THE CUBA FAMILY ARCHIVES FOR SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY AT THE BREMAN MUSEUM

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Jewish Information Series

The STORY of the JEWS in the UNITED STATES
the other that they cannot be separated. It is because the lives of Jews in America have been identical with the lives of other immigrants who have built America;—they have made the same sacrifices and shared the same blessings with all other citizens. It is because the land has been nurtured with their blood in all its wars. It is because their spirit lives and moves and has its being in the spirit of freedom and justice. Thus, knowing the value of freedom and justice, Jews are willing to die to preserve these ideals in America and in the world.

JEWISH INFORMATION SERIES
No. I

The Story of the Jews in the United States

for Jews in the Armed Forces of the United States

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the day. Not freedom and equality, but fear built on oppression, prejudice and racial strife was fostered by Nazism and Fascism.

Necessarily, the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party to power in Germany had its reflection on the American scene, especially since the Nazis deliberately spread their race theories and planned anti-Semitic campaigns as a screen to hide the Hitler conspiracy against the peace and freedom of the world. Jews, being in the first line of attack, were perhaps the first to realize that Nazi anti-Semitism was in reality not an attack upon Jews alone, but on all democratic society. It was therefore natural that in the face of these totalitarian attacks upon democratic society, American Jews were among the most effective preachers and defenders of the democratic system.

The Nazi drive for power inevitably led to World War II and today Americans once more are engaged in a war to defend their heritage and a world order which will vouchsafe to all men the Four Freedoms set forth by President Roosevelt—freedom from fear, freedom from

THE NEW WORLD

The story of the Jews in the building of America starts, not today nor a hundred years ago, but in the year 1492. It began with a man who thought the world was round and who had courage enough to prove it at the risk of his own life. He called himself Cristobal Colon. We know him today as Christopher Columbus, the man who opened a new world for the oppressed and persecuted of all nations.

In Spain, for hundreds of years the Jews had lived in what is still remembered as a golden age. Under the Moors and even under the Spaniards, they enjoyed a degree of freedom they had nowhere else in Europe. They had produced scientists, scholars, philosophers, poets and musicians. They helped make Spain famous for learning and culture. But by 1492, that Golden Age had long ago come to an end. Ferdinand, the king of Spain, who had driven out the last of the Moors, culminated a long succession of persecution by ordering the Jews to renounce their religion or leave Spain. Many became Christians, but many more, 300,000 in all, chose to remain Jews and go into exile.
Columbus did not hesitate to go to Jewish mapmakers for his charts and information, and to Jewish scientists for his facts. And it was not Isabella’s jewels that financed the voyage of discovery, but the funds raised by a converted Jew, Luis de Santangel by name. On the voyage with Columbus were six men who had been born Jews; the sailor who first sighted the land of the new world was Rodrigo de Triana, a Jew, and Luis de Torres, another Jew, was the first to set foot on land of the new world. Torres, because he knew Hebrew and Arabic, had come along as interpreter, since they expected to sail to the Indies. He headed the first inland expedition in America, on the island of Cuba; and it was he who brought tobacco back to Europe. Torres returned to the New World to live out his life in Cuba, thus becoming one of the first European settlers of America.

Those Jews who remained in Spain, converted to Christianity, were called Marranos, which means the damned; and many of them considered themselves that. Most of them practiced Jewish religious customs secretly, in Jews as individuals made important contributions. To Americans, this high standard of living seemed a just reward of victory. Americans had defended their freedom and their way of life with their blood and now leaned back to enjoy the fruits of the battle.

But the battle for freedom and economic security must be won anew by each generation, and it is not always a battle of guns and armor. Sometimes it must be fought on the home front, such as the battle of the depression which followed the prosperity period of the 1920’s.

True to its ideals, America solved the problems of the depression in its own characteristic manner, typified by the fact that the 1930’s, a time of severe stringency and suffering, saw tremendous advances in social legislation and other measures leading to greater economic democracy. How unlike the solutions sought by some European governments faced with similar problems. Not democracy, but totalitarianism, not greater opportunity for the average man, but suppression was the order of
population of the United States during the Civil War.

Half of them were in the infantry, although the infantry numbered less than half of the total forces. Ten thousand Jews were commissioned officers. Almost three thousand Jews died in service, and thousands more were wounded in battle. Very few bodies were returned to the United States for burial.

They did their duty—no more, no less than any other American in the service. They received eleven hundred citations for valor, three Jews were decorated with the supreme American award, the Congressional Medal of Honor; the famous Seventy-Seventh Division of New York City was composed of over forty percent Jews, and so was a good part of the Lost Battalion in the Argonne wood.

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THE JEWS IN OUR TIME

The post-war period in America was a golden era. It saw a great industrial expansion and a generally high level of prosperity. To this economic development and expansion, spite of the terrible punishments which the Inquisition inflicted on any who were discovered. They clung to their Judaism, and when Spanish and Portuguese colonies began to be established in South and Central America, they flocked to the New World in the hope that there they might once again become Jews in observance as well as in spirit. They settled in Mexico and Brazil and the West Indies, but their hopes of religious freedom were not fulfilled; the Inquisition went with them, and in both the Spanish and Portuguese colonies they encountered persecution.

Then Holland took possession of Brazil. Jews not only from Spain and Portugal, but from all over Europe, flocked there. For a brief time it seemed that all would be well for the Jews in Brazil. But in 1654 that hope vanished. The Portuguese seized Brazil from the Dutch and once more the Jews had to flee for their lives.

NEW AMSTERDAM

One small boatload of them, after being cap-
tured by pirates and then rescued by a French man-of-war, reached the Dutch colony which was called New Amsterdam. In September, 1654, they sailed into the harbor of this Dutch village, the first Jewish settlers in what was one day to become New York City.

Old Peter Stuyvesant ruled the colony at that time, and he refused to permit the Jews to remain. But they had come far enough in their wanderings; they were here in New Amsterdam, and here they were going to stay. Finally Stuyvesant and the directors of the Dutch West Indies Company relented and decided that the Jews might stay.

One strong-willed man, Asser Levy by name, became the leader of these Jewish settlers in their resolute fight for their rights, including the right to military service in defense of the new country. Under the Dutch they eventually managed to gain, if not complete liberty, at least a tolerance that was more than they enjoyed in most other quarters of the earth.

ture. They have built their synagogues, their schools, their charities, their fraternal and philanthropic organizations. Their part in the building of America led to common sympathy and mutual understanding between themselves and their fellow Americans.

This, broadly speaking, is the relatively secure and peaceful situation in which they found themselves at the outbreak of the first World War.

More than 200,000 Jews were in the American armed forces during the first World War. The armies of Napoleon were smaller. The forces Washington commanded in the American Revolution never exceeded 30,000. Some of the greatest engagements in the Civil War were fought with less than 200,000 men as the total for both sides. The number is well worth contemplation. It means that, after two thousand years of persecution, a fifth of a million Jews stood up to fight in the cause of the greatest democracy the world had ever known. Indeed, these Jews in the armed forces of their country numbered more than the total Jewish
them for granted. For them they embody the Promised Land, the actuality of freedom, of security and of growth.

The earlier immigration had produced many loyal citizens—statesmen, writers, merchants, doctors, lawyers, and soldiers. But now, to these, the generations deriving from the Jews of Eastern Europe have added painters, poets, actors, playwrights, musicians, and scientists. They have brought their share—many authorities say, more than their share—of enduring excellence to the spiritual and cultural life of the country.

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THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The new immigrants absorbed American culture, and in themselves they held the seeds of a new and energetic generation of Americans. They spread out from the few large cities in which they had originally congregated, and now make their homes in every nook and corner of the land. Their communities are dynamic parts of American cul-

THE FIRST SYNAGOGUE

The Jews, although poverty-stricken refugees at the time of their landing, immediately set about establishing themselves as citizens of worth and usefulness. The British took New Amsterdam and renamed it New York, and under English rule the rights Jews had enjoyed under the Dutch were continued. Many Jews took to trading. They developed an honorable reputation among the Indians, and their boats and barges journeyed far up the Hudson and Delaware Rivers. By 1683 they had rented a place to worship, and in 1728 they undertook to build their first synagogue on Mill Street. They became persons of respect in the community, honored and trusted by both the Dutch and the English. As word of the wonderful new land travelled back to Europe, more and more Jews sailed across the seas to America.

Naturally, Jews joined those settlements which guaranteed the greatest degree of religious freedom. Massachusetts, for all that the Pilgrims had come there as refugees, offered
freedom for Puritans, but not for Catholics, Quakers or Jews. In Rhode Island, on the other hand, Roger Williams had established the most liberal of all colonies, one that guaranteed freedom for all people. Thus in 1658 Jews began settling in Newport, where in time they built one of the most prosperous Jewish communities in America.

To the smaller towns they came in twos and threes, very often among the first settlers. They were fearless pioneers, for many of them, with a sack of ribbons and trinkets on their backs and muskets over their shoulders, went far into the wilderness to trade with the Indians. They crossed the Alleghenies and they plodded up to the wild Northwest territory, and sometimes they were the first white men in those distant places.

In the larger cities of the colonies, New York, Newport, Philadelphia, Charleston and Savannah, communities were built as Jews settled in increasing numbers.

**THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR**

On the 17th of April of '75, when Paul Chicago's west side, among their fellows who could understand their language and help them in their difficulties.

To keep themselves alive, they found employment in the garment trades, factories and sweatshops. They struggled and slaved and sweated. In a way, their privations were as heavy as those of the pioneers of the wilderness. True, they found in America freedom to worship God, freedom from fear, freedom to earn their bread in peace; but America was not the land of milk and honey that they had dreamed of in Europe—it was a land that demanded much. Like earlier immigrants, the Jews from Eastern Europe had to fight their way with little help. Through this fight they learned to be loyal, courageous and intelligent Americans. When a ruthless Germany launched the first World War, more than a fifth of a million of them were counted among the soldiers under the Stars and Stripes.

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To Jews in America, their country and its ideals are precious because they never took
them; they committed themselves to America, body and heart and soul.

The migration grew. Poor and rich, they came, learned and unlearned, old and young. For five years, beginning with 1904, more than one hundred thousand of them came to America each year.

**ADJUSTMENT TO AMERICA**

Coming as they did, so quickly, in such great numbers, these children of starvation were faced with problems that had never troubled the Spanish and German Jews whose immigration was slow and leisurely, who could hence establish themselves first and then lend a helping hand to the newcomers. But the Jews from Eastern Europe had less chance to adjust themselves; scarcely had a hundred landed, than a thousand more came. Speaking a foreign language, limited in experience and contacts, these men and women could not go off each by himself. They naturally felt safer together in that great settlement which formed the "ghetto" of New York's east side and Revere clattered through "every Middlesex village and farm," there were about 3,000 Jews in the Thirteen Colonies—not very many, but then neither was America very large or thickly settled at that time. Yet even though they were small in numbers, Jews made their weight felt in the Revolution.

It is estimated that of these 3,000 men, women and children, some 300 at one time or another, during the long course of the war, fought in the militia or the regular army. In Charleston, where Jews played an important part in the defense of the colony, one company of the town's militia had so many that it was called "The Jews' Company." Major David Salisbury Franks, a member of the famous Franks family, accompanied Arnold on his retreat from Canada, and afterwards fought on through the war. His cousin, Isaac Franks, was a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Continental army. In Georgia, Mordecai Sheftel, a Jew, became Deputy Commissary-General of Issues. There is no room here to list all the 300 and more who fought as officers and privates in that war. Yet Benjamin Nones should be men-
tioned, a volunteer private under Pulaski, a lieutenant under DeKalb, and finally a Major and Staff Officer under George Washington.

FINANCING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

Perhaps as important as any military service Jews were able to contribute was the part they played in the financing of the Revolution. For the Revolutionary War, like all wars, could be fought successfully only if the resources were available. The Continental Congress was always in need of funds, and Washington’s army was always losing men in large numbers for lack of money to pay the troops and buy them food and clothing. When Congress or the army needed money, Jews were among the many Americans who gave liberally, without question or security. A few contributions are recorded, such as the pledge of 3,000 pounds from Isaac Moses to Robert Morris, when Morris, minister of finance, was in desperate straits; or the contributions of Aaron Levy and Joseph Simon; or the $7,000 which Philip Minis of Georgia advanced to pay the troops. But there were also other lages where they lived; but for some time past, the bolder among them had broken away to the land of the free, and during those years letters and gifts had built a legend of America. A strange and wonderful place was the United States, where all could live as free men, with equal rights, where Jews could send their children to public schools and earn bread in peace, without fear or want.

They began to emigrate to America.

At first, they moved slowly; a few hundred ventured on the long, difficult journey, then a few thousand; the men went by themselves and then sent for their wives and children. Each wave of them wrote back glowing accounts of “the happy land,” and the news spread like wildfire. The thousands became tens of thousands. They went, not as so many other emigrants who planned to make a fortune and then return to the old country, but to find a new home to live in and die for. These Jewish immigrants burned all bridges behind
whom lived in the old Russian Empire, were extremely poor and endlessly persecuted. During the hundreds of years they had been living there, they were denied every ordinary human right. Economically, they were permitted to keep themselves alive, but they were permitted little more. They sustained this misery as their ancestors had done before them; they turned their hearts and minds to their religion and their history. They studied these deeply, and they became the most learned Jewish community in the world.

But in 1881, their lot became heavier than even they could bear. The people of Russia were beginning to murmur against the tyranny of the Czar. To divert their attention, the Czar’s bureaucrats undertook to direct the anger of the people against the Jews, as later Hitler did even more wickedly and cruelly. The Czar’s officers organized pogroms in which thousands of Jews were murdered.

Seeking to escape with their lives, many Jews turned to America. Not too much news and information had come to the lonely vil-

contributions never recorded—funds raised in synagogues to buy food and clothing for soldiers, and loans from individuals to members of Congress, to officers of the army, and to plain soldiers.

Outstanding was the work of Haym Salomon, a little Polish Jew who, charged by the British in New York with aiding and abetting the American cause, escaped from prison and fled to Philadelphia where he devoted himself to the cause of the Revolution.

Salomon’s task was to turn Morris’ credits into hard cash. When money was needed, regardless of the purpose, it was to Haym Salomon that Robert Morris turned. Haym Salomon was slowly dying of consumption. If he had turned the war to his own profit, he could have made a fortune and provided liberally for his family. He did neither, and died bankrupt in 1785, having given his life for his country, as surely as any soldier in the field.

Before leaving the Colonial period, a word should be said about the seafaring activities of Jews during the Revolution. America was
fighting England, a seafaring nation, but the Colonies had no regular navy and were forced to depend upon the activities of irregular privateers. Some of these privateers were commanded by Jews, and in other cases, whole fleets of them were owned and operated by Jews. These volunteer fleets struck telling blows which helped to bring about the final victory.

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THE WESTWARD TIDE

Though the Revolution was over, there were still battles to be won; for the thirteen colonies had to be fused into a single united nation with a Constitution and a Bill of Rights. It was the Bill of Rights, with its many "small" but highly important freedoms that opened the door to Jews into every one of the new states.

The Jews began to spread out, to move westward with the urgent tide of the American frontier. As yet, they were not numerous; so far as can be learned, their numbers increased from 3,000 to 15,000 during the years from often debated against Daniel Webster, also resigned from the Senate. He became one of the great figures in the Confederacy, and Jefferson Davis made him Secretary of State.

JEWS FROM EASTERN EUROPE

In 1785, the population of the thirteen colonies was about three and a half million, of whom some three thousand were Jews. In 1840, the population of the United States had increased to seventeen million, of whom fifteen thousand were Jews. In 1880, just at the beginning of the great Russian-Jewish migration, the population of America was some fifty million, of whom two hundred and fifty thousand were Jews. Today, the population of the United States is close to one hundred and forty million, and almost five million are Jews, which is about 4% of the total population. Let us see how this remarkable increase came about.

That part of Europe which stretches between the Baltic and the Black Seas was more thickly populated by Jews than any other area of the world. Jews of that region, most of
were many others whom he had no way of discovering. Yet even out of a total Jewish population of some 200,000, 7,500 is a very large percentage. To go on with statistics, we find that four Jews were promoted to the rank of general in the Union Army, seven were awarded the Congressional medal of honor for distinguished gallantry, 316 were wounded, 336 were killed in action, and 53 were captured—all these on the Union side.

If we go back to the beginning of the fight against slavery, we find that three members of John Brown's little band were Jewish. The great majority of the Jews of America were among those who had long spoken out against slavery.

Jews living in the Confederacy remained loyal to their states. David Levy, of Florida, who was the first Jew to sit in the United States Senate, resigned when his state seceded, to serve the South. A famous statesman of the day, Judah P. Benjamin of Louisiana, also a member of the Senate, a great orator, who

1785 to 1840. At this time there were a good many English, German, Russian and Polish Jews in addition to the older Sephardic or Spanish Jews. They did not congregate in the large cities as did those coming in the later waves of immigration, but pushed on beyond the frontier. In many places they settled in groups and formed communities, set aside land for burial places and built synagogues.

Thus, at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, synagogues appeared in many towns, in Richmond, in Baltimore, in New Orleans, and even upon the wilderness road to Louisville. Quietly, often leaving no record, Jews pioneered into the wilderness, to trade with the Indians and to provide the other pioneers with the supplies they so badly needed. When the Wyoming Valley massacre occurred, a party of women and children started from western Pennsylvania back to their homes in Connecticut. Weary and starving they came, one Friday evening, to the home of a Jewish trader who was laying out the Sabbath dinner in his rude
log cabin. To him they seemed like strangers out of the Bible. He washed their feet and seated them at his table, and afterward they were passed on from Jewish home to Jewish home until the frontier was behind them.

One of these early settlers was a man by the name of Abraham Mordecai, who came into Alabama in 1789, and later founded the city of Montgomery. Mordecai built the first cotton gin in Alabama. Another was Joseph Jonas, an early pioneer of the Northwest Territory. Jonas started the Jewish community at Cincinnati, which afterwards became one of the most flourishing in the land.

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**THE COUNTRY GROWS**

In the War of 1812 and in the Mexican War, as in the Revolution, Jews were quick to offer their services. During the War of 1812, Jews of Spanish origin still formed a considerable part of the American Jewish population; many of them fought in the army, and others did

Yom Kippur service to be held in San Francisco. The following year, two congregations were organized in that town—one by German Jews, and another by English and Polish Jews. In 1852, two Jews were elected by their fellow citizens to the State Legislature.

There were many similar happenings, but of most of them, no records remain. It is sufficient to say that wherever the tide of the American frontier rolled, Jews were to be found among the first pioneers, working and building a free America.

**THE CIVIL WAR**

One tragic phase in American history of the struggle was the Civil War, when the nation was divided, when brother fought brother in a conflict as bloody and terrible as man had known up to that time.

Like other Americans, Jews too, were divided. The Jewish historian Simon Wolf lists 6,000 Jews who served in the Union armies and 1,200 who served with the armies of the South. Those he was definitely able to trace but there
revolution was put down, Jews, along with other persecuted soldiers of democracy, emigrated to America by the thousands.

They reached the United States at just about the time gold was discovered in California, and the bolder and hardier among them set out to cross the continent. Jews were among those who plodded wearily along the Oregon trail, some on foot, some on mules, some riding in the lumbering covered wagons with their wives and children. Others traded with the Indians along the desolate valley of the Platte River, and still others could be found at Fort Laramie and Fort Bridger, waiting patiently until there might be gathered together ten males of Israel to hold formal worship. Often, instead of trading with the Indians, they had to fight them from behind the circles of covered wagons, side by side with other pioneers. Many trudged into Salt Lake City to live beside the Mormons. At last, a group of Jews reached the Pacific and in 1849, a handful collected in a tent to observe what has gone down in the record as the first signal service in the navy. Once again privateers owned, manned and commanded by Jews sailed under the Stars and Stripes. At sea, two Jewish officers, the sailing master later Commodore Uriah P. Levy and Captain John Ordroneaux, distinguished themselves.

There were Central European Jews among those who trickled into Texas during and just before the troubled days of the Lone Star State. A tide of immigration from the many small German kingdoms and dukedoms was beginning: The peasants and workers, smarting under oppression, were leaving their homes for the distant United States. They had heard of it as a land of liberty and opportunity, and the boldest among them threw off their bonds to sail for the land of the free.

A good many of these people from Central Europe made their way into the then wild and unsettled Texas. Adolphus Stern was one of the first settlers of Nacogdoches, in 1824. He fought against Santa Anna for the freedom of the Lone Star State. Later he became a mem-
ber of the Lone Star Congress. There were Jews with Sam Houston, and his surgeon general was Moses Albert Levy. Still other Jews fought with the American forces in the war with Mexico.

More and more of the immigrants now were German Jews, Jews from Holland, Jews from the Baltic States and from Poland. These were poor people, hard working men and women, who left everything behind them and journeyed to a strange land where they might be free to live and work and worship God. They came in small groups. Few of them lingered on the eastern seaboard. Like many Yankees, others would take packs on their backs and go peddling small necessities in the newly settled middle west.

After a time, the Jewish peddler would be able to replace his pack with a horse and wagon, in which he would drive from town to town. Finally, he might find a place where he could open a little shop and settle down to make a new life with his family. As more Jews arrived a community would be formed. The community would build a synagogue, start a school, and educate the children.

Some of these Jews became great merchants; others entered political life; but most left their mark on America through their sons and grandsons.

There is hardly a town in the middle west that did not have its one or two or three Jewish families. In Cincinnati in 1824, not long after its founding, English Jews founded the first synagogue, but German Jews soon outnumbered them; and in 1841 they formed their own congregation. By 1847, Chicago had its congregation. Soon other synagogues began to spring up, in one city after another.

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THE NEW JEWISH IMMIGRATION

In the year 1848, in many European countries, there occurred revolutionary uprisings aimed at freedom and social reform. Men everywhere threw up barricades, and fought for their freedom. When in Germany one such