

KENTUCKY'S JEWISH HISTORY IN NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE:
THE ERA OF MASS MIGRATION

Lee Shal Weissbach

Not long before we came to Louisville some sixteen years ago, my wife Sharon informed some of the people with whom she was working at Boston College that she would be moving to Kentucky. One of the more pretentious Easterners in the group expressed some dismay over the prospect of relocating from Massachusetts to Kentucky, but Sharon responded that to her the move did not seem so frightening. She explained that even though she had grown up in Cincinnati and had spent almost a decade in Boston, she had actually been born in Lexington, Kentucky. "You were born in Kentucky?!" reacted Sharon's colleague, "I thought you were Jewish!"

I relate this story to make the point that people do not commonly associate the Commonwealth of Kentucky with the American Jewish experience. Nonetheless, Kentucky does have a rich and fascinating Jewish history that stretches back to the beginning of the nineteenth century and is well worth exploring. For one thing, the history of the Jews in Kentucky has an inherent interest because, like any other aspect of Kentucky history, it helps form the background of the commonwealth's contemporary society. Furthermore, the history of the Jews in Kentucky is worthy of our attention because it can serve as a sort of case study to help us understand and appreciate the American Jewish experience more generally. As the title of this essay suggests, I intend to place Kentucky's Jewish

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history in a national perspective, paying special attention to the era of mass migration around the turn of the twentieth century. In order to begin, however, a brief discussion of the origins of Jewish life in Kentucky is in order.

Although there were a few Jewish settlers in Kentucky in the very early decades of the nineteenth century (a Baltimore-born Jew named John Jacobs apparently lived near Louisville as early as 1802 and Benjamin Gratz settled in Lexington in 1819),¹ they had no possibility of perpetuating a Jewish life on the frontier. As Louis D. Brandeis's uncle, Lewis Dembitz, wrote in his account of Jewish beginnings in Kentucky, the first Jews to arrive in the commonwealth "found no one to pray with, and what is more, no one to mate with."² Thus the very earliest Jewish pioneers who remained in Kentucky tended to abandon most Jewish practice, marry non-Jews, and raise families that identified with Christianity. Both John Jacobs and Benjamin Gratz married gentile women not once, but twice.

It was only in the decade of the 1830s that the first Jewish communal institutions arose in the commonwealth. An Israelite Benevolent Society with at least ten members was listed in the Louisville city directory of 1832 and, although this original Jewish organization seems to have ceased functioning as its earliest members moved on, new Jewish arrivals established regular religious services in the city somewhere around 1838. Kentucky's first Jewish congregation came into being in 1842, when the Louisville Jews who had been meeting for worship gave their prayer group the name Adath Israel (Congregation of Israel) and acquired a charter from the state.³

1 On Jacobs, see Lewis N. Dembitz, "Jewish Beginnings in Kentucky" in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 1 (1898): 99-100; on Gratz, see William Henry Perrin, ed., *History of Fayette County, Kentucky* (Chicago, 1882), 612-13.

2 Dembitz, "Beginnings," 99.

3 On the Israelite Benevolent Society, see Ira Rosenwalke, "The First Jewish Settlers in Louisville" in *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 53 (1979): 37-40; on the formation of Kentucky's various Jewish congregations, see Lee Shai Weissbach, *The*

During the decades of the 1840s and 1850s, Kentucky's Jewish population grew substantially as hundreds of Jewish immigrants found their way to the commonwealth. Most of these immigrants came from the German states of Europe or from adjacent areas such as Alsace in France or Posen, the Prussian-occupied region of Poland. They increased the size of Louisville's Jewish community to such an extent that by 1851 the city could support a second Jewish congregation, and they created small Jewish communities in some of Kentucky's secondary cities as well. Established by the so-called "German Jews" of the mid-nineteenth-century migration, the earliest Jewish communal organizations in Paducah and in Owensboro date from the late 1850s, and the first appeared in Lexington just after the Civil War.⁴

The Jews who settled in Louisville and in some of the commonwealth's other commercial centers came to Kentucky both to escape the discrimination and oppression they faced in Europe and to seek economic advancement. Arriving from their native lands without agricultural experience or inclination, they tended to concentrate in occupations with which they were familiar. A great many began their lives in Kentucky as peddlers or store clerks or small shopkeepers, and a few rose to prominence by the end of the nineteenth century as the leading entrepreneurs and retailers in their communities. As prominent success stories in this regard the Levy family in Louisville might be cited, or the Wallerstein family in Paducah, or the Wolf and Wile families in Lexington.⁵

Synagogues of Kentucky: Architecture and History (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), chapter 1.

⁴ On the early Jewish history of Louisville, see Herman Landau, *Adath Louisville: The Story of a Jewish Community* (Louisville: H. Landau and Associates, 1981), *passim*. On the early Jewish history of Paducah, Owensboro, and Lexington, see Lee Shai Weissbach, "Stability and Mobility in the Small Jewish Community: Examples from Kentucky History" in *American Jewish History* 79 (Spring 1990): 358-60.

⁵ On the Levy family, see Landau, *Adath Louisville*, 244; on the Wallerstein family, see "Wallerstein's Celebrating Its Diamond Jubilee" in the *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, 17 January 1943; on the Wolf and Wile families, see "Simon Wolf, Ill 5 Months, Dead" in the *Lexington Herald*, 24 December 1921.

In several ways the Jews who arrived in Kentucky in the middle decades of the nineteenth century maintained their distinctive identities. They were quick to organize their own Jewish burial societies, congregations, welfare organizations, and chapters of fraternal orders. As early as the 1870s there were already lodges of B'nai B'rith in Louisville, Lexington, Owensboro, and Paducah.⁶ So too, like other German immigrant groups, the German Jews maintained elements of their specifically German culture. Some synagogue minutes were still being written in German as late as the 1880s, for example.⁷

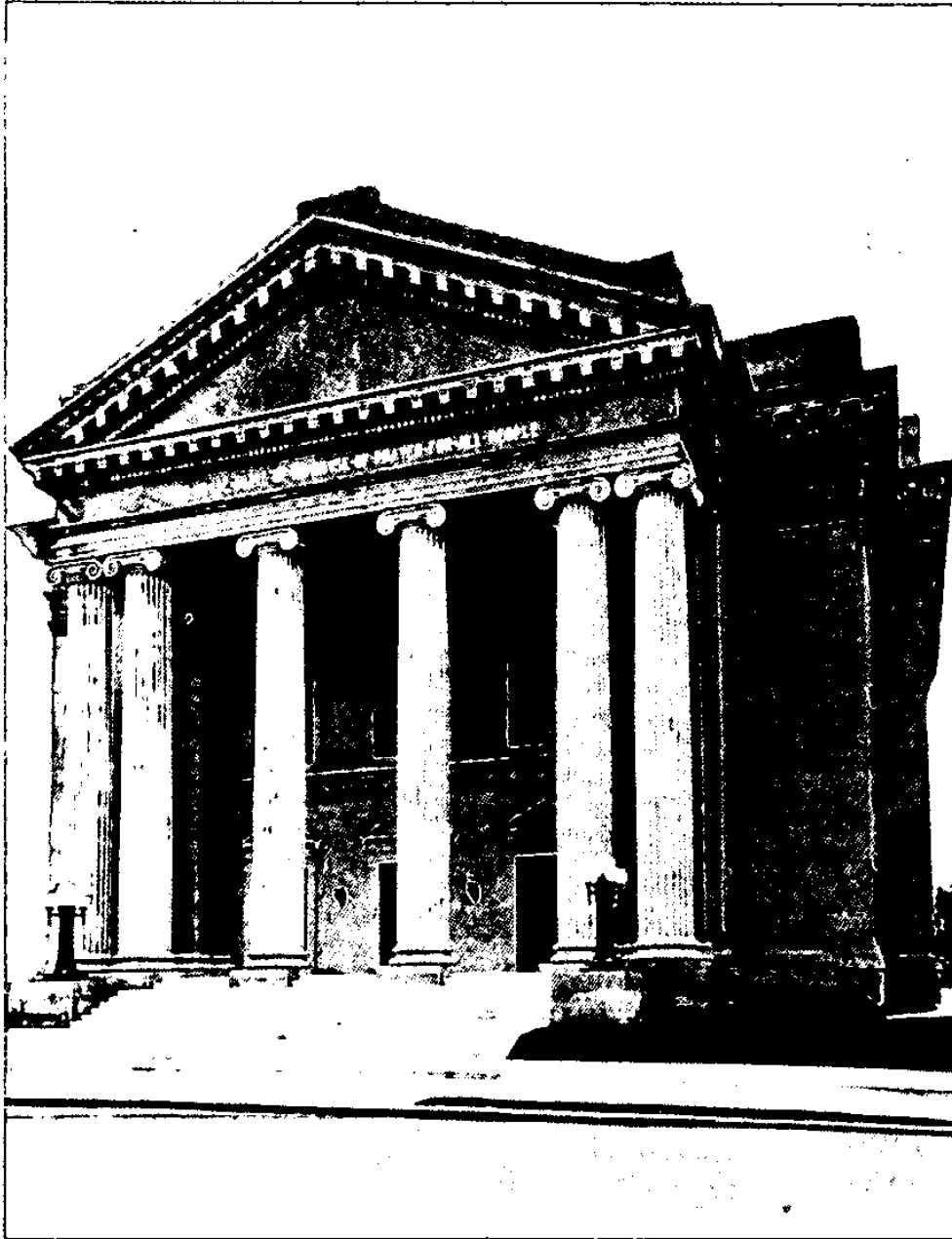
For the most part, however, Kentucky's Jews seem to have become integrated into their local communities quite rapidly. The swift acculturation of many Kentucky Jews is reflected in the support which both the Adath Israel congregation in Louisville and the congregation of the same name in Owensboro gave to the Reform movement in Judaism. Championed by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati, Reform Judaism promoted the idea that Jewish practice should be adapted to a modern environment. Thus, Reform Judaism abandoned the concept that adherence to Jewish law was obligatory, and it adopted many of the religious customs of the Protestant majority in America. By the end of the nineteenth century, the German-Jewish congregations of Paducah, Henderson, and Lexington had also come to identify with the ideology of Reform.

Like their adoption of Reform Judaism, the entry of Kentucky's German-Jewish citizens into local politics was also a sign of their rapid acculturation. Meyer Weil served as mayor of Paducah between 1871 and 1881, for example, and at about the same time the presiding officers of both chambers of the Lexington town council were Jews.⁸ Of course, the central role Jews played in local

6 Landau, *Adath Louisville*, 181; Weissbach, "Stability and Mobility," 359-60.

7 *History of Congregation Adath Israel, Louisville, Kentucky, and the Addresses Delivered at the Dedication of its New Temple* (Louisville, 1906), 17; and Martin M. Perley, "A Short History of Congregation B'rith Shalom" in *Dedication Service: Congregation B'rith Shalom* (Louisville, 1956).

8 "Weil, Meyer," in John E. Kleber, ed., *The Kentucky Encyclopedia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 940; "Jewish Citizens Play Prominent Part In



Louisville's 1868 Adath Israel Synagogue

*History of Congregation Adath Israel, Louisville, Kentucky, and the Addresses
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commercial development (and in the liberal professions as well by the end of the century) also indicates their intimate involvement in the life of their cities.

The flourishing of Kentucky's various Jewish communities in the latter decades of the nineteenth century was reflected in the synagogue buildings they erected in the years just after the Civil War. Congregation Adath Israel in Louisville, the oldest and largest Jewish congregation in the state, erected a magnificent temple in 1868 to replace its original sanctuary, which it had lost in a spectacular fire two years earlier. Designed by H.P. Bradshaw, one of Louisville's foremost church architects, and located on Broadway, one of the city's major thoroughfares, the Adath Israel temple symbolized the prosperity and the self-confidence of many within Louisville's Jewish community.

The progress of Jewish communities in Paducah and Owensboro was marked by synagogue construction as well. Paducah's Bene Yeshurum congregation erected its first sanctuary in 1871 and replaced it with a grander building in 1893, and Owensboro's Adath Israel congregation dedicated its house of worship in 1877. (That landmark is still standing and is still used occasionally for services).⁹

In effect, then, the Jewish population of Kentucky around 1880 was rather uniform in its makeup. The Jews in the commonwealth were almost all immigrants from Central Europe or their children and grandchildren. Their economic lives were concentrated very heavily in commercial activities of one sort or another. They were adapting quickly to their Kentucky environment, and (with the exception of members of Louisville's relatively small Beth Israel congregation)¹⁰ their religious ideology tended to be that of Reform.

All Affairs of City" in the *Lexington Herald*, 15 April 1917.

9 On Kentucky synagogue buildings, see Weissbach, *Synagogues of Kentucky*.

10 Around 1880 Beth Israel had sixty-seven members and fifty-five students in its religious school to Adath Israel's 170 members and 250 students. See Union of American Hebrew Congregations, *Statistics of the Jews of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1880), 38.

The character of Kentucky's Jewish population would change dramatically in the half century after 1880, however, for in that period a new wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in the commonwealth, this time coming from Eastern Europe rather than from the German states. The impact of the East European migration is revealed, first of all, in a dramatic population increase. The number of Jews in Kentucky rose from around 3,600 to nearly 20,000 between 1880 and 1927, by which time new congressional legislation had reduced Jewish immigration to a trickle.

Most of the new Jewish immigrants arriving in the commonwealth settled in Louisville, where the Jewish population rose from about 2,500 to about 12,500 between 1880 and 1927. Of course, some of Kentucky's smaller Jewish communities were augmented by East European immigrants as well (Lexington's Jewish population grew from about 150 to about 750 between 1880 and 1927), and the arrival of East Europeans also resulted in the creation of Jewish communal life in several places where none had existed earlier. Thus, the first Jewish congregations in Ashland and in Newport were founded in 1896 and 1897, respectively, and organized Jewish communities appeared in Covington, Hopkinsville, and Harlan in the early decades of the twentieth century.¹¹

The East European Jews who came to Kentucky around the turn of the century were in some ways similar to the German-Jewish immigrants of previous decades. The East European Jews, like the German Jews, left Europe in search of greater toleration. One development that prompted the immigration of East Europeans was a new series of pogroms, violent attacks against Jews, following the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881. Given their motives for leaving Europe, the East European Jews, like the German-Jewish immigrants of earlier years, were looking for a permanent place of

¹¹ Jewish population figures for Kentucky are compiled in Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data, 1585-1984* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 76-78.

refuge, and so they often brought their families with them or sent for them as soon as they could.

The East European Jews who arrived in Kentucky also saw the commonwealth as a land of opportunity where they could pursue the goal of material advancement. Like the German Jews who arrived in Kentucky in the decades just before and after the Civil War, the new Jewish immigrants often entered the world of commercial enterprise in small ways as peddlers, clerks, or small shopkeepers, or perhaps as wage earners in trades such as tailoring or cigarmaking.

Despite the similarities between the German Jews of the mid-nineteenth-century migration and their East European successors, there were, nonetheless, many differences between these two groups as well. Because the Jewish population of Eastern Europe was so much larger than that of Central Europe; because the surrounding society had been so much less attractive to Jews under Russian domination than it had been to German Jews; and because Czarist policy toward the Jews had been so oppressive, East European Jews had maintained a much more isolated and inward-looking society than had their German-Jewish contemporaries. East European Jews spoke their own language, Yiddish, and they were much more inclined to perpetuate traditional religious practices. Reform Judaism was virtually unknown in Eastern Europe, because there was no incentive for the Jews there to alter their practices in conformity with the norms of the larger society. Thus, the East European Jews who began to arrive in Kentucky after 1880 were more inclined to retain their distinctive customs than the German Jews had been, and, as they sought ways to adapt to their new environment, the East Europeans found it difficult to identify with the Jewish lifestyle that had developed in the commonwealth in the middle part of the nineteenth century.

For their part, the more established Jews of Kentucky found the East Europeans quite alien. While most of the German-Jewish families of Louisville and of smaller towns such as Lexington and Paducah had achieved at least middle-class status, and while a great many of these families had abandoned traditional Jewish practice,

the East European Jews arriving in the commonwealth tended to be of a much lower social and economic order and much more committed to maintaining a traditional Jewish lifestyle. Even if not all were rigorously observant of Jewish law, they knew of Judaism only in its Orthodox form, and they retained a strong ethnic and cultural identity tied intimately to the Yiddish language.

The division between the established Jews of Kentucky and the East European immigrants was so sharp around the turn of the century that it was even reflected in Jewish residence patterns, especially in Louisville. While the German-Jewish families were concentrated in comfortable neighborhoods south of Broadway, the city's East European Jews tended to cluster in a highly cohesive downtown neighborhood centered on Preston Street, which some referred to as a *shtetl*, using the Yiddish term applied to the self-contained Jewish communities of East European villages. Speaking of the Preston Street neighborhood in the 1920s, Herman Landau, the foremost chronicler of Louisville's Jewish history, recalls that "life in those days had a small-town aura, with nearly everyone and everything being in walking distance. The small shops attracted a goodly share of outside trade, . . . but in street and store, Yiddish was more likely to be heard than English."¹² (Notice that in Landau's recollection, "everyone" included only East European Jews).

Just as the arrival of East Europeans created new Jewish neighborhoods, and even new Jewish communities in some smaller towns, it also precipitated the creation of a whole new set of Jewish institutions. In part, of course, this was because of the sheer expansion of Kentucky's Jewish population. But the proliferation of Jewish institutions also resulted from the failure of existing organizations to meet the needs of Kentucky's recent Jewish immigrants. For example, unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the Americanized Judaism they encountered in Kentucky, the East Europeans found it necessary to organize their own congregations.

¹² Landau, *Adath Louisville*, 261.

Between 1882 and 1921 fifteen new Jewish congregations were established in Kentucky, almost every one of them a byproduct of the East European migration and hence Orthodox in outlook. In Lexington, for instance, the Orthodox Jews of the city organized the short-lived Brith Jacob congregation around 1910 and the more permanent Ohavay Zion congregation in 1912.

In Louisville the members of the four Orthodox congregations that were established in the 1880s and 1890s even tried to replicate the kind of integrated, organic Jewish community with which they had been familiar in Europe. They decided to centralize many communal functions and to establish a single rabbinic authority they would all accept. To this end, in 1902 the four assemblies created a body called the United Hebrew Orthodox Congregations, and they brought to Louisville Rabbi Asher L. Zarchy to serve as its head. Zarchy was, in effect, to be the chief rabbi for Louisville's Orthodox community.

Although the attempt to maintain a centralized Jewish communal structure was doomed to failure in an environment where recognition of a central religious authority could not be enforced, the United Hebrew Orthodox Congregations did undertake several initiatives that were absolutely essential for the functioning of Louisville's traditional Jewish community. It was this umbrella organization that supervised the provision of kosher food, that maintained the community's ritual bath, and that organized the Louisville Talmud Torah Society to provide the kind of intensive Jewish education that was considered vital by the city's East European Jews but less necessary by its more acculturated German Jews.¹³

Since East European Jews thought of their Jewish identity in ethnic and cultural terms as well as in religious terms, the new institutions they created were not limited strictly to those that would serve their religious needs. There was, for example, a Yiddish

¹³ On the United Hebrew Orthodox Congregations and Rabbi Zarchy, see *American Jewish Year Book* [hereafter AJYB] for 5668 (Philadelphia, 1907), 184; and Landau, *Adath Louisville, passtm.*



The Louisville Hebrew School at 206 East Market Street in 1926 at the time of the visit of the great Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik. Bialik's picture and a greeting in both English and Hebrew are in the window.

Herman Landau Gift, University of Louisville Photographic Archives

Literary Society established in Louisville sometime around World War I.¹⁴ There were also a number of Zionist societies organized in Kentucky in the early years of the twentieth century. These would not have come into being were it not for the presence of East European Jews, for the more established elements in Kentucky's Jewish population tended to oppose the concept of the Jews' return to their ancestral homeland. German Jews, after all, tended to think of their Jewishness as defining only their religious identity within America and not their ethnic identity as a people in exile. As early as 1907 there were already three Zionist circles in Louisville, and one in Newport as well.¹⁵ A chapter of the women's league

14 See *AJYB* for 5680 (Philadelphia, 1919), 377.

15 *AJYB* for 5668, 41; *AJYB* for 5680, 377.



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15 *AJYB* for 5668, 41; *AJYB* for 5680, 377.

Hadassah, perhaps the best-known Zionist organization in America, was established in Louisville in 1919.¹⁶

While the East European Jews arriving in Kentucky created many new Jewish institutions themselves, the influx of these immigrants also prompted the indigenous Jews to establish some new organizations around the turn of the century. These were primarily philanthropic institutions intended to help the immigrants adjust.

In their charitable efforts, the established Jews of Kentucky were, of course, motivated in part by a sense of obligation to their fellow Jews, but they were also induced to act by a certain degree of self-interest. The more acculturated Jews reasoned that gentile Kentuckians did not necessarily differentiate between the various sub-groups within their local Jewish communities, and these established Jews believed that if they were to avoid being embarrassed by the presence of their newly arrived coreligionists, it only made sense for them to help the newcomers adapt to life in Kentucky in any way that they could. Some of the older Jewish families of the commonwealth may even have feared that the presence of so many unacculturated immigrants living in difficult economic circumstances might lead to an increase in anti-Jewish feeling in society at large.

One good example of a communal institution organized by well-established Jews primarily for the benefit of new immigrants is the YMHA (Young Men's Hebrew Association) of Louisville, incorporated in 1890 under the leadership of I.W. Bernheim, one of Kentucky's foremost distillers and philanthropists. Among the activities sponsored by the YMHA in the early years of the twentieth century were gym classes, outings to parks and playgrounds, English-language courses for new immigrants, and a cooperative program with Neighborhood House, a social service agency on First Street in Louisville's so-called *shtetl* district. Neighborhood House itself had been organized by Louisville's indigenous Jews in 1896.¹⁷

¹⁶ Landau, *Adath Louisville*, 194.

Yet another example of an institution created by the established Jews of Louisville to help their immigrant coreligionists was the city's Jewish Hospital. Founded in 1903, Jewish Hospital was created in part to provide facilities for Jewish doctors who were routinely denied staff privileges elsewhere, but it was also intended to cater to the needs of the growing number of East European Jews in Kentucky who required medical care. These Yiddish-speaking patients were frequently indigent, and they were likely to be uncomfortable in medical centers that were unfamiliar with Jewish dietary laws and religious customs.¹⁸

As the decade of the 1920s approached and as the era of mass migration was drawing to a close, the number of welfare organizations designed to aid the expanding population of Kentucky Jews had proliferated to such an extent that in several cities federations of Jewish charities were organized to bring some order to Jewish welfare work. Louisville's first Jewish charity network was created in 1909, those of Lexington and of Paducah in 1917. Not surprisingly, the organizers of these federations were mainly Jews of German origin, and the beneficiaries of their philanthropic efforts were primarily East European Jews.¹⁹

Having come to understand something of Kentucky's Jewish history in the middle decades of the nineteenth century and through the era of mass migration, we can now approach the broader issue to which I alluded earlier. How much can be learned about the history of the Jews in the United States as a whole from the Jewish history of Kentucky, a relatively obscure border state whose Jewish population never exceeded twenty thousand? The answer to this question, in very simple terms, is that Kentucky's Jewish history can actually reveal quite a lot about American Jewish history in general. This is because the experience of the Jews in the

17 *AJYB* for 5680, 377; Landau, *Adath Louisville*, 92-94 and *passim*.

18 Landau, *Adath Louisville*, 113-14.

19 *AJYB* for 5680, 377; *AJYB* for 5700 (Philadelphia, 1939), 529. On the Louisville federation, see also Landau, *Adath Louisville*, 124-25.



Leaders of the Jewish community at the cornerstone laying ceremony for Louisville's Jewish Hospital in 1903. Among those in the photograph are Louisville's chief Orthodox rabbi, Asher Zarchy (front, second from left); Rabbi H. G. Enelow of Adath Israel (front, third from left); Lewis Demblitz (front, fourth from left); Charles Goldsmith, president of Adath Israel (front, fifth from left); and Rabbi Ignattus Miller of Louisville's third oldest congregation, Brith Sholom (rear, second from right).

Jewish Hospital Collection, University of Louisville Photographic Archives

commonwealth parallels the history of the Jews elsewhere in the United States to a remarkable degree.

If, for example, we consider the nature of Kentucky's Jewish population around 1880, on the eve of mass migration, we find that the makeup of Kentucky Jewry was very similar to that of American Jewry as a whole. Nearly all of the quarter of a million Jews in the United States at the time were of Central European origin, and



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nearly all were intent on making America their permanent home (while nearly fifteen percent of all German immigrants to the United States returned to Europe, the return rate among German Jews was under five percent).²⁰ Like German Jews in Kentucky, German Jews everywhere retained much of their identity both as Jews and as Germans, while at the same time becoming rapidly integrated into the economic, social, and political life of their regions.

Jewish residential patterns within Kentucky also reflected national trends. Just as most Kentucky Jews lived in Louisville and only very few lived in essentially rural settings, the American Jewish experience in general was primarily an urban affair. In 1880 Louisville was one of twenty-six major American cities with Jewish populations of at least one thousand, and these twenty-six cities were home to some seventy-one percent of all the Jews in the United States. By the same token, Paducah, Owensboro, and Lexington were, in 1880, among the one hundred and thirty-four American towns with triple-digit Jewish populations in which another thirteen percent of all American Jews lived.²¹

Mid-nineteenth-century Jewish occupational patterns in Kentucky were also typical. All over America in the decades just before and after the Civil War, Jewish immigrants from Central Europe and their offspring filled the economic niche of retail trade. As the historian of American immigration Roger Daniels has observed, "most German Jewish businessmen . . . did not make spectacular successes, but more of the first generation entered into business or other middle-class occupations than [in] any other nineteenth-century immigrant group."²²

And the parallels continued in the period of mass migration as well, for the transformation of Jewish life witnessed in Kentucky in the half century after 1880 reflected developments that were taking

20 Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 157.

21 Lee Shai Weissbach, "The Jewish Communities of the United States on the Eve of Mass Migration: Some Comments on Geography and Bibliography" in *American Jewish History* 78 (September 1988): 83.

22 Daniels, *Coming to America*, 158.

place all over the United States. While Kentucky's Jewish population jumped from under 4,000 to over 19,000 in less than fifty years, the Jewish population of the United States as a whole jumped even more dramatically: from a quarter of a million in 1880 to over four million by 1927. Similarly, the increase in the number of Jewish congregations in Kentucky after 1880 reflected a general pattern; while the number of synagogues in the commonwealth rose from four to thirteen between 1880 and 1916, the number of synagogues throughout the United States rose from 270 to 1,901 in that same period.²³

Moreover, throughout America, as in Kentucky, the East European migration that accounted for the country's Jewish population explosion continued to bring Jews primarily to urban areas. By the mid 1920s, there were about one hundred and thirty cities in the United States with Jewish populations of over two thousand, and the profiles of the local Jewish communities in nearly all of these cities were similar to the profile of Louisville's Jewish community. Like Louisville, every major city in America saw a proliferation not only of synagogues but also of educational institutions, cultural associations, Zionist societies, and other organizations that filled the needs of their burgeoning Jewish populations. In almost every major American city could be found a neighborhood like the *shtetl* centered on Preston Street in Louisville. As Gerald Sorin has noted in his volume of the marvelous new five-part history, *The Jewish People in America*, "in most cities and towns with Jewish residents, there were neighborhoods . . . that had a highly visible Jewish immigrant settlement, with a relatively autonomous life, distinct Jewish trades, and familiar street scenes."²⁴

23 The figures for Kentucky are from Weissbach, *Synagogues of Kentucky*, table 2; the figures for the United States as a whole are from Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 62.

24 Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880-1920*, vol. 3 of Henry L. Feingold, ed., *The Jewish People in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 160.



Evidence of Jewish life in Louisville around 1930. This photo of the corner of Third and Market streets shows M. Cohen and Sons tailors, one of numerous clothing establishments in Louisville with Jewish proprietors, as well as Knopf's Delicatessen, one of the downtown restaurants catering to a Jewish clientele. Note the Hebrew word "kosher" on Knopf's sign.

R. G. Potter Collection, University of Louisville Photographic Archives

When it comes to the matter of smaller Jewish communities, the situation in Kentucky was representative as well. For example, among the five hundred communities of somewhere between one hundred and one thousand Jews in the United States around 1927, the same two basic types that existed in Kentucky could be identified: older small-town communities, such as those of Paducah or Lexington established by German-Jewish immigrants in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and newer



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small-town communities, such as those of Newport or Ashland, that developed only in the era of mass migration.

Finally, it might be noted that in nearly every American city and town with an established Jewish population, there existed a clear-cut division between the local German Jews and the East European Jews. "A great deal has been written . . . about the conflicts between the 'uptown' or German-American-Jewish leadership and the masses of 'downtown' Eastern European Jews," Roger Daniels has observed:

That most of the German-American-Jewish leaders patronized the newcomers and were embarrassed by their squalor and their enthusiasms - religious and political - and sneered at their language - Yiddish - as a "jargon," and that East European Jews knew and resented this, are among the basic facts of the communal history of American Jewry.²⁵

Nonetheless, as Daniels also points out, German Jews in every community often stretched out a helping hand to the East European immigrants and even made common cause with them in some efforts.

All this is not to say, of course, that distinctions between the Jewish history of Kentucky and that of other parts of the country are completely absent. Certainly, every region and every locality has its own story to tell, and in some cases there are important differences to be noted between the Jewish histories of various states. In Mississippi, for example, there was not a single Jewish community of over six hundred individuals even as late as 1927 (Meridian had 575 Jews that year and Vicksburg 467),²⁶ and so Jewish life was atypical in being an exclusively small-town phenomenon. On the other hand, the Jewish experience in New York State was also substantially different from the Jewish experience in Kentucky. While there were certainly striking parallels between the Jewish communities of Syracuse and Louisville, for example, or between the communities of Plattsburg

²⁵ Daniels, *Coming to America*, 227.

²⁶ *AJYB* for 5689 (Philadelphia, 1928), 187.

and Lexington, there was nothing in Kentucky (or anywhere else in the country) to compare with Jewish life in New York City.

Even as early as 1860, about one quarter of all American Jews lived in New York City, and by 1920, nearly half of all the Jews in America lived there. In 1927 New York had 1.8 million Jewish inhabitants; Chicago, in second place that year, had 325,000. This meant not only that Jewish life was carried on in New York on a much grander scale than anywhere else in America, but also that it was in many ways unique. New York City was the headquarters of most national Jewish organizations; it was the center of American Yiddish culture; it was the birthplace of the trade unions organized by the Jewish working class; and it was one of the few cities in the United States where there was a Jewish constituency for turn-of-the-century ethnic politics.²⁷

Nonetheless, despite the anomalous situation in places where the Jewish population was extremely sparse or where it was overwhelming, there is much more to say about the commonalities between Kentucky's Jewish experience and the American Jewish experience more generally than there is to say about glaring exceptions that need to be noted. The outlines of American Jewish history can certainly be read in an account of the Jewish experience in Kentucky.

In this essay, I have focused on the period of mass migration, both because this was such an important formative period for American Jewry and because it happens to be the era I find most fascinating. In the context of this presentation, it is not my intention to take the story of Kentucky Jewry up to the present, but it is worth mentioning that what I have said about the way the commonwealth's Jewish history reflects American Jewish history as a whole holds true for the period since the 1920s as well. If we were to carry the

27 Good accounts of New York Jewish life in the era of mass migration are in Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (New York: Corinth Books, 1964); Arthur Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community: The Kehillah Experiment, 1908-1922* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); and Sorin, *A Time for Building*.

story of Kentucky's Jewish experience forward into the 1990s, we would notice, for example, the increasing acculturation of all Kentucky Jews and the consequent fading of distinctions between Jews of German origin and those of East European background. We would also notice the gradual disappearance of Kentucky's small-town Jewish communities (today, beyond Louisville and Lexington, there are remnants of Jewish congregations only in Paducah and Owensboro). And we would notice the quite recent breakdown of traditional Jewish residential patterns and endogamous marriage patterns. In considering all these developments, we would be able to see that they are characteristic of the American Jewish experience more generally.

And so I reiterate the fundamental proposition that I have advanced in this presentation. The history of the Jews in Kentucky (and the history of any local Jewish population, for that matter) is worth considering not only because it often has an inherently interesting story to tell (especially to a local audience), but also because local Jewish history can serve as a gateway through which we can embark on an exploration of the general patterns of historical development in American Jewish life.