Judaism in the Heartland: The Jewish Community of Marietta, Ohio (1895-1940)

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Marietta, Ohio, is a city of about 17,000 that sits in a quiet valley at the confluence of the Ohio and Muskingum Rivers in the southeast corner of the state. Marietta is an old town, established in 1788, and it was the first permanent settlement in the Old Northwest Territory. There are a few industrial installations around the city, though the surrounding area is predominantly rural. Marietta College, a small liberal arts school, has been in existence as a college since 1835. The predominant religious institutions in Marietta are mainline Protestant; they reflect the New England Congregationalism of the original settlers and the later influence of mid-nineteenth century German settlers who espoused Lutheranism and Methodism. Marietta also has a Jewish population of fifteen.

With this fact so baldly stated, one might wonder if an investigation of the Marietta Jewish community is not, *prima facie*, a less than compelling task. But if the dearth of Jewish activity is one of the remarkable features of Marietta's present sociological portrait, one can find in various places in the city tantalizing clues that lead one to suspect that perhaps there are Jewish details to the historical portrait that have not yet been uncovered. One of these clues was the starting point of my investigation: the existence of two Jewish cemeteries, their graves bearing family names no longer known in Marietta. These clues lead to the discovery that the story of the Jewish experience in Marietta is an excellent illustration of the history of the city at large.

Although the main body of my findings deals with the period from 1895 to 1940, one must actually look to the decade preceding this period in order to set the stage for the story of Marietta Jewry. Marietta in 1880 was the quintessential Victorian small town: quaint, quiet, and contented, with its own amusements for its population of

5500.[1] Ethnically and religiously, the town was homogeneous. The majority of the population was American-born of Anglo-Saxon descent, and cultural modes and mores were well-established.

But even the provinces were affected by the tremendous energies at work in American society at the turn of the century. Marietta's population statistics provide startling evidence. From 1880 to 1890, the population rose from 5500 to over 8000, and by the year 1900, to over 13,000. At the start of the new century, Marietta's population was two and a half times its size of twenty years previous. By 1920, the population reached over 15,000 a near tripling of population in forty years. Clearly these were pivotal years in the city's history.

These were also, of course, pivotal years in the history of American Jewry. Between 1880 and 1910, close to two million Jews, mostly from Eastern Europe, immigrated to the United States to escape a hopeless way of life and with the dream of finally obtaining a decent standard of existence in a rapidly expanding society. New York was not the only place where Jewish population boomed. There was also substantial immigration to the South, Midwest, and West, to any and all places that offered the possibility of reward for those who would work hard.

In Marietta, this lure, and the cause of the rapid expansion of the turn of the century, was oil. Preliminary oil discoveries had first been made in Washington County as early as 1860. Large-scale exploitation of these deposits began in earnest in the 1890's and the ensuing economic flurry created a boom town. It was the coincidence of these two phenomena--the discovery of oil and large-scale Jewish immigration--that created the Marietta Jewish community almost overnight. I have not yet uncovered any evidence of Jewish residents in Marietta prior to 1890, though it is entirely possible that there had been some transient Jewish population, for instance, peddlers. In the city directories of the early 1890's, only a few Jewish families appear. By 1896, there are half a dozen Jewish families, and by 1902, over a dozen. In 1910, the community was well-established, with a constituency of over twenty families.

The earliest Jewish residents of Marietta were not directly involved with oil business, but rather provided support services in the city. Morris Luchs ran a wholesale liquor store; Sam Sulzbacher was a tailor. Morris Miller arrived in Marietta in 1891 and became a junk buyer. In the mid-1890's, other businessmen began to arrive. Samuel Wallach owned several businesses, including a furniture store. Peter

Unger and Isaac Smith were junk buyers. About 1896, a young Cincinnatian named Joseph Josephy opened a large clothing store, The Buckeye, under the auspices of an uncle's company; he later became the owner as well as the operator of this popular establishment.

The majority of these early Jewish residents were not recent immigrants. Josephy, for example, had been born in Indiana, and his parents were German Jews. Peter Unger, Samuel and Adella Wallach, and Mrs. Isaac Smith were Austrian-born. Only Isaac Smith and Morris Miller were of Russian Jewish origin. The Wallachs, Smiths, and Ungers had all lived for a number of years in the central Ohio town of Zanesville before moving to Marietta.

By contrast, the families that swelled the ranks of the Marietta Jewish community in the beginning of the new century were all Eastern European. Like many other immigrants, they arrived in large family groups which formed a substantial core for the budding Jewish community. These family groups centered around the Brachman family, two branches of the Beren family, and two branches of the Rabinowitz family. All of these families were related to each other, as were several other families of various names. The only notable exception to this Eastern European trend was Jacob Katzenstein, a native Cincinnatian of German origin, who, like Joseph Josephy, moved to Marietta to operate a clothing store, a popular and "tony" establishment known modestly as The Leader.

From the old Russian names of birthplaces on Marietta wedding certificates, one can locate the area of origin of the majority of the Marietta Jewish families: central Latvia, along the Dvina River. Evidently certain members of the families served as "advance parties" in immigration. The Elias Beren family preceded the Wolfe Beren family. Isaac Hertz Rabinowitz and his nephews, Max and Isaac, arrived, probably separately, in the U.S. before the rest of the family. These immigrants proceeded straight to Marietta and at once became involved in aspects of the oil industry. Starting junk and scrap metal businesses, the enterprising arrivals would scour the oil fields for metal, rope, and other abandoned materials, which they would collect and resell. The pace of oil production meant that this chore was, if difficult, fairly profitable. The threat of potential confusion with another business with a similar name seems to have meant enough to Isaac Hertz Rabinowitz that he forced his nephews Max and Isaac and their branch of the family (under Isaac Hertz' brother Sussman) to change their name from Rabinowitz to Ruby before they

arrived in Marietta to set up in business. Sussman Ruby was an accomplished scholar, having studied at a prestigious Hasidic yeshiva, and had worked in an import-export firm in Latvia. He and his family arrived in Marietta about 1907 and entered the oil business.

By 1910, with twenty Jewish families in residence in Marietta, a Jewish neighborhood and communal institutions had taken shape. Most of the families lived around Hart and South Fourth Streets, near the Ohio River, often next door to or on the same lots with their businesses. It was near the corner of Hart and Fifth that the community established its first synagogue. In May 1903, Isaac Ruby bought a house at 504 Hart Street; he sold it later that month to the newly organized congregation Bnai Israel. City directories begin in 1905 to list official rabbis for Bnai Israel: Jacob Perliman in 1905, Samuel Mandel in 1907-08, Isaac Aaron (designated "Pastor, Jewish Church" in one directory) from about 1910 to 1915, and, from about 1918 or 1919, Aaron Axelrod. There were perhaps also unofficial rabbis in Marietta earlier. Abraham Shinedling, in his history of West Virginia Jewry, reports that the *American Jewish Yearbook* for 1903-04 lists one E.M. Mosinter as *having* served as rabbi at Pocahontas, West Virginia, and Marietta, Ohio.

In accordance with tradition, the congregation soon set up another communal institution, a burial society, and established cemeteries. Jews had been buried in a separate section of the city cemetery as early as 1895. Another cemetery was established on a tract of land just outside the city which was purchased initially by David Rabinowitz in January 1902 and soon resold to Bnai Israel.

Arrangements were also made for Kosher facilities with a local butcher, Rowland and Smith. A visiting shochet would provide the necessary slaughtering services on a regular basis.

With a large young population, weddings were a strong point of Marietta Jewish life during the first decades of the century. Peter Unger's three daughters were married, one to a clerk from Pittsburgh, one to a local oil well supplies dealer, and one to a tailor from Buckhannon, West Virginia. There were marriages among local residents: Isaac Hertz Rabinowitz' son married a Marietta girl, Louis Ginsburg married Dora Brachman, and Ella Beren married Elias Brachman, for example. Numerous others, however, were married to Jews from other cities. The wedding of Louis Goldish to Sadie Lebow of Bellaire, Ohio, in November 1917, was a major event of that year: the Marietta *Register-Leader* described in elaborate detail the ceremony, the sit-down dinner of 300, and the dance, all held at the

city Armory.[2] This event reportedly cost over $1000, a handsome sum for those days!

Another keynote social event, one about which former residents still speak with pride, was the 1909 wedding of Isaac Hertz Rabinowitz' daughter Sarah to Bernard Revel, a Talmudic scholar who later founded Yeshiva University. Writes Revel's biographer, with accuracy, "The worldly Jewish residents of the thriving Marietta community were enchanted by him."[3] The marriage had been arranged by one of Revel's mentors, a Pittsburgh rabbi who was a friend of the Rabinowitzes.

As there were weddings, there were, of course, also funerals. The graves of three Wallach children and of Ginsburg and Cohen infants attest to the precariousness of childhood in this period. One of Elias Beren's sons commited suicide at the age of 19, several years after doctors removed a portion of his brain following a head injury. Poor Morris Miller died a tragic death in 1907 after being struck by a train while driving his junk cart out to the oil fields. The obituary in the Marietta *Times* is quaintly phrased: "This was one of the first burials to be made in the city with the full Israelitic ceremony and was attended by most of the members of his race here." The paper also described the details of Jewish burial traditions, for the curious. Miller was evidently well-known in town as, to quote the paper again, "the aged Jew."[4]

The Hart Street neighborhood was a vital neighborhood at the time but it had a major drawback. Located on a flood plain, it was the first area of town to be inundated when the river rose. It was also downtown, near the commercial section, and moves "uptown" were motivated by social as well as practical factors. Even in the early 1910's, one can see in these moves the seeds of trends that would eventually help break down the Marietta Jewish community. Many of the families who had started in the oil business in Marietta continued to follow the westward development of the industry, obtaining large holdings in Oklahoma and Texas. Members of the Rabinowitz family settled early in the century in Oklahoma (where they changed their name to Travis, an Anglicization of the French Treyfous or Dreyfus, a family name deriving from the Middle Ages). By the time of Sarah's marriage to Bernard Revel, the Rabinowitz-Travises were wealthy enough to provide substantial support of the young couple and of Revel's projects. He in turn worked as a consultant for the business.[5] By 1915, this entire family had moved to Oklahoma, where they became extremely wealthy.

Within Marietta, the Jewish families began to fan out to other parts

of the city, though some continued to live near their businesses in the old neighborhood. With the exploitation of oil resources, the community was prospering, and in 1921, the synagogue on Hart Street was replaced by a newer, larger synagogue in a renovated home in an "uptown" neighborhood. Communal life continued actively. For the High Holidays, the Elks or Eagles Hall would be rented to provide for the many out-of-town Jews who came to the Orthodox services. Jewish education was provided by the rabbi, by members of the community, or by private teachers.

It is an interesting phenomenon that even in its moves uptown the community continued to be predominantly Orthodox. One former resident attributes this - and it is an intriguing insight - to the general air of "church-going respectability" in Marietta. Of course, complete Orthodox observance was not the rule. Many families were more "relaxed." Some, for instance, would keep kosher homes, but transact business on Sabbath.

Only a few families were non-observant and/or associated with Reform Judaism. The Katzensteins were of Reform background, as were the Josephys. Both families had predominantly Gentile friends. The Josephys even participated in the activities of local churches, for instance, the Unitarian, although they attended the Parkersburg, West Virginia, Reform congregation's services on the Jewish holidays.

There seems to be evidence of only one intermarriage in the Marietta community and in that case it is difficult to tell the extent to which the family may already have been assimilated.

Like most Jewish communities, the Marietta community took great pride in scholarly accomplishments. Sussman Ruby and Solomon Muskat, an optician, were both revered by Jews and Gentiles for their Talmudic knowledge and their piety. Academic accomplishments were extremely important to the Jewish children who attended the city schools in the 1910's and 1920's. They often graduated with high rank and with important roles in extracurricular activities, even though many of them may have come from families in which, especially in the early immigrant days, English was not spoken at home. One area in which Jewish students attained particular prominence was the Debate Club.

The older Josephy daughter also made a terrific impression in Marietta when, in 1929, she published, in collaboration with Mary Margaret McBride (later to become a well-known radio personali-

ty) a travel book entitled *Paris is a Woman's Town*. After graduating from Smith College in 1921, Helen had worked briefly on the Marietta *Times*, then had lived in Paris while working for *Vogue*. The bookstores in Marietta filled their windows with copies of the book and Helen was invited to speak at numerous gatherings. The *Times* modestly carried the story of the publication on page five of its June 6, 1929 edition, but could not help two days later printing a laudatory editorial about its former employee, proclaiming, "Anything Miss Josephy writes should be well worth reading . . . ."[6] The book was, in fact, a best seller.

By the mid-1920's, the Marietta Jewish community had reached its peak population of some thirty or thirty-five families, which totalled about 135 persons. The community had been growing for thirty years and its communal life was good enough to attract other Jewish families to the city. Yet at this same time, the community began to feel the subtle impact of forces which, quietly set in motion twenty years earlier, were eventually to stifle Jewish life in Marietta.

The social turbulence associated with the unprecedented growth of the turn-of-the-century had caused a profound reaction among Marietta's older families of Anglo-Saxon heritage. As Paula Roush Riggs, a historian of Marietta, has demonstrated, the Marietta establishment simply decided that this turbulence was too high a price to pay for economic progress. Thus, a very definite decision was made to retain the former life-style, to remain a small town. Writes Riggs, "After a brief period near the turn of the century when Marietta seemed to be trying to free itself from its rural heritage, it seemed to revert to strengthening its rural ties."[7] Economic incentives for new business and industry were discouraged, and opportunities that had once seemed limitless were now being constricted.

Of course, the impact on the Jewish community was not felt at once. Through the 1910's and 1920's, the pace of population growth in Marietta gradually slowed to less than 1% per year. The stellar young Jewish students at Marietta High School, even if they studied for a while at Marietta College, found more fertile academic and career fields elsewhere, often at such outstanding schools as Harvard.

All this does not, it seems, indicate that there was a basic incompatibility between the Jewish and Gentile communities rooted in Gentile antisemitism. In her study, Riggs found ample evidence of the disparaging attitudes of the families of northern European background to those recent arrivals from southern and eastern

European countries; however, she found no such statements regarding Jews as Jews specifically.

Perhaps there is some insight to be gained from the material in a *Register-Leader* article of October 18, 1918, headlined "Russian Jew is Held as Vagrant."[8] A certain Jacob Trotsky ("namesake," the paper notes coyly, "of the notorious Bolsheviki leader") was arrested for vagrancy and taken before Mayor Crawford in police court. The mayor, shocked to encounter a Jewish "bum", was prompted to remark that the poor man "apparently had none of the characteristic ambition of his race." "'You're not a full-blooded Jew?' the mayor asked Trotsky, who declared that he was. 'Then you have lost the birthright of your fathers,' asserted the mayor."

On the one hand, Mayor Crawford's peremptory removal of this unfortunate from the Abrahamic covenant bespeaks a high admiration for Jewish successes. Yet the remarks seem to conceal a double-edged sword. The dark side of Gentile admiration of Jewish successes is, of course, the suspicion that they were achieved through unscrupulous behavior.

It is perhaps aspects of this dark side that asserted themselves in an incident in 1928 which did reveal blatant antisemitic forces at work. With Joseph Josephy's business success and high level of civic and social involvement, it seemed only natural to several of his friends to nominate him for membership in the Marietta Rotary Club. Josephy's nomination caused a fracas in the Club that all but resulted in a major schism.[9] So many of the members threatened to resign if a Jew were elected, that the nomination had to be withdrawn. Many of the members who threatened resignation were prominent Methodist churchgoers and, perhaps not so coincidentally, business rivals of Josephy.

Another development was the appearance of a local branch of the Ku Klux Klan in Marietta in the mid-1920's. On a Saturday night in February 1923, there was a cross-burning on Harmar Hill, which was taken as the first demonstration of the recently organized group. The *Register-Leader* noted that local rumor placed Klan membership then at about 200.[10] The night following the cross-burning, members of the Klan appeared in full costume at the Methodist Church as evening services began. With a flourish, the Klansmen handed the visiting evangelist an envelope containing a cash contribution and a letter praising his work. The Marietta *Times* reported that the minister "said that he knew not the purpose of the visit, yet he

presumed it was for good, as he had similar experiences with the Klan in other places, and for a few minutes he addressed the Klansmen and the audience on the meaning of real Americanism."[11] Any reaction in the Methodist congregation against the evangelist with Klan ties was not recorded in the papers. The *Times* editorial concerning the church incident is oddly silent on the issue of Klan bigotry, stating only, "There is no real work for such an organization to do here. There is no difficulty in securing convictions in our courts when evidence of misdoing is obtainable."[12]

The Klan continued its activity in the Marietta area throughout the 1920's and made the news again in April 1925 with another cross-burning. If the estimates are of any value, the Klan would appear to have grown in numbers, for both the *Times* and the *Register-Leader* reported attendance of over 300 men and women "in regalia."[13]

A former Jewish resident of Marietta reports that a Gentile friend, a newspaper reporter, had surreptitiously observed the first cross-burning and the Klan meeting preceding it, and had been horrified to hear his Jewish friend's family's name brought up as a possible target for Klan harassment. His relief was mixed with other emotions when the conversation made it evident that the local Klan, having few Jews and few Blacks with which to concern itself, seemed to have decided that the more sizable Catholic community (many of whom were also immigrants) would be better prey! Although there were no actual incidents of violence against Jews in Marietta, the result was a subdued atmosphere, for there was no doubt that some prominent Mariettans were involved in the Klan activity. A connection with the Josephy-Rotary incident, though not perhaps direct or provable, is not out of order.

For the most part, the attitude of Marietta Gentiles to Marietta Jews seems to have been relatively unthreatening. Though there were incidents of antisemitic remarks, these seem to have been more thoughtless than deliberate, a "run of the mill" type of prejudice that remained non-belligerent. A former Jewish resident suggests that perhaps it was the sense of "noblesse oblige" among the old-line families that prevented wide expression of prejudices that plagued so many American cities and towns in the 1920's. It is a revealing observation, for it is consonant with the pervasive attitude in Marietta in this era. Toleration of such bias was unworthy of this small-town nobility with, as Riggs describes it, "their emphasis on the town's New England heritage with its connotations of refinement, respect for

learning and moral probity."[14] Ironically these are part of the complex of attitudes that resulted in the decisions that finally caused the decline of the Jewish community.

The 1930's were the watershed in the Marietta Jewish community's development. During this decade, the congregation continued to support a rabbi; David Vine served in the early 1930's after the departure of Aaron Axelrod. Members of the Ruby family moved west, as did the Brachmans. Joseph Josephy died in 1931 and his wife and younger daughter left Marietta to join Helen in New York. By 1935, the Jewish community was one-half of its size a decade previous. The remaining families included one of the Brachman families, a few of the Rubys, Isaac Smith's widow and his son Abe, the Kullers (who still ran a grocery in the old neighborhood), the Goldishes, and the Ginsburgs.

There were fewer Jewish students in the city schools as a result, but those in attendance still excelled. Marcus Ginsburg, the star debater of the Class of 1932, became an attorney, having received his law degree at Harvard. His sister Rowena graduated from Wellesley. The oldest Ginsburg son, Harold, was on his way to a promising scientific career when he was killed in a tragic accident near Marietta. In the summer of 1934, Harold received his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at the age of 25, and was married shortly thereafter. While he and his wife and her parents were visiting Marietta several weeks after the wedding, they went with Harold's father and with Marcus to watch a drilling operation at a natural gas well in West Virginia. As the *Times* reported the accident, "The gas was unexpectedly struck and ignited in an unknown manner. The accident is one of the most unusual in the history of the eastern oil fields."[15] All six of the observers were burned, several severely, including Harold, who died at Marietta Memorial Hospital two days later, and his mother-in-law, who died two weeks later. Following their recovery, the Ginsburg parents left Marietta and retired to Baltimore.

The Jewish community shrank even further in the 1940's. The city directory of 1943 lists fewer than a dozen families, and few of the original community. Even Abe Smith, the son of Isaac and Anna, who rose from newsboy to city editor of the Marietta *Times*, left (after an unfortunate incident involving his obviously disturbed wife) to work for the Akron *Beacon-Journal*. Sussman Ruby, the patriarch of the Marietta community for many years, died in 1940 at the age of 89. Described in his *Times* obituary as "one of Marietta's venerable citizens," Ruby had evidently engendered a great respect in the

Gentile community. "Mr. Ruby was revered in a large circle of friends in Marietta," the *Times* wrote. "He was a great reader and a scholar."[16] After his death, his wife Anna and two remaining daughters also left Marietta. In 1948, another of the old-time residents, Sam Ongar, died, only a year retired from tailoring, at the age of 84.

After 1950, even fewer Jewish residents remained. There were still members of the Wolfe Beren clan (Wolfe Beren died in 1947), the Goldish families, the Muskats, the Kullers (who ran the Hart Street grocery until 1952), and the Katzes (who operated the Marietta Garment Company until that same year). Only one new family arrived in the 1940's, having purchased the junk business that had formerly belonged to several old-time Jewish families. The property of this business includes the shell of what was once the grand red brick house of Isaac Hertz Rabinowitz. In the 1950's and 1960's, respectively, two Jewish families also moved to Marietta for business purposes. But the operation of communal institutions had all but ground to a halt. The Orthodox congregation supported a rabbi, Jacob Slavin, until 1960, when it was simply no longer able to do so. The last Jewish funeral was that of Louis Goldish in 1969 and the last Jewish wedding within the community was in the mid-1950s.

In Europe, Jewish communities were wiped out by plague and pogrom. In the case of Marietta (and we remember the slogan, "America is Different"!) it was wiped out by affluence and by its own internal dynamics. This outcome was implicit when Marietta made the decision to remain a small town. At the crucial period following its rapid expansion, the city contemplated its future and decided it would be better off in the past. Mariettans had, Riggs notes, "a preference for social order, even at the expense of economic expansion; a satisfaction with things as they were"; they exhibited a definite "trend toward insularity and rejection of the outside world . . . . Marietta would rather be a cultured town than a wealthy one."[17] These tendencies were fed by the overweening and sometimes exaggerated pride in the city's past.

When this thinking prevailed, Marietta became destined never to be the sort of place which could continue to provide an adequate environment for American Jews. Frustrated and restless from the confines of Eastern Europe, these Jews were drawn to the U.S. eager for a chance. The American Jewish community continued to yearn, continued to strive to better itself. It continued to grow—and

Marietta did not. Former residents of Marietta found success and contribution in the larger communities to which they moved. They continued to look forward, as Marietta stopped dead in its tracks, looking back, and, like Lot's wife, petrifying in so doing. Thus after a while all that remained were the elderly, whose children had not been able to find their opportunities in their own hometown.

Yet in the short run, Marietta proved an eminently satisfactory way-station on the road to the American dream. The generation that grew up with the Jewish community there found their youth, in the words of one of that generation, "a very healthy American Jewish experience." Marietta contributed to their progress and they to Marietta's, while it lasted. One can look back at this period as a significant and exciting time in the history of Marietta and as one more facet to the multifaceted and brilliant picture that is American Jewish history.

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NOTES

[1] All population statistics for the city are from Paula Roush Riggs, "Marietta, Ohio: A Town and its Images 1888-1938," Ph.D. dissertation, Department of American Studies, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, 1975.

[2] Marietta *Register-Leader,* Nov. 21, 1917, p. 5.

[3] Aaron Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel,* Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1972, p. 40.

[4] Marietta *Times,* May 6, 1907, p. 1.

[5] Rothkoff, p. 41.

[6] Marietta *Times,* June 8, 1929, p. 4.

[7] Riggs, p. 137

[9] *Ibid.,* p. 5.

[9] Allen Rupp, "A History of the Marietta Rotary Club," pamphlet, Marietta, 1970, p. 31.

[10] Marietta *Register-Leader,* February 26, 1923, p. 1.

[11] Marietta *Times,* February 26, 1923, p. 1.

[12] *Ibid.,* p. 4.

[13] Marietta *Times,* April 25, 1925, p. 1; Marietta *Register-Leader,* April 25, 1925, p. 2.

[14] Riggs, p. 135.

[15] Marietta *Times,* July 5, 1934, p. 1.

[19] Marietta *Times,* March 12, 1940, p. 5.

[17] Riggs, p. 135, 138.