [c. 1966/]), pp. 12-13.

²²Evening Bee, October 20, 1885; Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," pp. 49-50.

²³Evening Bee, October 20, 1884. Other officers were: Meyer Hellman, S. Schlesinger, Jr., Joseph Brussel, Adolph Meyer, Philip Gottheimer, Albert Heller, Moritz Meyer, Charles Brandes, Harry Sincere, S. Kalish. The charter of the local lodge was signed by Carl Brandeis, A. Heller, F. Adler, J. L. Brandeis, S. Schlesinger, J. Oberfelder, P. Gottheimer, J. Pepperberg, A. Jacobson, J. Bamberger, A. Meyer, H. Redfield, H. Sincere, M. Meyer, J. Meyer,

During its first year membership doubled, and by 1890, before the depression began to affect the community, its roster listed some one hundred and fifty names. B'nai B'rith had become a "potent influence in the community."²⁴ In 1887 members of the Omaha lodge helped to organize a chapter of B'nai B'rith in Lincoln.²⁵ Two years later Omaha hosted a meeting of the Grand Lodge, and the banquet held during the convention was attended by over three hundred people.²⁶

A Young Men's Hebrew Association was organized in Omaha in 1886 under the leadership of Julius Meyer.²⁷ The club sponsored social and literary entertainments, and made some attempts to rally the young Jewish men of the community and involve them in educational and charitable programs.²⁸

Thus by the mid-1880's the Jewish community in Omaha had organized not only a religious institution, but charitable, fraternal, and social groups as well. Omaha Jews were prospering, and as they prospered they became increasingly involved in the growth of the community as a whole.

S. Fischer, M. Cahn, J. Brussel, Dr. O. S. Hoffman, B. Newman, Dr. G. E. Harfield, and M. Hellman (Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," pp. 49-50).

²⁴Morning Bee, October 20, 1890; Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 49.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid. In 1901 William McKinley Lodge #521, I.O.B.B., was formed with a membership of twenty men between the ages of eighteen and thirty. By 1908 this lodge had eighty members (ibid., pp. 50-51).

²⁷Daily Republican, December 7, 1886.

²⁸Evening Bee, January 3, 1887 and May 10, 1888; Morning Bee, October 9, 1887.

CHAPTER IV

JEWES AND THE GROWTH OF OMAHA

Nebraska prospered in the 1880's. While the population of the state more than doubled in the decade between 1880 and 1890, that of Omaha increased from 30,000 to more than 140,000,--an increment of 358 percent in ten years.¹ Much of Omaha's growth was due to the development of the meat packing industry. The birth of the Union Stockyards Company in 1884 signaled an important factor in the city's paramount industry, and was accompanied by a spurt in the efforts of other businesses, such as smelting, linseed oil, soap, brickyards, clothing factories, food processing, and distilleries.² A recent historian has written that during this period the entire Omaha population, "reeling under the heady influence of a new industry, highly publicized visits of Eastern capitalists, and a growing population--seemed convinced that the dirt of Omaha's streets had a peculiar and magnetic charm."³

As Omaha grew and prospered, so too did its Jewish residents. Edward Rosewater attained early prominence, and pioneer entrepreneurs

¹James C. Olson, History of Nebraska (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), p. 203; Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 213.

²Olson, History of Nebraska, pp. 209-210.

³Ibid., p. 210.

such as Meyer Hellman, Aaron Cahn, and Max Meyer were joined by a number of other successful firms. Such large retail establishments as J. L. Brandeis and Company and the Nebraska Clothing Company, founded by Jews, took their place in the community in the 1880's.

Among the Omaha Jews whose businesses prospered in this decade was Isaac Oberfelder. I. Oberfelder and Company, importers and jobbers of millinery materials and notions, was the largest establishment of its kind between Chicago and the west coast, and did an annual business of nearly \$200,000.⁴ Another prominent Omaha business was that of Moritz Meyer, who dealt in wholesale tobacco, cigars, and sporting goods, and whose yearly sales totaled \$350,000 in the 1880's.⁵ Max Meyer and Brothers, music dealers and jewelry manufacturers, also reached its peak during this time, and was referred to as the "Tiffanys of the West."⁶

Elgutter's Mammoth Clothing House, Polack's Palace Clothing House, the Boston Clothing Store conducted by Charles Schlank and Solomon Prince, and S. Arnstein's People's Clothing House were among the leading retail establishments.⁷ Louis Kirschbraun, who had come to

⁴The Industries of Omaha, Nebraska (Omaha: Industrial Publishing Company, [1887]), p. 75.

⁵Ibid., pp. 71-72.

⁶Ibid., pp. 67-68.

⁷Daily Herald, April 16, 1882 and May 12, 1882; Daily Republican, November 3, 1881; Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 464.

Omaha in 1873, established the Kirschbraun Creamery, and was one of the city's leading purveyors of butter, eggs, and poultry.⁸

Edward Rosewater, who was regarded for many years as "one of the most influential political leaders of the West," began his public career with his election to the State Legislature for the session commencing in January of 1871.⁹ As a member of the legislature, Rosewater initiated impeachment proceedings against Governor David Butler, conducted an investigation of state institutions, and was instrumental in securing the passage of bills pertaining to the postal telegraph system, the regulation of the private practice of medicine, and the creation of the Omaha Board of Education and the institute for the deaf and dumb.¹⁰

It was in connection with the creation of the Omaha Board of Education that Rosewater founded the Bee, which became and remained one of the most influential newspapers in the midwest for over thirty years. The legislature passed the bill creating the Omaha Board of Education, but the terms of the legislation stipulated that the bill be submitted to a vote of the people. Since the local press was opposed to the creation of such a board, Edward Rosewater, in association with Harry Geralde, started publication on June 19, 1871 of a two-page theatrical sheet which was intended only as a

⁸Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 23.

⁹Morton and Watkins, History of Nebraska, I, 746; Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 81.

¹⁰Morton and Watkins, History of Nebraska, I, 745; Rosewater, "Edward Rosewater," pp. 74-78.

temporary effort for the purpose of bringing to the people Rosewater's views on the school board.¹¹

Rosewater and Geralde called their paper the Bee, since Rosewater wanted a name that would indicate wit and sarcasm, and a bee both stings and gives honey. Since Rosewater did not wish to associate his name with such an insignificant effort, Geralde was listed as both editor and proprietor. The Bee was distributed to theater-goers, of whom there were apparently a considerable number in 1871. Its influence was such as to result not only in an overwhelming vote of the people in favor of the creation of an Omaha Board of Education, but also a decision on the part of Rosewater to continue publication of the newspaper.¹² On July 27, 1871, the Bee carried an announcement that it would be published daily and permanently as an evening journal, and "as a thoroughly fearless and independent exponent of public opinion."¹³ Rosewater's name appeared on the masthead as publisher and proprietor, with Geralde serving as editor-in-chief. The four-page paper initially sold for fifty cents a month.¹⁴

Edward Rosewater fought corporate monopoly and corruption through the pages of the Omaha Bee, and though he won the enmity

¹¹Sorenson, Story of Omaha, p. 436; Morton and Watkins, History of Nebraska, I, 746; Rosewater, "Edward Rosewater," p. 79. Alfred Sorenson served as city editor of the Omaha Bee in the 1870's.

¹²Sorenson, Story of Omaha, p. 437; Rosewater, "Edward Rosewater," pp. 79-81.

¹³Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁴Ibid. A morning edition began publication in 1873.

of many of those opposed to his policies, he became one of Omaha's most public-spirited and influential citizens. Among Rosewater's strongest opponents were the proprietors of the other Omaha papers. Rosewater and A. D. Balcombe, editor of the Daily Republican, carried on a persistent battle, both personal and political, through the columns of their newspapers. In 1873, after the Republican and the Bee had exchanged a series of particularly insulting remarks, Balcombe and Rosewater clashed in person on the street at Fourteenth and Douglas. Rosewater, a short man, was armed with a rawhide whip, but Balcombe had the advantage of height and soon subdued his opponent, until finally the two were separated by bystanders.¹⁵ In subsequent years Rosewater was beaten several times by individuals implicated by the Bee as involved in shady undertakings or corruption. In 1876 Rosewater hovered near death for several days as a result of a beating by Dick Curry, a Negro whose place of business had been described by the Bee as a "colored den."¹⁶

Nineteenth century Omaha newspapers were unconcerned with the delicacy of the language used by their reporters and editorial writers, and thus Rosewater and his political and journalistic opponents slung verbal epithets with abandon. Edward Rosewater's son, Victor, in a biography of his father, wrote that Edward Rosewater

had, no doubt, shown himself to be sensitive to public criticism and swift to resent affront and his enemies then, as regularly thereafter, schemed to divert his pursuit of

¹⁵Daily Republican, July 10, 1873; Sorenson, Story of Omaha, pp. 438-439.

¹⁶Daily Herald, July 16, 1876; Sorenson, Story of Omaha, p. 440.

themselves or their allies by keeping him busy refuting their charges and misrepresentations. Rosewater always could be most easily incensed by diatribes at his race or foreign birth, by sneers at his stature, by imputations upon his honesty and sincerity. He could be vitriolic, too, and did not hesitate to "do his duty" at the risk of provoking reprisals. So personalities flew back and forth, fast and furious between the older morning sheets and the new sprightlier evening daily, ready to flare up in a moment into physical encounter.¹⁷

Edward Rosewater constantly advocated public improvements, and was himself personally responsible for an asset to the local scene in 1889, when the Bee Building, which had been under construction for two years at Seventeenth and Farnam, was completed. Hailed as the "largest fire proof newspaper office" in the United States, the building stood six stories high, and was built of red granite and brown pressed brick, in early Italian Romanesque architectural style.¹⁸

Rosewater was influential in the selection of the site of the Douglas County Court House at Eighteenth and Farnam, and the location of the city hall opposite the court house building.¹⁹ He was also an original promoter of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition, which took place in Omaha in 1898.²⁰ Rosewater served at various times as a member of the Republican National Committee and its advisory board. He represented the United States at Universal Postal Congresses in 1897 and 1906, and served on the United States Mint Commission in

¹⁷Rosewater, "Edward Rosewater," p. 97.

¹⁸Morning Bee, June 19, 1889.

¹⁹Sorenson, Story of Omaha, p. 438.

²⁰Morton and Watkins, History of Nebraska, I, 746.

1897.²¹ Rosewater was an unsuccessful candidate for the United States Senate in 1900 and 1906. He campaigned for direct election of senators, civil service and labor reforms, and the establishment of a postal telegraph system and postal savings banks. He opposed trusts and unequal taxation. His campaign circulars announced that he was "Free from Corporation Strings" and "Always Close to the People."²²

On August 30, 1906, Edward Rosewater was found dead of apparent heart failure in the Bee building.²³ In 1911 an Omaha public school was named in his memory.²⁴ The Bee was conducted by Edward Rosewater's sons, Victor and Charles, until 1920, when it was sold to Nelson Updike. A merger was effected with the Omaha News in 1927, and the following year the Bee-News was purchased by the Hearst syndicate, which maintained the paper until its demise in 1937.²⁵

As a Jew, Edward Rosewater was something of an enigma. He never affiliated with a synagogue, nor did he participate in the social

²¹Campaign circular, "For United States Senator," in Rosewater Collection, American Jewish Archives.

²²Ibid.; Morning Bee, October 28, 1900.

²³Morning Bee, September 1, 1906. Among Rosewater's many bequests was the designation that the income from a \$10,000 fund be set aside for the technical education of the worthy son of an Omaha mechanic. He also left five shares of Bee stock to Wise Memorial Hospital (letter to Victor Rosewater from A. D. Brandeis, July 8, 1907, in Rosewater Collection, American Jewish Archives; Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 12; Morning Bee, September 4 and 6, 1906). Rosewater's funeral service was held in the Bee building under Masonic auspices, with several clergymen, including Rabbi Frederick Cohn, as speakers. He was buried at Forest Lawn Cemetery (Morning Bee, September 1 and 2, 1906).

²⁴Morning Bee, June 5, 1911.

²⁵World-Herald, February 20, 1966.

affairs of the Jewish community. Among his few publicized connections with Jewish causes was his work in behalf of Wise Memorial Hospital and an occasional appearance at a public function. Rosewater was on some occasions criticized by his opponents in the newspaper world for his apparent indifference to his religion. The Daily Republican once commented that

it is noticeable that Mr. Rosewater's devotion to the Jews consists solely of an attempt to stir that race of people into indignation against THE REPUBLICAN. In other ways he fights very shy of them. He has never been remarkable for upholding the Jewish faith or Jewish customs, nor has he ever said anything in his paper favorable to his race. . . . His associates have never been Jews, and in no way has he ever appeared to hold any sort of communion with the people whom he affects with such indignation to defend whenever he is alluded to as one of them.

The Jewish people need no defense at the hands of Mr. Rosewater, first because THE REPUBLICAN has never attacked them, secondly, because Mr. Rosewater has no authority to speak for them, and, thirdly, because he is about the worst thing that ever happened to them.²⁶

Rosewater, however, did not deny his religion, and once wrote that he "would not change . . . [his] ancestry if . . . [he] could."²⁷

While Edward Rosewater sought prominence in journalism and politics, Jonas L. Brandeis found success in the business world. The

²⁶Daily Republican, May 22, 1883.

²⁷Typescript on Bee stationery, apparently an editorial, dated 1891, in Rosewater Collection, American Jewish Archives. Leah Colman Rosewater, who died in 1914, affiliated with the Congregation of Israel after her husband's death (Morning Bee, July 30, 1914). Ella Fleishman Auerbach, in her undocumented manuscript "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," gives Rosewater credit for more philanthropic activity on behalf of his fellow Jews. This writer, however, was able to find little evidence to support this view. In Victor Rosewater's biography of his father there is not a single word that would indicate that Edward Rosewater was a Jew.

Omaha Bee, commenting on the achievements of the Brandeis interests, stated that "its prosperity has been a part of the growth of the city and its faith in the city has been shown by its constant endeavor to grow within the city."²⁸

Jonas L. Brandeis was born in Prague in 1837 and came to the United States at the age of seventeen. Brandeis went first to Milwaukee, where he met and married Fanny Teweles.²⁹ The young couple soon settled in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, where Brandeis traded with the Indians in furs and grain and learned the rudiments of retailing. In 1881, having heard of Omaha's possibilities as a growing railroad center, Brandeis and his wife and four children came to Nebraska. A one-room store at Thirteenth and Howard, called The Fair, was opened in December of that year.³⁰ J. L. Brandeis had ideas that were unknown to the retail business in the 1880's. He kept his store windows lighted at night, and he included illustrations in his newspaper advertisements. Every Saturday night he released a dozen balloons which contained coupons redeemable for a free suit of clothes. Before long The Fair found it necessary to enlarge its quarters.³¹

²⁸Morning Bee, February 27, 1910.

²⁹Morning Bee, January 24, 1903; World-Herald, September 22, 1963; Sorenson, Story of Omaha, p. 563.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 563-564; World-Herald, October 14, 1951 and September 22, 1963.

³¹World-Herald, October 14, 1951 and September 22, 1963.

Arthur, Hugo, and Emil Brandeis were taken into their father's business in the late 1880's and the firm found a new location at 114 South Sixteenth Street. It was then called The Boston Store, and the name J. L. Brandeis and Sons was printed over the door. In 1891 a new four-story Boston Store was built at the northwest corner of Sixteenth and Douglas streets. This structure was completely destroyed by fire in February of 1894, and the firm was forced to find temporary quarters at Fifteenth and Dodge until a new store could be built on the site of the former structure.³²

Jonas L. Brandeis died early in 1903, leaving the business to his three sons. Long before his death the elder Brandeis "had built up from a small establishment one of the greatest retail stores in the west."³³ Brandeis interests eventually provided the land and much of the impetus for the Fontenelle Hotel, Omaha Athletic Club, Elks Club, and the Medical Arts Building. The Brandeis Theater and office building was completed in 1910.³⁴ J. L. Brandeis was generous both during his lifetime and after, and his will directed that considerable sums be left to various charities, including the Creche, the Omaha Benevolent Society, the Cleveland Orphan Asylum, and Temple Israel.³⁵

³² Sorenson, Story of Omaha, p. 564; World-Herald, September 22, 1963; Morning Bee, July 29, 1894.

³³ Sunday Bee, January 25, 1903.

³⁴ World-Herald, October 14, 1951; Sorenson, Story of Omaha, p. 566.

³⁵ Morning Bee, January 28, 1903. Both Emil and Hugo Brandeis died in 1912, Emil in the sinking of the Titanic (Morning Bee, April 17,

As the Brandeis store was beginning to prosper, three Jews, Morris Levy, Herman Cohn, and M. Strasburger, in 1886 founded the Nebraska Clothing Company as one of a chain of stores that stretched from Kansas City to Portland, Oregon.³⁶ Herman Cohn was born in Prussia and came to the United States in 1871. He soon went into the retail business, first in New York and then at Smithport, Pennsylvania.³⁷ Morris Levy was born in Germany and came to the United States in 1866 at the age of twenty-two. He began as a peddler, and then he, too, entered the retail business at Olean, New York. In 1876 Levy and Cohn associated with Strasburger, who never came to Omaha.³⁸

The Nebraska Clothing Company was initially located at Fourteenth and Douglas, and moved to its permanent location at Fifteenth and Farnam in 1898. The firm pioneered the so-called "one-price" selling system. It soon became one of Omaha's most successful retail

1912 and July 22, 1912). Arthur Brandeis then brought to Omaha a cousin, George Brandeis, who had been brought to the United States by J. L. Brandeis and who had been with the Boston Store in Chicago (Morning Bee, November 10, 1912). Arthur Brandeis remained active in both civic and Jewish affairs until his death in 1916 (Morning Bee, June 11, 1916; Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 19). Mrs. J. L. Brandeis, who died in 1905, was primarily responsible for the creation and maintenance of the Wise Memorial Hospital, and organized a sewing class for Russian Jewish immigrants (Morning Bee, May 20, 1905). George Brandeis married a Catholic and most of the Brandeis family gradually lost its Jewish identity.

³⁶Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 464; Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 23.

³⁷Ibid. Cohn was married in 1890 to Sarah Brandeis, daughter of J. L. Brandeis. He built the Loyal Hotel and named it for his son.

³⁸Jewish Press, July 26, 1923; Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 23.

establishments, and its owners became active in civic and religious affairs. When Morris Levy died in 1923 he was said to be "one of the richest men in Omaha," and it was stated that "no individual or charitable organization applying to him for aid went away empty handed."³⁹ Morris Levy was a member of the Omaha School Board, and was very active in the affairs of Temple Israel, the Associated Jewish Charities, and the Omaha Jewish Institute. He served as president of Temple Israel, and was a founder of the Jewish Press. He was largely instrumental in the federation of the Omaha Jewish community, and gave generously of his time and resources until his death.⁴⁰

While Omaha and its Jewish citizens prospered and organized, their numbers were rather suddenly increased by the arrival of the first contingents of Russian Jewish immigrants. These newcomers, always poor and often uneducated and untrained, were aided by those Omaha Jews who had attained success and wealth. By the increase in population alone the structure of the Omaha Jewish community was at once strengthened and complicated.

³⁹World-Herald, July 24, 1923.

⁴⁰Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 21; Jewish Press, July 26, 1923. Herman Cohn died in 1911 (Morning Bee, March 27, 1911). The Nebraska Clothing Company was sold in 1912 by the sole surviving partner, Morris Levy, to his son-in-law, William Holzman, and John A. Swanson (Morning Bee, November 10, 1912). On Levy's death the Jewish Press eulogized that the soon-to-be-built Jewish Community Center would be "a monument to this man--a monument not of cold marble but one throbbing with life and vitality, radiating happiness and the best of Jewish life, Jewish culture, and Jewish tradition, reflecting in all these aspects the life of the one man who above all others had made it possible" (Jewish Press, July 26, 1923).

CHAPTER V
THE REFUGEES

As conditions worsened for the Jews of eastern Europe, they found it increasingly difficult not only to make a living but also to practice their religion. Land ownership was forbidden, as was participation in certain businesses and industries. Government jobs and public positions were closed to Jews. Special taxes were levied on such items necessary to the practice of orthodox Judaism as skull caps, candles, and kosher meat. Jews were not allowed to worship collectively in their homes, and synagogues were permitted only in communities where the number of Jewish families exceeded eighty. Blackmail and bribery flourished.¹ These discriminatory regulations were accompanied by the murder and contumely of pogroms, which, "apart from the loss of life and damage to property . . . left the Russian Jews in a state of stupefaction and horror, with a sense of living on the brink of a precipice."² Emigration seemed the only way to survival.

Though Jews had trickled out of Russia and the neighboring countries prior to 1880, the pogroms started a mass exodus. Some left with the unofficial blessing of officials who were happy to

¹Morning Bee, January 4, 1892.

²Joseph, Jewish Immigration, p. 63.

have a few less Jews to worry about; others sneaked out at night hoping their flight would go undetected. Some walked, some rode in carts, others were able to take advantage of the newly completed railroad system. But all had one destination--the seaports, and passage to America.³ The earliest emigrants made their way on their own. Those departing later were often aided by such philanthropic organizations as the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society and the Jewish Colonization Association, which was founded in 1891 to help in the emigration, colonization, and resettlement of eastern European Jews.⁴

On July 14, 1882, the Jewish population of Omaha was considerably augmented by the arrival of one hundred and sixty-one refugees. Included were some forty families and a number of single men and women, some of whom bore the scars of the ill-treatment they had received at the hands of the authorities in their native land.⁵ Many of these refugees apparently came from Kiev and had set sail for America from Liverpool.⁶ The group had probably congregated in a refugee camp in Brody, Galicia. Arrangements for their passage to the United States were made by the Alliance Israelite Universelle, a European relief society. In New York they were advised by the

³Handlin, Adventure in Freedom, p. 82.

⁴Gabriel Davidson, Our Jewish Farmers and the Story of the Jewish Agricultural Society (New York: L. B. Fischer, [1943]), p. 10. Cited hereafter as Our Jewish Farmers.

⁵Daily Republican, July 16 and 21, 1882; Daily Herald, July 16, 1882; Evening Bee, July 18, 1882.

⁶Daily Republican, July 16 and 21, 1882.

Hebrew Aid Society to avoid the congested conditions on the eastern seaboard, and were therefore put on board a train bound for Omaha.⁷

The Omaha Hebrew Benevolent Society met the refugees on their arrival at the depot, and found temporary quarters for them in buildings at Thirteenth and Jackson and Tenth and Farnam.⁸ Most of the arrivals were penniless and a committee was organized by the Hebrew Benevolent Society to raise funds, to collect food, clothing, and farming implements, and to find jobs for the immigrants.⁹ Since it was presumed that many of the men had been farmers in Russia, the committee initially hoped to raise enough money to purchase land for a colony.¹⁰ This plan was never realized, but before long jobs, usually menial, and housing, often crowded, were found for the refugees. One group was assigned to work on the Omaha and St. Paul Railroad, then under construction. Others joined the labor force on the North Omaha sewer project. Some of those working on the sewer,

⁷Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 24; Daily Herald, July 16, 1882.

⁸Daily Republican, July 16, 1882; Daily Herald, July 16 and 18, 1882. Those Omaha Jews primarily responsible for the care of the refugees were J. Harris, Charles Schlank, Philip Gottheimer, J. C. Rosenfeld, Albert Heller, Meyer Hellman, Julius Meyer, Samuel Jacobs, Morris Elgutter, I. Schiff, Henry Baswitz, and Sol Prince (Evening Bee, Daily Herald, and Daily Republican, July 18, 1882).

⁹Daily Republican and Evening Bee, July 21, 1882.

¹⁰Evening Bee, July 21, 1882. Actually it was likely that few, if any, had been farmers in Russia, since the percentage of Russian Jews engaged in agriculture was very small (Joseph, Jewish Immigration, p. 42). It was also thought, or perhaps hoped, at first, that these refugees were well off financially.

unaccustomed as they were to manual labor, found the summer heat too much for them and were forced to find other employment.¹¹ Several members of the group were relocated elsewhere, a few in Council Bluffs, and others in Chicago and St. Louis.¹²

A number of these refugees eventually became well-established Omaha citizens, and several had a marked influence on the practice of traditional Judaism in Omaha. The city's first mohel, Julius Cherniss, and Henoah Marks, who opened the first kosher butcher shop, were among them.¹³

The stream of east European immigration continued throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth, until the First World War. Some Jews who eventually settled in Omaha had originally been members of agricultural colonies. In 1882, twenty Jewish families were settled on free government homesteads in Burleigh County, North Dakota. This colony, which was called Painted Woods, ultimately comprised over two hundred individuals, but by 1885 the hardships of severe weather, drought, and prairie fires, despite financial help from the Jewish community of

¹¹Evening Bee, July 22 and 27, 1882.

¹²Evening Bee, July 22 and August 10, 1882; Daily Herald, August 11, 1882.

¹³Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," pp. 25-26; World-Herald, November 8, 1952. Prior to 1882, kosher meat was prepared by the local shohet, Jacob Bramson, in a non-kosher butcher shop. Others in the group were the Slosberg family, Harry and Sol Brodkey, and Max Bellman, Abraham Rachman, and Will Rachman, who were instrumental in the organization of the orthodox congregations.

St. Paul, forced them to give up.¹⁴ Some of the members of the Painted Woods colony went north and joined another group that was somewhat more successful in establishing a colony at Devil's Lake, in Ramsey County.¹⁵

In South Dakota, Herman Rosenthal and several other families founded a colony in Davison County, and named it Cremieux, in honor of the president of the Alliance Israelite Universelle. These colonists were met with the same hardships that befell the North Dakota pioneers, and within three years their efforts also ended in failure.¹⁶ Although the majority of these colonists found their way to the Jewish communities in Minnesota and Chicago, some came also to Omaha.¹⁷

In western Nebraska, government land was made available in 1906 under the Kinkaid Act, and about fifteen immigrant Jewish families settled in Cherry County, some forty miles from Hyannis,

¹⁴ American Jewish Year Book 5763 (1912-1913), p. 61; Plaut, The Jews in Minnesota, pp. 96-103.

¹⁵ American Jewish Year Book 5763 (1912-1913), p. 93; Plaut, The Jews in Minnesota, pp. 104-109.

¹⁶ Davidson, Our Jewish Farmers, pp. 215-218; American Jewish Year Book 5763 (1912-1913), p. 60.

¹⁷ Questionnaire returned by Harry Trustin; interview with Mrs. Philip Rosenblatt, September 21, 1967. The colonists, on arriving in Omaha, were shunned by their orthodox co-religionists, who wondered what kind of Jews these could be who had lived in the wilderness so far removed from their counterparts. Omaha Jews remained suspicious of these former colonists until it was discovered that one family had been at Castle Garden, the immigrant receiving station at New York, at the same time as some who had come to Omaha several years earlier.

in 1910.¹⁸ At about the same time a settlement of Jews was made near Torrington in eastern Wyoming, just twenty miles from Mitchell, Nebraska. Some of these Nebraska and Wyoming colonists, too, eventually came to Omaha.¹⁹

Jewish refugees arriving in Nebraska were aided by the organization, in 1891, of the Omaha branch of the Jewish Alliance of America, which had been founded for the purpose of establishing small Jewish communities in some of the less populated areas of the country, particularly in the south and west.²⁰ A committee was formed in Omaha to investigate the possibility of purchasing a tract of land within fifty miles of the city, where a farming community might be established. The purpose of this plan was to provide the immigrants with an occupation other than peddling, and to find work for them in factories in the area.²¹ Although the Omaha Jewish Alliance undoubtedly aided in the settlement of the new arrivals in the community, plans for a farming colony in the Omaha vicinity were never realized.

¹⁸Olson, History of Nebraska, p. 268; Davidson, Our Jewish Farmers, p. 28; American Jewish Year Book 5763 (1912-1913), p. 98.

¹⁹Ibid.; Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 35. The failure of these agricultural colonies resulted in the creation of the Baron de Hirsch Fund and the Jewish Agricultural Society, which had considerably more success in maintaining the Jewish farm movement (Davidson, Our Jewish Farmers, p. 196).

²⁰Morning Bee, August 9, 1891; Zosa Szajkowski, "The Attitude of American Jews to East European Jewish Immigration (1881-1893)," Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, XL (March, 1951), pp. 237-238.

²¹Morning Bee, August 25, 1891 and December 14, 1891.

In 1899 there began a large wave of Jewish emigration from Roumania to the United States.²² A sizeable group of Roumanian refugees arrived in Omaha on September 13, 1900. A Roumanian Refugee Committee was appointed from the membership of seven charitable organizations within the Jewish community, with the intention of raising enough funds to enable each refugee family to receive a sum of fifty dollars on arriving in Omaha. Shelter and jobs were also provided for the newcomers, who were soon assimilated into the Jewish community.²³

The Industrial Removal Office was created in 1901 under the auspices of the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society, for the express purpose of removing Jewish refugees from the crowded cities of the eastern seaboard and finding homes for them in the interior of the country. Agents were sent out to find prospective employers and sponsors for Jewish immigrants. Local committees were organized, and a specific allowance was granted for each family and individual settled under the auspices of the Industrial Removal Office.²⁴

The I. R. O. also administered the so-called Galveston Plan, under which an attempt was made to settle immigrants in the interior through the creation of a port of entry in the south. More than

²²Kissman, "Roumanian Jews," p. 161.

²³Morning Bee, September 15, 1900.

²⁴Davidson, Our Jewish Farmers, p. 10, 20; Samuel Joseph, History of the Baron de Hirsch Fund (/Philadelphia: Baron de Hirsch Fund, c. 1935/), pp. 185-187. Cited hereafter as Hirsch Fund.

5,000 immigrants were processed through Galveston by 1912.²⁵ Immigrants were placed, as much as was possible, according to their vocations, and thus butchers were sent to Kansas City, Fort Worth, and Omaha, carpenters to Grand Rapids, and tanners to Milwaukee. The Jewish Immigrants' Information Bureau was established to allay the worries of those Jews who were unfamiliar with the midwest and who would have preferred the crowded east where they were more certain of finding friends and relations from the old country.²⁶ As the activities of the Industrial Removal Office expanded, it was separated from the Jewish Agricultural Society and after 1907 was supported mainly from funds raised through the Jewish Colonization Association.²⁷

In total, the Industrial Removal Office was responsible for the removal and settlement of more than 100,000 Jewish refugees in over 1,000 cities and towns in the central and southern United States. Added to this number were countless Jews who came to these locations according to the so-called "magnet theory," by following friends and relatives who had previously been settled in a particular area.²⁸

²⁵Ibid., pp. 205-209.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 207-208.

²⁷Davidson, Our Jewish Farmers, p. 22.

²⁸Joseph, Hirsch Fund, p. 205; Davidson, Our Jewish Farmers, p. 23. David Bressler, who became General Manager of the Industrial Removal Office in 1903, said: "The aim of the Removal Office is to act as an invisible force to direct the stream of Jewish working men to our Western country, and it sets before itself the ideal that the time may come that of the Jews who land at Ellis Island in any one year, a majority of them will voluntarily and instantly depart for the interior upon their own initiative and without outside assistance" (Joseph, Hirsch Fund, p. 198).

The Omaha representative of the Industrial Removal Organization was Reverend Esau Fleishman, a native of Lithuania who had lived first in Sioux City and who came to Omaha in 1888 and was a mohel and shohet.²⁹ A total of 2,135 Jewish refugees were settled in twenty-three Nebraska cities and towns by the Industrial Removal Office between 1901 and 1917, the majority of them in Omaha. The stream of immigrants handled by the I. R. O. reached its peak in 1907 when a total of 336 Jewish immigrants arrived in Nebraska, and tapered off considerably after 1908.³⁰

Fleishman, assisted by a committee, met every train carrying refugees, and found housing for them, often in his own home until other arrangements could be made. For those lacking a trade or skill, jobs were found in the packing houses, smelters, and Union Pacific shops. Nearly all of those who came were unaccustomed to hard manual labor. Many found the Omaha Jewish community too small and suffered from loneliness and frustration, often wishing to be returned to New York where they could join their "landsleute."³¹

²⁹ Questionnaire returned by Ella Fleishman Auerbach, August, 1965. Fleishman was assisted by Harry B. Zimman, Carl Brandeis, Morris Levy, Philip Stein, and Jacob Lieb (Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 34). Fleishman was often called upon to perform his services as a mohel in outstate Nebraska and in those communities in Cherry County and Torrington, Wyoming (Auerbach questionnaire). Fleishman was the father of Ella Fleishman Auerbach, author of "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska."

³⁰ Joseph, Hirsch Fund, Appendix H, p. 290.

³¹ Questionnaire, Ella Fleishman Auerbach. Landsleute, or landsmen, are fellow countrymen,--immigrants originating from the same town in Europe.

A typical immigrant was Jacob I. Marks, whose brother-in-law had left Russia to avoid conscription and had been sent to Omaha by the Canadian Industrial Removal Office. Jacob Marks spent four months in New York on his arrival in the United States, and then was granted enough money by the Industrial Removal Office for passage to Omaha. Marks wrote that he arrived in Omaha absolutely penniless, but that "I had my health and one goal--to bring my family from Russia."³²

As Marks was a painter, he joined the Omaha Painters' Union, though he had to borrow \$5.00 to pay his dues. He found a job, but as a newcomer he was paid less than the union wage scale. He eventually learned English and saved enough from his meager salary to send for his wife and three children, whom he had not seen for two years. Marks' wife found the Omaha Jewish community too small, and the family in 1913 moved to Tulsa, where they had relatives who were successfully established.³³

Little was done directly to induce prospective emigrants to settle in mid-western cities until the distribution in 1911 by the Jewish Colonization Association of a pamphlet which described twelve cities considered desirable as destinations for Jewish immigrants. Omaha and South Omaha were pointed out as the most significant points in Nebraska, although the description of the city was less than enthusiastic and may have accounted at least to some extent for the

³²Jacob I. Marks, "Reminiscences." (unpublished typescript, 1959-1960, at American Jewish Archives), pp. 134-136.

³³Ibid., pp. 136-143.

fact that Omaha became the home of far fewer refugees than did such cities as Milwaukee, Kansas City, and Detroit. The pamphlet described Omaha as having a population of about 5,000 Jews, whose economy was considered "not bad." Omaha Jews were divided into three groups, of which the largest comprised workers, the second, store-keepers, and the third, peddlers. The pamphlet explained that there were few Jewish "hand workers" in Omaha because the pay was low, averaging eight or nine dollars per week, and the work was not steady. Butchers were paid two to three dollars weekly. Local Jewish organizations and the economy of the city in general were described. Jewish life in South Omaha, in particular, was spelled out in rather unattractive terms. The pamphlet noted that "anti-semitism is felt very strongly in the packinghouses among the newcomers."³⁴ Perhaps Omaha, with its isolated location and its packinghouses, smelters, and graneries, seemed unappealing to these would-be emigrants.

The eastern European immigrants huddled together on their arrival in the United States. Though those who settled in Omaha did receive some assistance from the established Jewish residents, they looked mainly to each other for support and help in their new community. Most of these refugees in Omaha lived in an area between Ninth and Thirteenth streets, Harney to Center. A particular concentration was found on South Tenth between Harney and Leavenworth, where recently

³⁴Jewish Colonization Association, Amerikanishe Shtedt (Petrograd: 1911), pp. 37-39.

arrived Jews occupied nearly every house and several families often shared the same premises.³⁵

The Jewish immigrant was almost wholly concerned with making a living. He worked in a factory or shop, or peddled goods from door to door or in the country. Since his religion forbade his working on holy days or on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, it was difficult for a pious Jew to work for a gentile. Few did, and most were self-employed, even if peddling apples or collecting junk were the first means of earning a livelihood in America. Most Omaha Jews eventually became engaged in some form of business, either as employers or employees, and far more were in business for themselves than were employed by others. There were few, if any, professionals in the first generation of immigrants.³⁶

The immigrant Jew went to night school to learn English, but continued to speak Yiddish among his landsmen. Often he found that just as he was able to provide the barest necessities for his own family, relatives would arrive from Europe, and he would have to sustain them also, until they were themselves self-sufficient.³⁷

³⁵Omaha City Directory, 1888, pp. 1126-1131. The Jewish population in Omaha remained concentrated in this area until about 1905 when it began a movement to the north which continued for about ten years. About 1920 it began to move gradually westward. It has been estimated that the Jewish population of Omaha doubled between 1900 and 1914 ("Jewish Communal Survey," p. 42).

³⁶"Jewish Communal Survey," pp. 44-45.

³⁷Plaut, The Jews in Minnesota, pp. 156-157; T. Earl Sullenger, The Immigrant in Omaha (Omaha: Municipal University of Omaha, 1932), p. 3. Thirty-five Russian Jews attended a night school in 1892. The class was described as "attentive and eager to learn and a great deal is expected of it" (Morning Bee, December 13, 1892).

The social life of the Jewish immigrant from eastern Europe revolved around the synagogue. The newly arrived Jews formed a distinct community into which were absorbed those who had arrived prior to the early 1880's. The organization of orthodox Jewish religious services in Omaha was now possible.

CHAPTER VI
THE ORTHODOX CONGREGATIONS

The worship of the east European immigrants differed markedly from that of the reform Jews. Orthodox services, which were held twice daily, were highly informal and required only a minyan of ten adult males. No rabbi was necessary and services were often held in private homes, and, as the number of participants increased, in rented halls or store-fronts. The orthodox congregation provided not only for the religious worship of its member, but also for his social needs and physical well-being. It often started as a society which granted sickness and death benefits.¹

The orthodox congregations in Omaha, as in other communities, were organized according to the country of origin of the immigrant. The form and manner of worship and the pronunciation of the language differed in Europe from country to country, and sometimes even from town to town. These nationally oriented services were, in effect, transplanted to America, and therefore there grew up in most American-Jewish communities a variety of orthodox minyans based on the background of the immigrants.² There were in Omaha Lithuanian, Russian,

¹Swichkow and Gartner, The Jews of Milwaukee, p. 170.

²Handlin, Adventure in Freedom, p. 62; Stuart E. Rosenberg, The Jewish Community in Rochester, 1843-1925 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), p. 163. Cited hereafter as Jewish Community in Rochester.

Roumanian, and Hungarian Jews, and often more than one religious grouping was found within the structure of a national group. Because of this approach, there were tremendous difficulties involved in trying to satisfy all of the immigrants. Little cohesion existed either within or among the various orthodox congregations, and there were many splinter groups, as a few individuals would become dissatisfied with the services of one organization, and would join another, or split off and form still another orthodox minyan.³ Reorganization was the rule rather than the exception. As early as 1887 there were at least four orthodox Jewish prayer meetings supported in Omaha by immigrants.⁴

The first recorded orthodox services in Omaha took place in 1880, and gained publicity because some of the participants engaged in a dispute which was later settled in police court.⁵ These services, which were conducted according to the practices of Lithuanian Jews, were held first in a rented house and later in various buildings in the downtown area. The small congregation was served briefly by Reverends Cohen and Leveen, and starting in 1883 by Reverend Abraham Bramson, a shohet who acted also as reader for the prayer meetings.⁶ Dissension persisted within the ranks of the small group, but on October 3, 1883, the congregation B'nai Israel, more familiarly

³Ibid.

⁴Evening Bee, September 15, 1887.

⁵Evening Bee, May 19, 1880.

⁶Morning Bee, February 16, 1890.

known as the "Litvische shul," was formally organized.⁷ A few days later all Omaha Jewry was invited to be guests of the new congregation at Crouse's Hall, Sixteenth and Capitol, "to celebrate the arrival of the new scrolls of the covenant."⁸

The arrival of the Russian refugees in the summer of 1882 considerably increased the number of those attending the orthodox services, and soon prayer meetings were held in different locations so that the members would not have too far to walk.⁹ One minyan was held at Twelfth and Jackson, and later at Fourteenth and Leavenworth. A second was conducted at Tenth and Center streets, near a group of houses owned by David Skolnikovsky, who looked after many of the immigrants when they first arrived in Omaha.¹⁰ These services were eventually moved to Thirteenth and Center, and

⁷Evening Bee, January 1, 1883; Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, B113. The articles of incorporation transliterate B'nai Israel as Benna Israel, and state that the "said organization should have for its object Christian worship only." This statement was apparently the closest a court clerk could come in transliterating the words of these Yiddish-speaking immigrants, who were not able to read what was recorded. The signers of the articles of incorporation were Moses Horwich, Jacob Schuller, Jacob Levi, and David Skolnikovsky. Charter members were Moses and Harris Horwich, Jacob Kendis, Jacob Levy, David Skolnikovsky, Jacob Bernstein, Abraham Bernstein, Hyman Greenblatt, Herschel Glickman, I. Gilinsky, and Louis Harris (Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 44). "Litvische shul" means Lithuanian synagogue.

⁸Daily Republican, October 7, 1883; Evening Bee, October 6, 1883. "Scrolls of the covenant" refer to a Torah. Disputes, most of them involving Abraham Bernstein, continued to plague the congregation (Evening Bee, October 24, 1883).

⁹Orthodox Jews do not ride on the Sabbath or on Jewish holy days.

¹⁰Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 43.

Thirteenth and William streets, where the orthodox Jewish population was concentrated.¹¹

Early in 1889 a disagreement arose in the congregation E'nai Israel over the selection of a religious leader. Abraham Bernstein, whose relative wealth allowed him considerable influence over the immigrants and who had been involved some years earlier in a similar incident at services of the Congregation of Israel, supported Rabbi S. Goldstein. The ideas advocated by Goldstein were deemed too liberal by a majority of those present, who favored retention of Reverend Bramson. Bernstein was "mobbed by a number of indignant fellow Jews" whom he later had arrested on charges of assault and battery.¹² These difficulties were to some extent ironed out by a reorganization of the congregation and the dedication of an existing building at 1407 South Thirteenth Street as a new synagogue on August 25, 1889. At the dedication, "the attendance was large, the interest manifested great and a liberal collection was taken up."¹³

In 1888, the Lithuanian Jews organized a Talmud Torah under the administration of Jacob Gordon, and in 1891 the first ordained orthodox

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Daily Republican and Morning Bee, January 22, 1889. Bernstein, in the guise of helping indigent Jewish immigrants to get started in business, apparently took frequent advantage of them. The Bee recorded that "with his money he has been able to defy justice, escape the penitentiary, and act the autocrat among his own people" (Evening Bee, December 14, 1882).

¹³Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 46; World-Herald, August 18, 1889; Evening Bee, August 26, 1889.

rabbi to serve Omaha Jewry, Rabbi Henry Grodzinsky, arrived in Omaha.¹⁴ A cemetery, Fisher's Farm, was acquired by the congregation at about this time.¹⁵

A further reorganization of the congregation took place in 1897, at which time the Lithuanian Jews incorporated their congregation under the new name of Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol.¹⁶ In September of that year the members of the newly reorganized congregation held initial services in a remodeled building at 1109 South Thirteenth Street, between Pacific and Pierce. Rabbi Grodzinsky, "a bearded patriarch with a most musical voice," presided over the dedication ceremonies, at which addresses were given by Mayor Frank E. Moores and Rabbi Leo Franklin of the Congregation of Israel.¹⁷ This building continued in use until a new synagogue was constructed at Nineteenth and Burt streets in 1911, by which time the concentration of orthodox Jewish population was shifting to this area on the near north side of downtown Omaha.¹⁸

In 1884 a group of Russian Jews who were dissatisfied with the Litvische congregation decided to organize their own synagogue,

¹⁴Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 33 and p. 43; Evening Bee, September 11, 1888; interview with J. Harry Kulakofsky, October 16, 1967. Rabbi Grodzinsky was born and educated in Poland and served all the orthodox congregations in Omaha for many years.

¹⁵Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 44.

¹⁶Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, I461. Trustees were Aaron Rubenstein, Lewis Miller, and Harris Horwich. Moses Horwich was listed as clerk.

¹⁷Morning Bee, September 16 and 20, 1897.

¹⁸Morning Bee, August 26, 1911.

Chevra B'nai Israel Adas Russia. Thus the Society of Russian Israelites was incorporated for the stated purpose of promoting "Fraternity, Love and Friendship." Mark Horowitz served as its first president, and each member agreed to pay fifteen cents weekly dues towards the support of religious services. The membership fee was two dollars, of which fifty cents was payable in advance and the balance whenever possible. All members were required to be present at services when another member observed yartzeit.¹⁹

Dissension prevailed also in the early days of the Russian congregation, and a month after the initial organization the president of the society was suspended for attending the prayer meeting of another group. New officers were named forthwith, with Pincus Chaikin now serving as president. The money in the treasury was designated for the purpose of purchasing those items necessary for Jewish religious observance,--a "Holy Closet," a reading stand, and a shofar.²⁰

¹⁹Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, B217, May 11, 1884. Other officers were listed as follows: B. Brhadinowitz, vice president; M. Bellman, secretary; J. Schlosberg, treasurer; S. Baswitz and H. Greenberg, trustees. Yartzeit, translated as year time, is the anniversary of a death at which time the Kaddish, or sanctification prayer, is recited in memory of the departed.

²⁰Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, B218, October 6, 1884. Other officers elected at this time were: Wolf Reichman, vice president; and Towie Catlin and Mayer Barnet, trustees. A shofar is a ram's horn sounded at services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. A list of members of the congregation was appended to these articles of incorporation as follows: Abraham Reichman, Abraham Baswitz, A. Yanowsky, A. Cohen, B. Weissman, B. Danowitz, H. Greenberg, H. Bes Brodka, B. Zetelin, L. Zetelin, T. Catelin, P. Shaken, J. Schlosberg, S. Bes Brodka, Wolf Chadrakowski. The "History of the Chevra B'nai Israel," which was deposited in the cornerstone of the synagogue built in 1910 at Eighteenth and Chicago, listed the following as

The Russian congregation met for a time in rooms at Tenth and Eleventh and Jones, and then for several years in rented quarters at 111 North Tenth Street.²¹ In 1886 the Russian Relief Society was organized to raise funds for a synagogue building, and two years later land on Capitol Avenue between Twelfth and Thirteenth streets was leased for ten years at a rate of \$25 per month.²² On June 30, 1889 the first orthodox synagogue building in Omaha was dedicated. Its membership, which numbered about eighty at the time, was entirely foreign born. A local paper noted that many of the immigrants, all of whom had arrived in Omaha "in abject condition . . . have risen from poverty to wealth and are among Omaha's most enterprising citizens."²³ At the time of the dedication of the Russian B'nai Israel, the congregation was served by the Reverend J. Borliant. Rabbi N. I. Benson presided over the dedication ceremonies, and a long address was given by Mayor Broatch.²⁴

founders of the congregation in 1884: A. Rachman, Hensch Marks, Hirsch Greenberg, Abram Baswitz, Mordecai Bellman, Ephraim Baswitz, Wolf Rachman, Boruch Weisman, Benjamin Donowitz, Bernard Mayer, Hirsch Brodkey, Solomon Brodkey, Isaac Schlosberg, Moses Buchman, Chaim Levine.

²¹"The History of the Chevra B'nai Israel of Omaha, Nebraska," translated from the Yiddish by Rabbi Isaac Nadoff; Omaha City Directories, 1885-1888.

²²Morning Bee, June 30, 1889; "History of Chevra B'nai Israel."

²³Morning Bee, June 30, 1889. The synagogue was built at a cost of between \$5,000 and \$6,000.

²⁴American Israelite, XXXVI (July 11, 1889), p. 1. It is interesting to note that the Litvische shul dedicated a new building just two months later, and that the two congregations would be building new structures again in 1910. This might have been simply coincidental, or, as seems more likely, might indicate a certain amount of competition between the two congregations.

Membership in B'nai Israel also entitled the Russian Jews to the advantages of a benefit society, which granted three dollars weekly during sickness and one hundred dollars on the death of a member.²⁵ In 1888 the congregation purchased land for Golden Hill Cemetery for one hundred dollars.²⁶ Shortly before the synagogue was built the congregation apparently passed through one of the reorganizations so frequent in orthodox societies. New articles of incorporation were filed in April of 1888, and a year later officers were elected twice within one week.²⁷

The congregation encountered severe financial difficulties shortly after occupying their new synagogue building, and creditors threatened to attach the building for non-payment of bills for building materials. At a special meeting, members were asked to contribute funds to defray the outstanding debts, and "even though all the members were very poor, the thought of losing their synagogue drove them so, that every member strained himself to the limit so that enough money could be raised to pay the creditors all that was due them."²⁸ It was decided a few years later to purchase the land on which the synagogue was built. Since the members of the congregation were unable to raise the \$3,000 necessary, the owner of the property,

²⁵Morning Bee, July 1, 1889.

²⁶Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 39.

²⁷Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, C522, April 8, 1888; Morning Bee, April 19 and 25, 1889.

²⁸"History of Chevra B'nai Israel."

Effie Bowman, accepted interest-free notes from some of the members of the congregation. By 1895 the debt had been discharged.²⁹

Shortly after the turn of the century the congregation purchased land on Twenty-first and Chicago for a new building, but this property was later sold and another tract purchased at Eighteenth and Chicago on which a new synagogue was dedicated in 1910.³⁰ By this time the membership numbered one hundred and fifty families, and the congregation was served by Rabbi Henry Grodzinsky, who also ministered to Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol.³¹

As the Lithuanian and Russian Jews were establishing their congregations, another society, Chevra Bikur Cholim, or society for visiting the sick, was organized in 1885 by Jews of Hungarian origin. Incorporated as a charitable society to help its members in sickness and death by "relieving their distress and necessities in illness, and providing a burial for them when dead," Bikur Cholim also held weekly and high holiday services.³² For a few years meetings were held at

²⁹Ibid.; Morning Bee, September 17, 1895.

³⁰Morning Bee, December 9, 1906 and June 26, 1910.

³¹Morning Bee, June 26, 1910. Shortly after the laying of the cornerstone of the new synagogue, the congregation filed new articles of incorporation (Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, U221-224, July 31, 1910). Officers at the time were: Jacob Katelman, president; Mendal Blank, vice president; Elihu Block, secretary; Aaron Ferer, treasurer; Samuel Ravitz, Chaim Friedel, and M. Zelner, trustees (Program, Chavra Bnei Israel [sic], Laying of the Corner Stone, June 26, 1910).

³²Evening Bee, September 8, 1885; Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, B579, January 13, 1887. The names signed to the incorporation papers were: Jacob Harris, A. Kline, Isaac Brown, Charles Shaw, and Henry Speigle.

the Unitarian Church, but in 1890 the society rented the former Garneau Church building at Twelfth and Jackson, and at the same time opened a Sabbath school "for poor Jewish youth." Rabbi N. I. Benson, who had formerly served the Congregation of Israel, for a time conducted the services and religious school of the Bikur Cholim society.³³ The organization also purchased a cemetery tract adjacent to that of the Congregation of Israel.³⁴

In the fall of 1896 the Bikur Cholim, led by Jacob Klein, reorganized under the name of the Hungarian Society. Members held meetings twice monthly in the Bee building and later purchased a site on North Nineteenth Street. At this time the Hungarian Society numbered about eighty members.³⁵

Some of the members of the Hungarian Society were apparently instrumental in the founding of the B'nai Jacob Anshe Sholem, which first held services at Twenty-Second and Cuming after the turn of the century. Jacob Klein, who had come to Omaha in 1873, was primarily responsible for the initial organization of this congregation,

³³Morning Bee, February 16, 1890 and April 4 and 27, 1890. The Litvische shul had formerly held a service at the location at Twelfth and Jackson.

³⁴Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 47.

³⁵Ibid.; Morning Bee, August 14, 1897; Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, I362, May 11, 1897. Officers were: Adolph Brown, president; David Gross, vice president; Charles Singer, secretary; J. Rosenblum, financial secretary; I. Sommer, treasurer (ibid.; Morning Bee, March 21, 1897). The building site was never utilized. The Hungarian Society changed its name to the Liberty Society of Omaha in 1918 (Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, D2596, August 21, 1918), and to B'nai Scholem in 1919 (Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, G2210, December 21, 1919).

which was incorporated in 1906.³⁶ In 1909 the congregation bought and remodeled the former Second Presbyterian Church at Twenty-fourth and Nicholas. The members walked en masse from their former building to the new one. Rabbi Grodzinsky led the procession, with the boys of the congregation bearing the books, torahs, and flags.³⁷ This congregation, called the Kapulier, also purchased a cemetery tract at Pleasant Hill.

A number of other orthodox congregations were organized in Omaha, but most of them eventually dissolved and their members affiliated with other synagogues. The Congregation of Russian Israelites Shomry Shabos was incorporated in 1887 by a group of Russian Jews who had probably been members of the Russian B'nai Israel, but who came to consider themselves too pious for that organization.³⁸ Another group, B'nai Jacob, organized in 1889 under a Reverend Goldstein, who may have been the same gentleman whose religious doctrines caused difficulties in the Lithuanian B'nai Israel earlier in the same year. This congregation was dissolved after a brief existence, and most of its

³⁶Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 45; World-Herald, April 22, 1924; Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, P329, October 16, 1906. M. Markovitz was listed as clerk. Trustees were N. Jacob, M. London, and Will Krasna. Jacob Klein, called "rabbi" because of his high degree of piety, was honored by his followers with the inclusion of his name in that of the congregation (Auerbach, p. 17). Klein died in 1905 (World-Herald, April 22, 1924).

³⁷Sunday Bee, January 10, 1909; Morning Bee, March 2, 1909.

³⁸Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, C207, September 10, 1887. Trustees were Abraham N. Silberman, Mayr Winokur, Munich Steinberg, Nuchem Chazen, Iechiel Alpor, and Bell Goldman.

members joined the Russian B'nai Israel.³⁹ The congregation Sharey Zion, more often called the Shimska Shul, was organized in 1900 with Aaron Ferer as its founder and president. Services, which were directed by Reverend Max I. Zimman and later by Moses Schaze, were held at 1117 Dodge Street and later at Nineteenth and Cuming. There were about thirty members of this congregation, most of whom joined the Russian B'nai Israel after its dissolution.⁴⁰

Beth Hamedrosh Adas Jeshurun was organized in 1916 by a few members of the B'nai Israel who lived too far from that synagogue to walk to Sabbath and holiday services. They purchased a house at Twenty-fifth and Seward in 1920, and two years later constructed a new building at the same site.⁴¹

South Omaha Jews incorporated Adas Jeshurun, or the Congregation of Israel of South Omaha, in 1909. The congregation acquired the former First Presbyterian Church at Twenty-fifth and J streets and refurbished it as a synagogue building.⁴² A Talmud Torah was also

³⁹Morning Bee, February 16, 1890; Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 338. Auerbach in "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," apparently confuses the affairs of this congregation with those of Bikur Cholim.

⁴⁰Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, K408, November 3, 1900; Omaha City Directories, 1906-1907; interview with J. Harry Kulakofsky, October 16, 1967. Other officers of this congregation were: Zaleg Corenman, clerk; Moses Rosenblatt, vice president; Simon Katleman, treasurer; and Simche Corenman, Kalmenusher Schaibel, and Max Launden, trustees.

⁴¹Jewish Press, August 3, 1922; Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 46.

⁴²Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, S630, June 20, 1909; Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 46. First officers were George Wright, president; O. Steinberg, vice president;

established where "every day during the year, save on holidays, about 45 boys, averaging 11 years in age, pour over the ancient lore their fathers have studied for generations."⁴³

Two other small congregations, Agudath Achim and Tifireth Israel, were briefly maintained by Omaha orthodox Jews, and a group of young members of the community organized the Young Israel Synagogue in 1924.⁴⁴

Thus the eastern European refugees built their own religious community within the structure of Omaha Jewry. In general, it was splintered, disorganized, financially insecure, and lacking in strong leadership, both lay and professional. But the most important effect of the settlement of orthodox Jews in Omaha was the development of a considerably more complex, changing, and assuredly stronger Jewish community.

H. Silverman, secretary; Louis Moskovitz, treasurer; M. L. Goldenberg, Abraham Levey, and Harry Lapidus, trustees.

⁴³Morning Bee, July 26, 1919.

⁴⁴American Jewish Year Book 5680 (1919-1920), p. 416; Jewish Press, September 4, 1924 and January 1, 1925.

CHAPTER VII
A COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION

The Jews who began arriving in Omaha from eastern Europe in the early 1880's were vastly different from those who had come from western and central Europe in mid-century. The earliest arrivals had most often stopped elsewhere in the United States, sometimes for a considerable length of time, before arriving in Omaha. Therefore, by the time they took their place in the Omaha community they were at least somewhat Americanized and assimilated. If they did not already speak English, they spoke German or perhaps Bohemian, languages shared with many other Omaha pioneers of various religious faiths. These western European immigrants did not arrive in Omaha direct from the boat or the refugee receiving centers as did their eastern European co-religionists three or four decades later. Indeed, those arriving in Nebraska from Europe in the early days of Omaha's history were not referred to as immigrants, but rather as pioneers. They were not so much refugees from a foreign land as they were brave and hardy men setting out to help build America. They came to this country seeking political freedom, and their country of origin and religious affiliation had little bearing on the lives they led in the United States.

The Jews who fled the hardships and pogroms of eastern Europe, however, were not pioneers. They were refugees,--arriving on United States soil in search of both political and religious freedom, and

often causing a heavy burden for the communities in which they settled. These refugees had not had time for assimilation or Americanization, and they would not necessarily have chosen such processes even had they been faced with a choice. They got off the train in Omaha in much the same condition as that in which they boarded the ships that brought them to the United States. They were a strange looking lot to those accustomed to American modes of dress and speech. Not only were they distinctively foreign and unattractive in appearance but they even spoke their own language, and Yiddish sounded peculiar and even uncouth to Americans, both Jewish and gentile. Unlike the mid-century pioneer who was young, single, full of energy, and eager for a new life in a new country, these refugees were often older, burdened with large families, downtrodden, and unsure about the difficulties of adapting to a new way of life. Instead they tried to accommodate their old ways to new surroundings. In effect, they transplanted the European shtetl, or village, to American cities, and they turned to religion for solace in the new world as they had in the old.¹

To the eastern European immigrant who was a traditional Jew, the Reform Judaism practiced in America was unlike any Judaism they had ever known. Bareheaded men and women sitting together at formal services held only on the Sabbath seemed just as strange and foreign to these orthodox Jews as did traditional worship to the modernized Jew.² Indeed, the refugees had little in common with their Americanized

¹Hirshler, Jews from Germany in the United States, pp. 72-73.

²Davis and Meyer, The Writing of American Jewish History, p. 392.

co-religionists. While the basis of their religion was the same, it seemed in practice immensely different.

Immigrants were perhaps rather more cheerfully welcomed into the Omaha Jewish community, however, than was the case in some cities. There is no evidence that Omaha Jews made any attempts to limit the number of immigrants that were sent to their city, or even that there were any complaints registered in regard to the influx of east European Jews. In contrast, however, Jewish leaders in such cities as Milwaukee, Providence, and Rochester protested bitterly that their benevolent societies were unable to handle any more refugees, and begged to be awarded only the young, single, skilled, and strong.³ Nebraska,--always under-populated,--received its share of refugees whole-heartedly, and perhaps would have been happy to accept even more.

Interaction between the existing Jewish community and the refugees was usually limited to forms of benevolence.⁴ Culturally, socially, and particularly in terms of religious practice, the two

³Szajkowski, "The Attitude of American Jews to East European Jewish Immigration (1881-1893)," p. 222, 232, pp. 238-239. Milwaukee Jews wrote to a New York emigrant aid society as follows: "If you send many more Russians to Milwaukee . . . they will be shipped back to you without permitting them to leave the depot." Jews of Providence, in a similar vein, wrote that "for every new Emigrant you send here we will return two. We have all we can attend to."

⁴The Friday Club, organized in 1888, comprised sixteen Jewish women who met twice monthly to sew garments for the needy and paid dues that were contributed to charity (Morning Bee, January 4, 1901). The Hebrew Ladies Aid Society was also organized in 1888 by ladies of the Congregation of Israel to care for the poor and sick and to bury the dead (Morning Bee, February 10, 1889; Excelsior, September 1, 1894).

groups were widely divergent, and neither was much interested in sharing the customs or institutions of the other, at least in the early years.⁵ Thus the existing community often furnished various forms of charity for the newcomers, and established Jewish businessmen frequently provided the refugees with their first jobs in their new country. As soon as the refugees were able, however, they helped each other, either privately or through their own charitable organizations or religious associations. They accepted the help of the reform Jews only so long as it was absolutely necessary.

By the early 1890's, however, it was no longer possible for very many Omaha Jews to make charitable contributions. The generally poor business conditions of the waning century hit Omaha with great severity. A long period of drought and severe crop losses had for several years been plaguing the great plains, causing depreciation in land values and financial instability.⁶ These conditions, aggravated by a general business depression that began in 1891 and continued in the area for six years, resulted in the crippling and even liquidation of a large number of Omaha business firms. By 1894 another summer of drought and hot winds had so affected Nebraska crops that "financial conditions grew worse and the entire state was almost in the grip of actual famine."⁷ Jobs were impossible to find, and many people had

⁵Plaut, The Jews in Minnesota, p. 110.

⁶Ed. F. Morearty, Omaha Memories (Omaha: Swartz Printing Co., 1917), p. 42.

⁷Pioneer Charles H. Morrill, quoted in Olson, History of Nebraska, p. 243.

already moved to Chicago in hope of finding employment there on the world's fair project. Several banks closed their doors for the last time, and "soup houses and charity stores were the ones doing a thriving business" as "men robust and rugged, willing to work if it could be had; men who were never known to depend upon the helping hands of a generous public . . . were carrying to their homes food that was dished out through public or private charity."⁸

The Jewish refugees were not so seriously affected by the depression, because at that point they had little to lose. They were already poor, and their poverty was merely a matter of degree. One day, or month, or year they may have been somewhat more or less poor than they had been before or would be in the future.

But to the well-established Jews who were members of the Congregation of Israel, the depression was real and threatening. It affected not only their personal financial and business situations, but their entire community organization,--their clubs, their charities, and even their synagogue. Max Meyer, who had been one of Omaha's most prominent and wealthy citizens for nearly thirty years, lost everything he had when his business failed in 1893. When times are bad, business in a jewelry and musical instrument store is likely to be worse than most, and Meyer was forced to close down.⁹ Since nearly all of the

⁸Morearty, Omaha Memories, pp. 54-55. Few Jews, however, were dependent on public charity. In a compilation of the religious affiliations of those applying at Rescue Hall for lodging or food, only one-fourth of one percent were Jews (Morning Bee, December 21, 1893).

⁹Morning Bee, February 16, 1900.

real estate that Meyer owned was mortgaged, that too was lost, and he left Omaha permanently for a job as a jewelry salesman in Baltimore.¹⁰

Meyer Hellman, whose death in 1892 may have been hastened by his precarious financial situation, "was at one time the possessor of immense real estate in Omaha, but was forced to mortgage it to secure his creditors."¹¹ The Hellman home at Twenty-fourth and St. Mary's Avenue was excluded from the mortgage agreement with the intention of providing Mrs. Hellman with a lifelong home. As late as 1900, however, four years after Mrs. Hellman and her daughters had left Omaha, a Milwaukee company attempted to have the home sold in order to satisfy a claim against the Hellman estate.¹²

The mid-nineties also saw the demise of the Keshet Shel Barzel lodge in Omaha, and spelled a period of difficulty for Nebraska Lodge #354 of B'nai B'rith, which suffered a large drop in membership and had great difficulty in maintaining its existence.¹³ The affairs of the Congregation of Israel too, suffered in the depression. Its membership rolls were considerably depleted by voluntary resignations and suspensions of members who were unable to pay their dues.¹⁴

By 1897, when the area was beginning to recover from the effects of the years of depression, a new and different Jewish community was

¹⁰Morearty, Omaha Memories, p. 47.

¹¹Daily News, December 24, 1900.

¹²Morning Bee, December 25, 1900.

¹³Supra, p. 58; Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 50.

¹⁴Supra, p. 53.

emerging in Omaha. Before the advent of the refugees and the hard times of the depression, the majority of Omaha Jews had been well-assimilated, English-speaking, modern in religious practice, and as a group, fairly well-to-do. By the turn of the century, many of those Jews who had been so closely connected with the growth of Omaha had suffered great financial losses and had even left the city. It seemed that the refugees,--unassimilated, Yiddish-speaking, traditional in religious practice, and still as a group, quite poor,--were now in the majority. Though it was several years before members of the orthodox community became leaders of Omaha Jewry, their population considerably augmented and perhaps even preserved the identity of the Omaha Jewish community in general.

Thus the last years of the century found Omaha Jewry poorer in resources but considerably wealthier in numbers. Since the community now embraced both reform and orthodox elements there arose a need for far more organizations and institutions to support its growing and diverse population.

CHAPTER VIII

A DIVERSIFIED COMMUNITY

Although the religious associations of traditional Judaism often served also as mutual benefit societies, the orthodox community was not long in organizing other groups that were more exclusively charitable in nature. Omaha's immigrant Jews soon involved themselves in a network of organizations that was far more complex than that of the reform element. Not until after the turn of the century did the two factions combine their efforts, so that the rosters of some organizations began to include the names of members of both the orthodox synagogues and the Congregation of Israel.

Thus for many years the two branches of Judaism maintained entirely separate social and philanthropic organizations, just as they maintained entirely separate religious associations. Although the efforts of the reform branch were most often directed toward the relief of the immigrant Jew, there was little interaction between the two groups on any other level, and the reform Jews for many years remained the upper strata of Omaha Jewish society.

In 1887 a group of eastern European refugees formed the Hebrew Knights of Charity Association, "to extend aid and support to any worthy person who may ask its assistance, also to propagate the qualities of good fellowship and brotherly love among

its members."¹ A Young Men's Benevolent Association was founded in 1895 by another group of recent immigrants, and dispensed \$467 in charitable contributions during its first year of operation.² Two years later still another Hebrew Benevolent Association was organized with twenty-five refugees as charter members.³ At about the same time a benevolent auxiliary was established within the local B'nai B'rith lodge, whose members were mainly reformed Jews, to raise funds for needy Jews.

The Jewish Ladies Aid and Sewing Society of the Congregation of Israel and the B'nai B'rith Auxiliary combined their efforts and were hailed by a local reporter as the "two best and most useful benevolent organizations among the local Jews."⁴ This combined organization represented the "upper crust" of Jewish society.

Perhaps the strongest of all the charitable societies within the Jewish community for many years was the Omaha Hebrew Club. Organized in 1892 by twenty-five immigrants, the roster had swelled to over 600 by 1922.⁵ Initial officers were Isaac Cassel

¹Douglas County, Nebraska, Corporation Records, C272, November 13, 1887. Officers were L. Calmenson, A. Cornbluth, I. Lipshitz, L. Slobodinsky, B. S. Pelzer, and W. M. Catlin. J. D. Nathanson served as clerk.

²Morning Bee, October 11, 1896. Officers were Charles Cohen, H. B. Zimman, I. Zimman, and J. H. Leslie.

³American Hebrew, November 6, 1897, p. 91.

⁴Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 50; Morning Bee, January 19, 1900.

⁵Jewish Press, June 15, 1922.

as president and Esau Fleishman as secretary.⁶ The Omaha Hebrew Club served many purposes aside from those of conventional charity. It provided legal assistance for its members, many of whom were peddlers who were frequently involved in street disturbances as victims of anti-semitism and ridicule. It also arranged for volunteer nursing care for the sick, as well as a system of sickness and death benefits, much as an insurance policy would provide today.⁷

New fraternal orders, too, were created within the expanding Jewish community. In 1895 Omaha lodge #130, Independent Order Brith Abraham, was founded, and two years later Nebraska State Lodge #144 of the same order was organized by members of the orthodox congregations.⁸ The first Omaha Hebrew Camp of Modern Woodmen of America was established in 1897 and was followed in succeeding years by several other similar groups, all with memberships seemingly drawn from among the immigrant Jews.⁹

An Omaha section of the National Council of Jewish Women, a national service organization, was initially organized late in 1896

⁶Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 53. Charter members also included Moses Schwarz, Mendel Blank, Jacob Katleman, Abraham Monsky, I. Winick, Solomon Greenberg, M. Mabel, S. Becker, B. Wazman, S. Sunberg, Aaron Rubenstein, Arnold Levin, I. Beck, Jacob Kendis, O. Kornblut, Samuel Robinson, Moses, Joe, and Oser Sokolowsky.

⁷Ibid.; Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 46; Jewish Press, June 15, 1922; Morning Bee, August 26, 1904.

⁸Excelsior, April 13, 1895; Morning Bee, January 11, 1897.

⁹Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 46; Morning Bee, December 12, 1897 and February 7, 1898.

by a number of prominent women who were also active in the charitable activities of the Congregation of Israel.¹⁰ A school was established for the children of Russian immigrants, and assistance was lent to the benevolent auxiliary of the B'nai B'rith.¹¹ Shortly after acting as host to a national convention, which was held in Omaha in connection with the Trans-Mississippi Exposition of 1898, the Omaha branch of the National Council of Jewish Women ceased to function on the local level. It was revived some twenty years later.¹²

Orthodox Jewish women founded the Ladies' Relief Society late in 1904 for the purpose of "aiding women only in need and small children with the assistance of doctors and medicine, also other aid which may be found necessary." Dues were twenty-five cents monthly.¹³ The growth of the Ladies' Relief Society paralleled

¹⁰Morning Bee, December 13, 1896 and August 27, 1897.

¹¹Morning Bee, January 25, 1898; Excelsior, December 10, 1898.

¹²Morning Bee, October 24, 1898. Mrs. Alexander Pollack served as president of the Omaha section. When the organization was revived in 1920, Mrs. Frederick Cohn, wife of the rabbi of Temple Israel, served as president (Morning Bee, July 17, 1920). A local chapter of Hadassah, women's Zionist organization, was organized in 1919 with Mrs. Ida Levin as initial president (Hadassah Directory Yearbook, 1966-1967, p. 41).

¹³Ladies' Relief Society Minute Book, December 22, 1904. The first meeting was held at the home of Mrs. A. Kulakofsky, and Mrs. Louis Richards served as the first president. In 1921 the group changed its name to the Jewish Women's Welfare Organization (Jewish Welfare Federation, Annual Report, 1921, p. 12). A typical record of the expenditures of the Ladies' Relief Society read as follows: "Hall rent and cards - \$2.10; Shoes for Brown Child - \$1.30; Cash to Mr. Brown - \$7.00; Goldstein's Horse - \$10.00; Mrs. Baskin's medicine - \$1.25; Mr. Garfinkle (tobacco) - \$2.00; Mrs. Novitsky (Goldstein) - \$5.00; Rent Mrs. Aronoff - \$4.00 (Ladies' Relief Society Minute Book, May 8, 1906).

that of the Omaha Hebrew Club and it was for several years the most active and successful Jewish women's organization in Omaha. As time went on, a number of ladies of the Congregation of Israel affiliated with and participated in the work of the Ladies' Relief Society.¹⁴

Major responsibility for the dispensation of charity within the Jewish community was assumed by the Associated Jewish Charities upon its formation in October of 1903. The primary purposes of the Associated Jewish Charities were to provide immediate relief to needy Jews, to investigate all cases brought to its attention, and to help members of the Jewish community to find jobs.¹⁵ Although there were a few members of the reform branch of Judaism on the board of directors of the Associated Jewish Charities in its formative years, and many among its contributors, the officers were all of eastern European origin and were members of the Orthodox congregations.¹⁶ This would seem to indicate that the direction of charitable activities within the Jewish community had, by the early twentieth century, been assumed by the orthodox Jews. By 1912 the Associated Jewish Charities was cooperating with the Jewish Free Loan Society, the Jewish Immigrants Information Bureau, and the Jewish Ladies' Relief Society in the handling of relief cases in the Omaha area.¹⁷

¹⁴Morning Bee, July 22, 1911.

¹⁵Associated Jewish Charities, Annual Report, 1911.

¹⁶Ibid. Officers in 1911 were S. Ravitz, J. Katleman, H. Friedman, and Louis Harris.

¹⁷Associated Jewish Charities, Annual Report, 1912. The hiring of a paid general secretary, Helen Grodinsky, was made possible in 1912 through funds from the Jewish Immigrants Information Bureau of Galveston. A total of 679 cases was handled in 1912.

By 1914 most of the organizations within the community,--religious, fraternal, and charitable,--had affiliated with the Associated Jewish Charities and the Jewish community was formally federated.¹⁸ Representatives from these organizations now had a place on the board of directors of the Federation, and the work of the Associated Jewish Charities was expanded to include legal and medical aid, employment, loans, immigrant assistance, family counseling, and attention to the problem of transients.¹⁹ The federation of the Jewish community was hailed in the Bee as a movement which

challenges the attention of all our local charity organizations, and of everyone who is interested in or contributes to their support. In other cities, as here, the Jewish charities have taken the lead in federation, and have made it work out successfully.²⁰

In 1899 a movement was started within the Jewish community, sparked by the efforts of Mrs. J. L. Brandeis, Mrs. Charles Schlank, and Mrs. J. Sonnenberg, to consider the establishment of a Jewish

¹⁸ Associated Jewish Charities, Annual Report, 1914. Organizations represented in 1914 were: Congregation B'nai Israel, Nebraska State Lodge #144 Order Brith Abraham, Modern Woodmen Hebrew Camp #4944, Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol, Temple Israel, Omaha Hebrew Club, Hungarian Society, Wise Hospital, Temple Israel Sisterhood, Wm. McKinley Lodge #521 Independent Order B'nai B'rith, Nebraska Lodge #354 B'nai B'rith, Daughters of Israel Aid Society, Ladies Auxiliary of Wm. McKinley Lodge, B'nai Jacob Anshe Sholem, Jewish Ladies' Relief Society, and Ladies Auxiliary of Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol. The act of federation was described as "the concentration of an entire community in an organized effort for charitable and philanthropic endeavor for the general good and benefit of all, doing away with duplication and waste, and bringing to the beneficiary of charity the full measure of the community's support."

¹⁹ Associated Jewish Charities, Annual Report, 1913, 1914.

²⁰ Morning Bee, December 14, 1913.

hospital in Omaha.²¹ All branches of Omaha Jewry were represented on the hospital committee, which set out to raise funds in addition to the twenty-five cents paid by each member of the hospital association in monthly dues.²²

The hospital association acquired and remodeled a three-story frame building at 3208 Sherman Avenue, and on November 17, 1901 the Wise Memorial Hospital was formally dedicated. There were four wards and six private rooms, as well as operating and reception areas. Patients were cared for regardless of religious affiliation or ability to pay.²³ In the first half year of operation, the hospital treated a total of ninety-seven patients, of whom twenty-four were Jewish and only seven were charity patients.²⁴ In the fall of 1902 the Wise Hospital moved into the former J. J. Brown residence at

²¹Wakeley, Omaha, I, 359; Morning Bee, September 26, 1899; American Israelite, XLVIII (November 7, 1901), p. 7. Desire for a Jewish hospital was evidently inspired by alleged discrimination experienced by Jewish charity patients in city hospitals (Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 48). Mrs. J. L. Brandeis was given most of the credit for founding Wise Hospital. On her death the hospital board passed the following resolution: "With patience and perseverance, undaunted by discouragement, she courageously carried forward her plan of founding a permanent institution in the city of Omaha, open and free to the afflicted without distinction as to creed or race" (Morning Bee, June 11, 1905).

²²Morning Bee, September 26, 1899 and October 2, 1899.

²³American Israelite, XLVIII (November 21, 1901), p. 7; Morning Bee, November 11, 1901.

²⁴Report of the Secretary, Wise Memorial Hospital, May 1, 1902, in American Israelite, XLVIII (June 12, 1902), p. 3.

2225 Sherman Avenue. There were now thirty beds and a staff of eight nurses and eleven doctors.²⁵

The building fund of the hospital association was greatly swelled in 1904 by a gift of \$15,000 from Abraham Slimmer, a wealthy eccentric from Waverly, Iowa, whose hobby was the endowment of hospitals.²⁶

Slimmer granted the money conditionally, with the provision that the hospital would be non-sectarian and accommodate charity patients, and that Omaha residents would raise another \$40,000. This they did, through the particular generosity and efforts of Guy C. Barton, Edward Rosewater, and Arthur Brandeis.²⁷ These fund-raising efforts were culminated on February 2, 1908 with the dedication of a newly-constructed, three-story stone and reinforced concrete structure at Twenty-fourth and Harney.²⁸

In 1905 the Omaha Jewish community joined together for the first time in public celebration. The event commemorated the 250th anniversary of Jewish settlement in the United States. In addition to programs at the individual synagogues, the entire community gathered at the Congregation of Israel for a childrens' program and then at the Lyric Building to hear speeches and readings given by Isadore

²⁵Omaha Illustrated Bee, November 30, 1902. The house was built in 1869 (Morning Bee, August 11, 1909).

²⁶Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 45; Swichkow and Gartner, The Jews of Milwaukee, p. 228; Morning Bee, August 9, 1902.

²⁷Morning Bee, December 10, 1905. A number of non-Jews made significant contributions (Morning Bee, February 3, 1908).

²⁸Morning Bee, February 3, 1908.

Ziegler, Simeon Bloom, Martin Sugarman, and Edward Rosewater on the role of Jews in American history.²⁹ An overflow crowd was in attendance and Elgutter remarked that this was "the first time that all of the Jews of Omaha have gathered together, and we should all rejoice in that event."³⁰

As the Jewish population of Omaha continued to increase, a need was felt in the community for an agency that would help to "assimilate foreign emigration, to keep children off the streets, and to provide a Jewish home for Jewish activities."³¹ Under the auspices of Nebraska Lodge #354 of B'nai B'rith a committee was appointed to organize and raise funds for the Omaha Jewish Institute, which opened late in 1907 in the former Dodge home at Twenty-first and Burt streets.³² Although the Institute remained very modest in its scope and facilities, some attempts were made for a time to establish a night school for immigrants, and to set up a Hebrew school and a center for Jewish organizational meetings and lectures.³³

²⁹Morning Bee, November 25, 1905; Program "In Commemoration of the 250th Anniversary of the Settlement of the Jews in the United States," Omaha, 1905.

³⁰Morning Bee, November 27, 1905. The Bee editorialized that "when the Jewish people of Omaha come to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the advent of the Jews to the United States they should remember to hire a bigger hall" (Morning Bee, November 28, 1905).

³¹Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 41.

³²Ibid.; Morning Bee, December 22, 1907.

³³Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 43; Morning Bee, April 3, 1906. Nathan Bernstein, a teacher of physics at Omaha High School and author of "The Story of the Omaha Jews," was very active in the Omaha Jewish Institute and other Jewish activities. The

The eastern European immigrants brought with them from their native lands an affection for the land of Palestine and an interest in the Zionist movement. Reform Jews at this time were either opposed or indifferent to Zionism and therefore the movement remained for many years in the hands of orthodox Jews. The first Zionist organization in Omaha, called Choveie Zion, was organized in the late 1890's with twenty-five members.³⁴ The Dr. Herschel Nordau Gate #24 of the Knights of Zion, a branch of a national organization of American Zionists, was formed in 1902 with over one hundred members. Sisters of Zion and Junior Sons and Daughters of Zion were also soon founded in Omaha.³⁵ In February of 1906 Omaha Zionists combined their efforts with the formation of the United Zion Societies, comprised of representatives of all local Zionist groups. Louis Kneeter and Arthur Marowitz served as president and secretary.³⁶

Along with other charitable endeavors, Omaha Jews were particularly aware of their duty to the elderly among them. In 1911 the Daughters of Israel Aid Society was founded by a group of fifty women dedicated to the establishment of a Jewish old peoples' home

Omaha Jewish Institute was the first of several attempts to establish a Jewish Community Center. These hopes were finally realized in 1926 (Jewish Community Center, Dedication Book, p. 8).

³⁴Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 48.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

and a public bath house for Jewish women.³⁷ After a number of setbacks, a building was opened in 1917 at 2504 Charles Street which accommodated twelve and had a bath house in the rear.³⁸

In addition to charitable societies, there began to develop in the United States around 1900 on both the local and national levels a network of organizations devoted to labor and socialism. A group of socialist brotherhoods called the Arbeiter Ring, or Workmen's Circles, appealed especially to those immigrant Jews who felt alienated from religion and Zionism. Such secular societies afforded the refugee sickness and burial benefits as well as a feeling that he was "connected with something nobler and mightier-- the struggle for justice to the workingman and for the triumph of the socialist ideal."³⁹

A number of Workmen's Circles were organized in Omaha early in the twentieth century, and in 1913 a situation arose in which Workmen's Circle #173 became involved in an attempt to reduce the price of kosher meat in Omaha markets. The socialists suggested the establishment of a cooperative system among kosher meat markets to eliminate competition and the need for so many shohets, since each market traditionally maintained its own ritual slaughterer. Local butchers, however, opposed the idea of a cooperative and

³⁷Morning Bee, January 28, 1913; Report of Daughters of Israel Aid Society, p. 2. A mikveh, or ritual bath, is required by observant Jews for purposes of purification.

³⁸Ibid.; Morning Bee, August 5, 1917.

³⁹Swichkow and Gartner, The Jews of Milwaukee, p. 248.

preferred instead to cut costs by eliminating deliveries.⁴⁰ At any rate, the Workmen's Circle was unsuccessful in bringing about a reduction in meat prices or in establishing a butchers' cooperative.

On the local level a Jewish peddler's union was incorporated in Omaha in 1909 "to protect each member and to help one another in case of distress and when lawfully engaged in business and not when himself looking for trouble." Members were required to be permanent Omaha residents and to own their carts.⁴¹

In 1914 another labor problem arose on the local scene when the employees of Jewish bakeries went on strike because they were expected to work on Saturday nights. Bakery owners incurred the enmity of their orthodox customers by temporarily employing gentile workers as scabs and by baking on the Sabbath. Orthodox Jews boycotted the stores involved, and the synagogues forced each baker to post a bond of \$50 which would be forfeited if bread were baked on Saturday.⁴² After four weeks the affair was settled with an agreement whereby bakers would work a shorter week and no baking would be done on Saturdays.⁴³

As the organization of the Omaha Jewish community grew in scope and complexity, many of those who were active among their co-religionists also became leaders in the secular community. Civic affairs and politics began to involve not only individual Jewish citizens, but the Jewish community as a whole.

⁴⁰Morning Bee, March 21, 1913.

⁴¹Morning Bee, June 29, 1909.

⁴²Morning Bee, January 28, 1914.

⁴³Morning Bee, February 6, 1914.

CHAPTER IX
PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Omaha Jews were active not only in their own community but on the larger scene as well. As the Jewish population of Omaha increased in size and importance, Jews as individuals and as a group became a force increasingly to be reckoned with in professional life and in politics. And as such a force, Jews began to find themselves the objects of both political maneuvering and anti-semitic incidents.

Although few immigrants were engaged in the professions, a number of Jewish physicians and attorneys were counted among Omaha's Jewish population prior to the turn of the century, and as years passed the number of Jews in the professions was considerably augmented. The first known Jew to establish a medical practice in Omaha was Dr. Oscar S. Hoffman, who came in 1884 apparently at the invitation of Max Meyer. Hoffman had studied medicine both in New York and in Europe and served as the first chief of staff of Wise Memorial Hospital.¹

Dr. Charles Rosewater, youngest brother of the Bee editor, came to Omaha in 1886 after studying in Cleveland and abroad.² Drs. E. E.

¹Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 59; Evening Bee, April 22, 1887.

²Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 59; Evening Bee, April 22, 1887.

Sloman, Millard Langfeld, Abram Romm, James Goetz, and Philip Sher were also among the earliest Jewish physicians to practice in Omaha. Of this group, Drs. Romm and Sher were of Russian birth, and both came to Omaha early in the twentieth century.³

Among the first Jewish attorneys to practice in Omaha were Simeon Bloom, Charles S. Elgutter, Isadore Ziegler, and Martin Sugarman. Bloom was not only the first on the scene, but he was one of relatively few early Omaha Jews who was native born. Reared in Indiana and educated in Cincinnati, Bloom served in the Civil War and was a high school teacher for five years before studying law. He came to Omaha in 1877 after briefly practicing in Cincinnati and Detroit. Simeon Bloom served on the board of education of the city of Omaha from 1878 to 1881, and was active in civic and Jewish affairs, often presenting the sermons at the Congregation of Israel services when a rabbi was unavailable.⁴

Charles S. Elgutter was the son of pioneer Morris Elgutter, and was educated at Phillips Exeter Academy and Harvard. He began the practice of law in Omaha in 1891, served for three years on the board of education, and participated widely in both civic and Jewish activities.⁵

³Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," pp. 59-60; Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," pp. 16-17.

⁴Ibid., p. 18; Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 96, 381; Daily Republican, March 24, 1878 and April 3, 1878.

⁵Daily Herald, July 20, 1883; Jewish Press, November 3, 1922; Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 18; Auerbach, "Jewish Settlement in Nebraska," p. 60.

Louis Mendelssohn, an Omaha architect, established a firm in about 1880 and ultimately contributed to the design and engineering plans of the Exposition Building, the Chamber of Commerce, the Paxton Building, and the First National Bank, as well as a number of churches and other public buildings.⁶

Harry B. Zimman, son of a Russian immigrant who served as a mohel and shohet and lay leader of the B'nai Israel congregation, was probably more active in public affairs than any other Omaha Jew of his time. Zimman came to the United States with his parents at the age of five and moved to Omaha from Chicago in 1889.⁷ As a young boy Zimman worked as a clerk in Gladstone's grocery store, and in 1900, at the age of twenty-one, he was elected to the city council from the third ward. Termed a "political prodigy" by the local press, Zimman served three terms on the city council,--including one as president.⁸ In 1904 Zimman became acting mayor in the absence from the city of Mayor Frank E. Moores, and two years later Zimman filled the post of interim mayor upon the death of Moores.⁹ In 1909 Zimman was an unsuccessful candidate for the Republican mayoralty nomination, but in 1918 he was elected a city commissioner under the newly adopted commission

⁶The Industries of Omaha, Nebraska, p. 68; Savage and Bell, History of Omaha, p. 304.

⁷Sorenson, Story of Omaha, p. 615; Omaha Sunday Bee, May 31, 1903.

⁸Ibid.; Sorenson, Story of Omaha, p. 615.

⁹Morning Bee, October 2, 1904 and March 26, 1906.

form of local government.¹⁰ Always active also in Jewish affairs, Zimman gave up public life in 1922 to become treasurer of J. L. Brandeis and Sons.¹¹

While Harry Zimman was earning a solid reputation in city government and politics, Mogy Bernstein, "one of Omaha's institutions," was becoming the "idol of Omaha newsboys."¹² Mogy Bernstein was born in 1876 in Louisville, Kentucky, and moved with his family to Albany, Indiana, and then to Omaha in 1882. While attending night school, Bernstein began selling newspapers on the street and soon became a leader among his fellow newsboys.¹³ As chief of street circulation for the Bee and later for the Daily News, Bernstein set up rules of behavior for the newsboys, organized picnics and annual

¹⁰Morning Bee, February 27, 1909 and April 1, 1909; Sorenson, Story of Omaha, p. 615.

¹¹Sunday Bee, May 31, 1903; World-Herald, August 16, 1922. Upon Zimman's retirement from public life, a local paper editorialized as follows: Harry Zimman "has served Omaha in a public capacity from his early youth, and always with loyalty, courage, and exceptional ability. It is clean and unselfish service that he has given. He has never had in his mind and heart the advancement of any interest but the public interest. He has never been subject to any influence but the rights and welfare of the people"

"In Harry Zimman's public career in Omaha there is inspiration to the young man, and evidence that the cause of good and clean government is the winning cause. In retiring after many years of faithful service, with his name and record untarnished, he carries with him into private life the thanks and good will of Omaha's citizenship" (World-Herald, September 15, 1922).

¹²Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 29; Morning Bee, August 16, 1919. Mogy Bernstein was a brother of Nathan Bernstein. Another brother, Louis, was rabbi of Congregation Adath Joseph in St. Louis (Morning Bee, April 18, 1911).

¹³Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 29.

Christmas dinners, and personally supported a newsboys' home at 1410 Farnam Street until it received public support. This was a club, dormitory, and restaurant where boys could buy a sandwich for as little as three cents.¹⁴ As friend and protector of the newsboys, Bernstein requested the court to parole to his charge boys who fell into difficulty with the law, and as a result of these activities he eventually became chief probation officer of the juvenile court, "which he established almost unaided."¹⁵

Another son of an Omaha Jewish pioneer who attained public recognition was Edward Rosewater's son, Victor, who attended high school in Omaha and received his higher education at Johns Hopkins and Columbia universities. Victor Rosewater began work on the Bee shortly after receiving his doctorate, and became editor upon his father's death in 1906. In 1908 the younger Rosewater was a delegate-at-large from Nebraska to the Republican National Convention, and in 1912 he served as chairman of the Republican nominating convention at Chicago.¹⁶ Rosewater was chairman of Omaha's first home rule charter convention in 1913, and was a member of the University of Nebraska Board of Regents and of the Omaha Public Library Board. He served also on the Nebraska State Commission on Workmen's Compensation, and was chairman of the

¹⁴Ibid.; Morning Bee, January 1, 1906 and August 17, 1919.

¹⁵Bernstein, "The Story of the Omaha Jews," p. 29; Morning Bee, August 17, 1919. Mogy Bernstein was found dead of a bullet wound in 1919 (Morning Bee, August 16, 1919).

¹⁶New York Times, July 14, 1940.

Nebraska Constitutional Convention Survey Committee. In addition, Rosewater was active as a founding member of the American Jewish Committee.¹⁷ He left Omaha in 1922 to become publicity director of the Philadelphia Sesquicentennial Exposition, after which he devoted his time to writing and lecturing.¹⁸

As individual Jews became active in public affairs and politics, Jews as a group became a potent force on the political scene. The first recorded political action group organized by Omaha Jews was the Hebrew-American Liberal Club, founded in 1889 with about two hundred members.¹⁹ In a meeting described as "stormy" at which at least one fist fight took place and dissension was the rule, the club selected a ticket for the county elections.²⁰

Other political clubs made their appearance within the next few years. Included were the Nebraska Israelite Republican Club, the Hebrew Silver Club, the Omaha Hebrew Republican Club, and the Nebraska Jewish Republican Club.²¹ At a mass meeting of Omaha Jewry in the fall of 1896 the Russian-American McKinley-Hobart Club of Omaha was established, and declared itself "as first,

¹⁷Ibid.; Sunday Bee, June 7, 1908.

¹⁸World-Herald, April 16, 1922.

¹⁹World-Herald, October 28, 1964.

²⁰Evening Bee, October 31, 1889.

²¹Morning Bee, October 22, 1896; November 2, 1896, and September 17, 1903.

last and all the time for sound money, and unalterably pledged to vote the straight republican state ticket."²²

Local Democrats and the Omaha World-Herald, however, were discouraged over the apparent strength of Jewish support for McKinley and the Republican party. An attempt was made to discredit the organization by publishing a report stating that "many of the names attached to the membership list of the McKinley club were obtained by false pretenses," and denying "that the Russian-Americans ever pledged themselves for McKinley or adopted resolutions in his support."²³ A local Jewish baker reportedly declared that "the facts of the matter are that a few Russian-Americans made up a list, putting in names of persons who knew nothing of the organization of the club and would not and will not join it." The same individual also alleged that "a strong organization for Bryan can be formed from the better class of Russian-Americans, and will be formed very shortly."²⁴

In response, the Bee reported that local Jews were "highly incensed at the attempt of the local free silver organ to belittle and discredit the organization which they have formed for the support of the republican presidential ticket." The Bee further stated that "every man whose name appears on the membership roll

²²Morning Bee, October 22, 1896.

²³World-Herald (morning edition), August 13, 1896.

²⁴Ibid.

put it there himself with full knowledge of what he was doing."²⁵ The Bee's remark that there were "not a half dozen free silver Russian-American Jews in Omaha" may have underestimated Bryan's support, but all evidence would seem to indicate that most Omaha Jews were Republicans and supported McKinley in the presidential campaign of 1896.²⁶

Late in 1899 the so-called "Hebrew vote" occupied the forefront in the local political field for several weeks. The situation involved a dispute among local political bosses as to who, if anyone, controlled the Jewish vote. An effort was made on the part of various political party leaders, both Jewish and non-Jewish, to publicly induce Jews to vote for particular candidates. The incident began with a letter written by and circulated among the Jewish community by Jacob Marks, in which he urged Jews to vote the Democratic ticket in the forthcoming local election in order to "teach the bosses a long-life lesson."²⁷ Marks claimed that the Jews had not received their just desserts from the Republican party for all the support they had tendered it in the past. His letter to his "esteemed co-religionists" read in part:

Are we going to fold our hands and not rebuke the insult heaped upon us? We always worked and voted for the Republican

²⁵Morning Bee, August 14, 1896.

²⁶Ibid. There were a few Jewish names among those attending the city populist convention in 1897 (Morning Bee, April 4, 1897).

²⁷Letter to the voters of the City of Omaha and Douglas County, from Jacob Marks, 1899, in Rosewater Collection, American Jewish Archives. This is apparently not the same Jacob Marks described in a previous chapter.

Party and never had any recognition in return. Look to our Federal offices, County or city offices, and show me if you can, any of our people there.

Why? ye Republican bosses and leaders of the G. O. P. -- Why? When election comes, you flatter us for our votes and after election is over you forget and ignore us?²⁸

At this same time Marks wrote a letter to the World-Herald in which he claimed that Edward Rosewater controlled the Jewish voters and furthermore, that Rosewater was remunerated by the Republican party for delivering the votes of his fellow Jews. Rosewater then circulated a letter in which he exposed an alleged attempt by Marks at blackmail. Marks supposedly told Rosewater that for \$500 he would "suppress the circulars and organize the Jewish voters in favor of the Republican ticket." But Marks also reportedly agreed to forego the \$500 bribe if Rosewater would instead promise to arrange that Marks and one of his associates, J. D. Nathanson, would receive appointments to county offices. Rosewater announced that he would not be a party to such a bargain, but he apparently did agree to support "for public employment" any two Jewish men "who would be recommended by the leaders" of the Jewish community.²⁹

There followed a number of letters in the public press written by individuals and by representatives of Jewish organizations, all of which indicated that no one controlled the Jewish vote. Jews

²⁸Ibid. Marks' letter referred specifically to the fact that Jews had turned out in large numbers in the primary election to support the Republican ticket and especially Charles Elgutter for the office of county judge. Elgutter, however, was passed over by party leaders in favor of a non-Jew, with the alleged comment that "the county judgeship is too good an office for a Jew to hold."

²⁹Letter from Edward Rosewater, November 3, 1899, in Rosewater Collection, American Jewish Archives.

were described as

ever ready to support any candidate with a clean and reputable record, and . . . under no control whatsoever or under no obligation to indorse E. Rosewater or Jacob Lewis [sic] or any other political boss pretending to represent the Hebrew voters.³⁰

Affairs on the political front were fairly quiet for a time until shortly before the final election. On May 5, 1900, a letter was circulated both in English and Yiddish urging Jewish voters to support William S. Poppleton, the "fusion candidate" of the Republican party, against incumbent Mayor Frank E. Moores, Republican candidate. The circular was signed by four well-known Jews and claimed that as mayor, Moores had never done anything for the Jews despite the promises he had made in enlisting their support in the previous election. The letter also claimed that Moores was responsible for the firing of S. L. Morris, the only Jewish member of the police force, and of H. Brown, who had been a city street sweeper. "If the Jewish people are so low in the estimation of Mayor Moores as not to entitle them even to the honor of handling a broom on the public streets under his administration," stated the writers, "why, then, not drop the party lines and support W. S. Poppleton, who is a good, clean, and honest businessman."³¹

³⁰Letter to editor from R.G., Morning Bee, November 6, 1899; letter from William Monsky, president of Omaha Hebrew Club, in World-Herald, November 6, 1899.

³¹Letter from H. Rubin, John Simon, Sol. Prince, and J. D. Nathanson, March 5, 1900, in Rosewater Collection, American Jewish Archives.

This circular was repudiated by the Bee, which claimed that it was signed by "four disreputables" including the "notorious" Nathanson, and which discredited the report that Morris had been fired from the police department because of his religion.³² At any rate, despite the attempts at vote manipulation, Mayor Moores was reelected and it is doubtful that Jews were any more successful in obtaining appointments to public offices during his succeeding term of office.³³

Whether or not claims that Jews were excluded from public positions were justified is a matter for conjecture, but there were a number of specific anti-semitic incidents that did take place in the community and to which the attention of Omaha citizens was at times directed. An early incident involved the American Protective Association, a group acting in the guise of patriotism and devoted to the expulsion from public office of Roman Catholics. A. P. A. activities in Omaha in the early 1890's had a considerable effect on local politics, and their bigoted attacks on Catholicism came to include other minority groups as well.³⁴ At one time a sizeable advertisement appeared in a local newspaper exhorting that

³²Morning Bee, March 5, 1900.

³³Morning Bee, March 7, 1900. Harry B. Zimman was elected to the city council from the third ward on the same ticket. Zimman later was involved in a dispute with J. D. Nathanson, who was an unsuccessful candidate for appointment as state grain weigher. Nathanson blamed Zimman for his failure to get the appointment and claimed that Zimman called him a "disgrace to the Jewish community" (Daily News, February 2, 1901).

³⁴Morning Bee, August 5, 1895; Morearty, Omaha Memories, p. 44.

"ALL REPUBLICAN AND INDEPENDENT VOTERS WHO SCRATCH THEIR TICKET FOR SENATORS SHOULD VOTE FOR THE Honorable, Successful, Self-Made Man, WM. N. BABCOCK." The notice then instructed readers not to vote for the "GOLD-CRAVING, SHYLOCK JEW, MAX MEYER, OR THE BIGOTED IRISH ROMAN CATHOLIC, J. C. BRENNAN."³⁵

In another anti-semitic occurrence, eight Jewish children who had been students at Sacred Heart School were asked to leave, apparently on the directive of the French Mother General of the Sacred Heart Order, who had recently visited Omaha from her Paris headquarters. Local officials of the school appeared quite distressed over the necessity of excluding the Jewish children, who were placed by their parents in other schools with no public objections.³⁶ The opinion of local Catholics was summed up by a member of that church who wrote that

we have only the friendliest feeling for the Jewish children. We would do nothing to encourage any act of discrimination against them and we wish it fully understood that neither the local Catholics nor clergy have had anything to do with the order of exclusion.³⁷

In 1913 an act of apparent discrimination occurred which affected a prominent Omaha Jew and which presumably was never resolved. Nathan Bernstein, who had been head of the physics department at the high school, was at first demoted from that position and then summarily

³⁵Unidentified newspaper clipping, Rosewater Collection, American Jewish Archives.

³⁶Morning Bee, February 8, 1899.

³⁷Morning Bee, February 9, 1899.

fired from the faculty.³⁸ Since Bernstein was on what was called the "permanent list" of teachers, he supposedly had tenure, and the school board apparently exceeded its authority in firing him without stating the reasons for its action or allowing Bernstein a hearing.³⁹ Letters to the editor by indignant Jewish citizens alluded to "discrimination." Editorials in the local press on the injustices of the affair were apparently to no avail. Bernstein, however, did urge citizens to elect new members to the school board "in order to counteract the one-man power" that was apparently responsible for his dismissal.⁴⁰ A new school board was elected in November of 1914 but Bernstein did not request reinstatement and instead became a salesman of life insurance.⁴¹

By 1913 the Omaha Jewish community had matured and to a great extent, stabilized. But just as some major strides were about to be taken towards the further federation of the community and the building of a Jewish Community Center, disaster struck Omaha in the form of a tornado. The efforts of Omaha Jewry were now turned towards helping the victims of this destructive force.

³⁸Morning Bee, November 6, 1913 and June 25, 1914.

³⁹Morning Bee, September 17, 1913; September 24, 1914, and October 7, 1914.

⁴⁰Morning Bee, September 19, 1913; June 25, 1914; September 18 and 24, 1914; October 7, 18, 22 and 24, 1914. The only compensation that was made to Bernstein between the time of his demotion and dismissal was the reinstatement of his former salary (Morning Bee, November 19, 1913).

⁴¹Morning Bee, November 6, 1914; Jewish Press, October 12, 1928. A check of the minutes of the Omaha School Board revealed absolutely no information on this affair.

CHAPTER X

A TORNADO'S DESTRUCTION

Shortly before sunset on Easter Sunday, March 23, 1913, a violent tornado struck the heart of Omaha. Entering from the southwest and cutting across the city in a northeasterly direction, the cyclone left in its wake a path of destruction several blocks wide and over four miles long.¹ An eyewitness reported that

starting in the best residence part of the city, hundreds of homes were smashed to pieces or broken to bits. Following the wind as swiftly as thought fire broke out and in the twinkling of an eye homes of happy prosperous people were turned into piles of blazing debris, from which dazed and crippled victims of the storm god's wrath were dragged by rescuers. Others were taken out dead. It came like a thunderbolt from a clear sky and passed so quickly that people couldn't realize what had happened.²

The city was left without electricity, telephone and telegraph service were disrupted, and public transportation was halted. Final figures showed a total of 185 deaths and 350 injuries. Five hundred and fifty homes were totally demolished and over a thousand other buildings suffered at least partial destruction. Eleven churches and eight schools were among the ravaged structures.³

¹Morearty, Omaha Memories, p. 190; Morning Bee, March 25, 1913.

²Morearty, Omaha Memories, p. 190.

³Ibid.; Morning Bee, March 25 and 26, 1913.

The area around Twenty-fourth and Lake streets, housing a large percentage of the Jewish population, was among those sections hardest hit. Altogether, one hundred and fifty-three Jewish families suffered as a direct result of the tornado and

many of these families were left penniless without food, clothing or shelter and in destitute circumstances and not infrequently illness from exposure and injuries sustained in the storm, followed with the result that the already great misfortunes were increased many fold.⁴

A number of Jews were among the dead, including Nathan Krinsky, his wife, and five children, who lived near Twenty-fourth and Lake in the back of a bakery which the family operated.⁵

Within two days of the storm, leaders of the Jewish community called a meeting at which every Jewish organization was represented and the Jewish Relief Committee was organized to raise funds to "take in hand the task of alleviating the wants of those . . . co-religionists who needed relief."⁶ The committee agreed to cooperate with the citywide Citizens' Relief Committee, but, as one member of the Jewish committee stated, "We always care for our own people."⁷

The Jewish Relief Committee therefore began a fund-raising drive "separate and distinct from that raised by the Citizens' Relief

⁴Report of Jewish Relief Committee, Omaha, Nebraska, July, 1913, p. 1.

⁵Morning Bee, March 25, 1913.

⁶Report of Jewish Relief Committee, p. 1. Officers of the committee were Harry B. Zimman, Henry Monsky, C. C. Katleman, and Sam Frank. Members of the executive committee were S. Ravitz, Dr. Philip Sher, F. S. Hadra, H. A. Wolf, Sol Brodkey, Rabbi Frederick Cohn, and Mrs. A. Melcher.

⁷Morning Bee, March 26, 1913.

Committee, to be appropriated and applied directly to the relief of Jewish sufferers."⁸ Though most Jewish families were aided exclusively by the Jewish Relief Committee, the city-sponsored agency did provide some Omaha Jews with food, clothing, and furniture, and occasional financial help.⁹

The Jewish Relief Committee met almost daily for some weeks after the tornado and a relief station for Jewish storm victims was set up at 1604 North Twenty-fourth Street. The Omaha Bee commented that

because . . . many of the Jewish families have not a good speaking knowledge of the English language, the Jewish people have thought it best to take care of these unfortunates with the aid of those who can communicate easily with them.¹⁰

For those who were reluctant to apply for help, workers canvassed the storm-ravaged neighborhood in search of Jews in need, and tornado victims were then supplied with clothing, bedding, groceries, fuel, rent money, and repairs to their homes.¹¹

Jews who were personally unaffected by the tornado contributed generously to help their needy co-religionists. Omaha Jews donated over \$4,500 to the Jewish Relief Committee, and sizable contributions came also from the Jewish communities of Lincoln, Council Bluffs,

⁸Report of Jewish Relief Committee, p. 2.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Morning Bee, March 29, 1913.

¹¹Ibid.

Sioux City, Fremont, and even from as far as Des Moines and Leavenworth, Kansas.¹²

Local Jewish organizations dipped into their treasuries to contribute to the tornado relief fund. William McKinley Lodge #521 of B'nai B'rith and its ladies' auxiliary gave a benefit ball, and the Omaha Hebrew Club donated \$500 to the relief fund in addition to a large amount of relief dispensed directly to its own members.¹³ An advertisement in the local press indicated that all members of the Omaha Hebrew Club who were "in distress" could "obtain immediate relief" by applying to the club president.¹⁴ Wise Memorial Hospital dispensed free care to all tornado victims referred for medical aid by the Jewish Relief Committee, and a total of fifty patients were admitted to the hospital on this basis.¹⁵

Contributions to the Jewish Relief Committee amounted to \$8,371.93. A total of 116 cases were investigated, and temporary relief in the form of clothing, furniture, food, and medical expenses was afforded to seventy-two Jewish families. Sixteen families were referred to the Citizens' Relief Committee either for loans or outright financial assistance.¹⁶

¹²Report of Jewish Relief Committee, p. 25. Total receipts were as follows: Omaha and South Omaha: \$4,575.03; Lincoln: \$486.00; Council Bluffs: \$443.50; Sioux City: \$1,000.00; Fremont: \$119.50; Leavenworth: \$110.50; Des Moines: \$914.40; Miscellaneous: \$723.00.

¹³Morning Bee, April 2 and 8, 1913.

¹⁴Morning Bee, March 25, 1913.

¹⁵Morning Bee, April 11, 1913 and January 1, 1914.

¹⁶Report of Jewish Relief Committee, pp. 18-23.

The tornado relief afforded by the members of the Jewish community to their co-religionists clearly exemplified the Jewish tradition of zedakah, the fulfillment of the requirements of charity and social justice. For centuries Jews have heeded the Biblical proverb, "He that is gracious unto the poor lendeth unto the Lord."¹⁷ Omaha Jews were no exception.

The Easter Sunday tornado of 1913, however, represented a considerable setback to the progress of Omaha's Jewish community. For during the previous year a campaign had been started to raise funds to build a Jewish Community Center.¹⁸ Despite the fact that a sizable sum had already been secured towards this goal, the relief requirements necessitated by the tornado's destruction caused the community at least temporarily to forego plans for the future and instead to handle present needs.

¹⁷Proverbs 19:17.

¹⁸Jewish Community Center, dedication book, 1926, p. 8.

EPILOGUE

By 1915 Omaha Jewry had to a great extent become stabilized and unified. The social and cultural divergence that had existed between the pioneer and the immigrant had begun to fade. Jews of disparate backgrounds and representing various degrees of religious practice found themselves working together for the good of their own people and of the entire community.

World War I found Omaha Jews rallying to the relief of their unfortunate co-religionists abroad and serving their own country as well. The war, like the tornado, represented another setback to the local community in its goal of building a community center, and it was not until 1926 that these hopes were finally realized.

The early decades of the twentieth century also saw the establishment of a city-wide Hebrew school, brought about by a consolidation of the efforts of all of the orthodox congregations in the education of their young people. A weekly newspaper and a country club soon took their places in the community, and Omaha Jews provided the impetus for the development of an international Jewish fraternity for young men. Succeeding years witnessed the growth of the movement of modern orthodoxy with the establishment of a conservative synagogue, and the union of the orthodox congregations.

Thus Omaha Jewry consolidated and took its place in the larger community. The institutions that had been nurtured since pioneer

days continued to flourish, and new ones arose to fill the needs of an expanding community, while members of the younger generation arose to assume positions of leadership. The strength of Omaha's Jewish community augured well for the future.

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- Personal interview with Mrs. Philip Rosenblatt, September 21, 1967.

Letter from Adolph Gladstone to Fanny Simon, November 1, 1867 (copy in author's possession provided by Ronald Gladstone, Nebraska City, Nebraska).

Letter from Adolph Gladstone to Fanny Simon, December 29, 1867 (copy in author's possession provided by Ronald Gladstone).

Letter from Irma H. Gross, July 15, 1965.

Letter from Blanche Hellman Sachs, July 17, 1965.

Questionnaire returned by Milton R. Abrahams, Omaha, Nebraska.

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Questionnaire returned by Albert Cahn, Chicago, Illinois.

Questionnaire returned by Blanche Rosewater Newman, Los Angeles, California.

Questionnaire returned by Harry Trustin, Omaha, Nebraska.

Tombstone inscription, Temple Israel Cemetery, Omaha, Nebraska.