

The Jewish Presence in Grand Rapids

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There are about 2,000 Jewish people in Grand Rapids. I do not know why the first Jews came to this city, but I do know why they left Bavaria. In the mid-nineteenth century, widespread revolution followed the fall of Napoleon, monarchs regained their thrones, and increasingly restrictive laws against the Jews were enacted. By 1850 thousands of young, educated Jews had emigrated to the United States. Did the handful who came to Grand Rapids have friends here? Did they come because it was a German community? Did they see mercantile opportunities in the wake of the lumber industry which was denuding Michigan forests?

In August, 1852, nineteen-year-old Julius Houseman arrived in Grand Rapids. The village boasted 2,686 inhabitants and "eight public houses and victualling establishments." Soon he was joined by four other young Jewish men. They were his cousin Joseph Houseman, Albert Alsberg, and two men named Newburg. Whom did they find to marry? Joseph married Henrietta Rose; her half brother Albert Alsbury married Mary Houseman, a sister of Julius' cousin Joseph! Only Julius married out of his faith. His bride was Jane Ringuette, daughter of the partner of Grand Rapids pioneer Louis Campau.

In 1857 a young French fur trader named Jacob Levy wandered into town and died suddenly of "galloping consumption." As burial in the existing Christian cemeteries was impossible, the five young men each contributed \$25 to purchase space in Oakhill Cemetery, an area characterized by Baxter's History of Grand Rapids as "neatly, sweetly, and carefully cared for." From that September of 1852 the small group of young Jewish men became a congregation fulfilling the three requirements of holding weekly services, educating their young (whether they wanted to be educated or not), and

fulfilling the list of benevolent obligations characteristic of Jewish congregations to this day--supporting the impoverished, healing the sick, visiting the homebound, welcoming the newcomer, etc.

Soon the Civil War darkened, and the growing Jewish community sent its young men to the front in numbers twice that of the non-Jewish community, a practice they have unfortunately pursued in each war since. At least two presidents of Temple Emanuel had been captains during the Civil War--one from the North and one from the Confederacy! They were David Amberg and Sidney Hart.

After the Civil War more Jews settled here. The Houseman Company offered fine clothing, Barth and Company dry goods, and Levi Brothers silk hats. The city directory praised the Hart and Amberg Company for its "rectified whiskies."

Fourteen years after the founding of the congregation, the body incorporated with Julius Houseman as president. He became mayor of Grand Rapids twice and was elected to the Congress of the United States twice. This remarkable man had large real estate holdings, administered the estate of first settler Louis Campau, built the Houseman Building, and gave his name to Houseman Field and Houseman Street.

In 1880 the women of Temple Emanuel held a "Fabulous Fair." They were joined by many of the women in the non-Jewish community and raised \$2,914 toward the \$15,000 cost of the first Temple building. The latter edifice, sadly remodeled, stands today at Ransom and Fountain Streets.

Jews did not enter the United States in a slow, steady stream, as is characteristic of some other immigrant groups. A small number of Spanish Jews knocked at the doors of Peter Stuyvesant's New Amsterdam in the mid-seventeenth century and had been reluctantly admitted. They had left their homes in the West Indies where their ancestors had settled after the Spanish

Inquisition. In our Archives we have a family tree going back to that terrible event. Two current Temple families appear on the document.

Two hundred years after the arrival of the Sephardic Jews from the West Indies, many German (Bavarian) Jews came to our country of freedom. A third wave of some million Jews escaped from the pogroms of Eastern Europe from 1890 to 1920. This is the vanished culture immortalized in the popular drama, Fiddler on the Roof. During this period there was a second influx of Sephardic Jews following the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The fourth immigration were the pitiful few who escaped the Holocaust of World War II, and in the past decade a small number of Jews were rescued from Communist Russia and resettled on our shores.

Here in Grand Rapids, descendants of the first two waves of immigration assimilated easily into our city. When the much more numerous Eastern European Jews arrived, they formed their own congregations, now represented by the conservative synagogue Ahavas Israel. Temple Emanuel espouses Reform or liberal Judaism. There is also a very small number of Chassidic Jews in Grand Rapids who practice Orthodoxy. They are colorful but not representative of the Jewish community. We are all friends.

There are about 320 families in Temple Emanuel. Many are very active in the general community, heading Art Gallery, United Way, Red Cross, Symphony and other organizations. Are the Jews "accepted"? Prejudice remains, but it is what the late and great Father Hugh Michael Beahan would have called "pin pricks." It was quite different when I grew up here. Every day at my public school began with a--Christian--prayer. Good Christian Reformed boys and girls were dismissed fifteen minutes early on Wednesdays for catechism. I was required to lead a parade down the neighborhood streets as the entire school sang "Onward Christian Soldiers."