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Religion

GERMAN JEWS IN NEWARK

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The history of the origin and growth of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, the wealthiest Hebrew temple in New Jersey, provides an insight into the history of German Jews in Newark.

The German immigration in 1840 brought the first large number of Jews and it was in that year that Jewish life began in Newark. Most of the new Jewish arrivals were immigrants who had come from Alsace-Lorraine and the western part of Germany. They were mainly farmers, tradesmen, students, ^{and} poverty-stricken laborers. They had come to the United States to escape military service. Primarily, they wanted the freedom and the opportunity for themselves and their children which was denied them in their native land. The previous immigrations of Spanish and Portugese Jews in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were too small for the formation of Jewish groups in such small towns as Newark.

On August 20, 1848, at the home of Isaac S. Cohen, the following individuals met to establish the first Jewish congregation in New Jersey: Louis Trier, Isaac Newman, Alexander Sussholz, Wolf Bergstrasser, Hirsch Rothchild, David Caan, Abraham Eustesheimer, Abraham Newman, Jacob Neustetter, David Marx, Aaron Trier, and Meyer Newberger.

The group adopted the name, "B'nai Jeshurun", which means, "Sons of Righteousness." They elected officers and thus established the first Jewish congregation in New Jersey. The mode of worhsip in this "First Jewish Synagogue," as the early Newarkers knew it, was orthodox. The German Jews were as yet recent arrivals in the

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United States and clung to their accustomed religious traditions in the midst of a still alien land.

In 1863 a weekday school was established in which was taught German, English, and Hebrew. Yiddish, the language of the Russian Jews, was not spoken by the German Jews. B'nai Jeshurun later introduced a trained choir.

In 1868 the cornerstone of a new structure was laid at Washington street near William street. The Reverend Dr. Isaac Weiss of Cincinnati delivered the main address at the ceremony. In that same year they adopted a new constitution. Its preamble included a newly-formed resolution of the congregation "to further the true worship by the aid of the inspired words of the pulpit, effectual prayers, in harmony with our inner convictions, the discarding of antiquated reforms and the preservation and adoption of such, whether old or new, as shall further the religion of enlightened Judaism." A sympathetic ear had been lent to the adherents of the Reform Jewish movement. The German Jews had begun to root themselves in the new land, and were gradually instituting reforms in the^R church.

The triumph of reform was well established. The congregation affiliated with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. They dispensed with the German day school for children. Except for Hebrew instruction, they began sending their children to the public schools for all education. They helped establish such institutions as the Talmud Torah, Jewish Day Nursery, Neighborhood House, and the Hebrew Orphan Asylum.

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In 1915 the Congregation housed itself in its present building at High street and Waverly avenue.

Today, more than any other organization, the B'nai Jeshurun symbolizes the attitude and development of German Jews in Newark.

In addition to the B'nai Jeshurun, there are two other reform congregations. They are the B'nai Abraham and the Oheb Shalom. The first was organized in 1857. Its purpose was to provide worship for poor and orthodox Jews who had no place for worship because of the liberal tendencies in the B'nai Jeshurun. Strangely enough, the B'nai Abraham followed the same path as the B'nai Jeshurun, although it has not liberalized the mode of worhsip quite as much. The Oheb Shalom, however, was reform from its beginning, in 1860. Its organizer had previously belonged to the B'nai Jeshurun. This, in brief, is the history of the two other synagogues in Newark.

The B'nai Jeshurun and the Oheb Shalom contain in their congregations a majority of German Jews. The B'nai Abraham's congregation is composed mainly of Russian and Polish Jews. So even here can be seen the difference between the German Jews and other Jews, in that their synagogues, though all of them "Reform," differ in degree, the German Jewish ones being the most "Reformed."

At present, ~~other~~ membership in the Orthodox synagogues is diminishing. The trend of the Jews, aside from the German Jews, is toward a reform faith that is comparable to the religious habits of non-Jews. This is the German Jews conception of Americanization - that his religious habits should not essentially differ from those of a Christian.