

THE UNKNOWN GLOBAL CAREER OF RABBI MEIR LASKER

1903-1993

By

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Few rabbis in the 20th century had a more global career than Meir Lasker, who served in Holland, Poland, Cuba, the United States, and possibly elsewhere.¹ Throughout his life, wherever he went, Meir Lasker was anchored by his principles, his love of humanity, and his hope to contribute to the improvement of life. Largely, unknown today, Meir Lasker was entrenched in much of the drama of 20th century Jewish life and the larger historical context happening in the world.

Born in Kiev, in the Russian Empire, on December 25, 1903,² Meir Lasker was born in hostile and tumultuous times. Within the first two years of his life, Kiev endured its second massive pogrom in 1905. Although it is uncorroborated that this pogrom was the decisive moment that would send Haim and Sophia Lasker (Meir's parents), to relocate to America; in 1905, far away from the turmoil of the Russian Empire they headed for new shores and a new opportunity in the United States.³

Growing up in Providence, Rhode Island, Meir Lasker may have been too young to recall the Kiev Pogrom of 1905, which resulted in the death of approximately 100 Jews, but was unable to eschew the consequences of the magnitude and the devastation of the pogrom aptly described by Simon Dubnow as "Russia's St. Bartholomew's night."⁴

¹According to A Rhode Islander in Havana – back in the day Wednesday, April 13, 2016, GERALDINE S. FOSTER, he spent a year in Poland and Germany financed by the WORLD Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ).

In Response to Modernity Michael A. Meyer on page 339-340 goes into more detail of Lasker and the WUPJ. Curiously, Poland is mentioned, but not Germany.

² Who's Who in American Jewry, 1938 (? ... copied document.)

³ Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes Volume 5, November 1967 Number 1

⁴ History of the Jews In Russia and Poland, Dubnow, Simon JPS 1920 page 127.

However, the underlying political, economic, social, and religious factors and as a relocated refugee it was an incident determinative of the trajectory of Lasker's life and career. Equally, if not more important was the influence his parents, Haim and Sophia had on him.⁵ Ensclosed in the Jewish community of Providence, Rhode Island, a community that mostly consisted of immigrants in the early twentieth century, Haim Dov (Chayim) Lasker (1868-1938) was the director of a Talmud Torah (children's school) of Congregation B'nai Zion for thirty years.⁶ In the *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*, volume 4, number 3, the first section of the publication outlining the history of B'nai Zion dedicates a few paragraphs to the significance and leadership Haim Lasker had in the education of the 300 youth of the synagogue.

It was here, in the synagogue of his youth, Meir Lasker developed his love of learning from his father and his support of Zionism from both his parents and the leader of B'nai Zion, Reb Lazarus Lipshitz. Further influence from this period that cemented Meir Lasker's direction was his mother Sophia and his first wife's Sylvia's parents who were also involved with Jewish organizations, intellectuals and passionate Zionists.⁷ In fact, in the *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*, under the section Members At-Large of the Executive Committee, second name down, you can find the name of Sylvia Lasker's grandfather Alter Boyman.

Of all the influences and factors that contributed to Meir Lasker's life it is undeniable his father, Haim, was the primary mover. In fact, Meir Lasker described his reverence for his father as such: "as a youngster I not only lived in the shadow of my father, but I worshiped and idolized him as few sons do...spiritually he was in my eyes a spiritually "perfect man."⁸ Haim Lasker's incredible leadership and guidance was not subjective or exclusive to Meir Lasker. Two of his many other students who also attested to Haim Lasker's incredible leadership were Brown University professor and novelist Israel Kapstein as well as his wife Stella Kapstein (a teacher in Providence Public School system). Their

⁵ Rhode Island, *ibid.* See Lasker Memoir page 107

⁶ Rhode Island, *ibid.*

⁷ A Rhode Islander in Havana, Foster.

⁸ Rhode Island, *ibid.*

description of Haim Lasker as inspirational cannot be overstated. In terms of his educational methodology, they described it as “a most modern approach to learning”⁹ and ultimately this modern approach would lead Meir Lasker toward the Reform movement. Meir Lasker for his part was fluent in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English by the age of twelve and had the honor of working as his father’s assistant. By the age of fourteen Rabbi Meir Lasker was teaching his own classes at the Talmud Torah.

It comes as no surprise then that en route to becoming a reform Rabbi Meir Lasker studied at the Hebrews Teacher College and Tufts College from 1921-1923, graduated from Cincinnati University in 1927 with a B.A., and was ordained from Hebrew Union College in 1928.¹⁰ Subsequent to his ordination, Rabbi Meir Lasker did graduate work at Chicago University, received a Morgenthau Traveling Fellowship for a year’s study both at the American School of Oriental Research under the direction of Nelson Glueck, a renowned archeologist, and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem from 1928-1929. Between 1926 and 1938, only 69 American students attended the Hebrew University. During his time in British Palestine, Lasker was inspired by the spirit of the emerging kibbutz movement and became active in Labor Zionist circles.

During his Morgenthau Fellowship year, Lasker was approached by Sir Claude Montefiore and Lady Lily Montagu on behalf of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) to study Jewish life in the massive Polish Jewish community.¹¹ Formed by the League of Nations, at the end of World War I, the Polish government fell to a coup led by Marshal Josef Pilsudski in May 1926; he effectively ran the country until his death in 1935 during a period of increasing anti-Semitism. At the time, Poland was home to nearly three million Jews, then the largest Jewish community in the world. The Jewish population constituted nearly 1% of the total population in the country. In Poland, Lasker faced hostility both from Polish anti-Semites and from Jewish traditionalists who objected to his

⁹ Rhode Island, *ibid*.

¹⁰ Curriculum Vitae Meir Lasker sent to Jacob R. Marcus, 1959 (Keneseth Israel archives.) According to one theory Meir Lasker went to Tufts because he was unsure if he wants to be a rabbi or a doctor.

¹¹ Response to Modernity. Meyer, Michael page 339-340.

liberal approach to Judaism. Unfortunately, the exact nature of his work in Poland has not yet been determined. He may have also spent time in nearby Germany during this period.

In 1930, Lasker left Poland for The Hague, in Holland, again on behalf of the World Union where its first Dutch congregation had recently been founded. In contrast to Poland, Holland had a Jewish population of 156,000. Although difficulty in learning to speak Dutch limited Lasker's effectiveness in the Dutch Jewish community, Lasker can be credited with planting the seeds for Liberal Judaism in the Netherlands, which by the beginning of the 21st century had emerged as the most successful of any of the branches of the World Union in Western Europe.¹²

Returning briefly to the United States, Lasker married Sylvia Boyman of Providence, Rhode Island on October 19, 1930.¹³ The couple had one son, Boyman Lasker, who later went on to a career in business. The Laskers moved briefly to Dayton, Ohio where Rabbi Lasker served as the Rabbi of the Dayton View Synagogue Center, a Conservative congregation, (established in 1924) from 1932-1933, and also worked in the congregation's growing religious school. By contrast, Dayton's original Reform synagogue, Beth Israel, traced its history back to the 1850s.

In 1933, Lasker again decided to take an overseas pulpit and this time moved to Havana, Cuba as a Rabbi. He remained there for eight fateful years. Arriving in Cuba during the waning years of President Gerardo Machado, the country became increasingly unstable during the brief Provisional Revolutionary Government (1933-1934) of Dr. Ramon Grau San Martin followed by the rule of a right wing coalition led by Fulgencio Batista y Zalvidar whose fascist tendencies opened Cuba to Nazi infiltration.¹⁴ In December, 1936, the government again changed hands and was now led Federico Laredo Bru with the help of Fulgencio Batista who succeeded him in October, 1940.

During his Cuban years, Lasker primarily served as Rabbi of Havana's Union Hebrew Congregation (UHC) also known as Temple Beth Israel. UHC was founded in 1904 by American Jewish soldiers who had remained in Cuba following the Spanish-American

¹² Encyclopedia Judaica, Second Edition volume 15 page 66

¹³ in a letter rabbi Meir Lasker sent to Jacob R. Marcus (Keneseth Israel archives.)

¹⁴ Foster, Geraldine- A Rhode Islander in Havana – back in the day

War.¹⁵ Although the congregation largely conducted its business in English, Lasker learned to speak Spanish and even edited the Spanish language journal, *Vida Haberna*. As the situation in Germany deteriorated, German Jews sought refuge in Cuba. Lasker worked extensively with the newly arrived Germans including a special school for 900 German Jewish children and partnered with the American Friends (Quaker) to create a summer camp for Jewish refugee children in Cuba.

Lasker's situation in Cuba was greatly complicated by intense Nazi efforts to infiltrate the Cuban government and society. Not surprisingly, tensions between Cuban leftists, many of the Jews, and pro-Nazi elements intensified and anti-Semitism, in general, spiked. It was in this complex environment that the most dramatic period in his career unfolded as Lasker became increasingly involved in the settlement of German Jews in Cuba and worked to help the ill-fated passengers of the tragic voyage of the St. Louis, which attempted to bring 900 German Jews to Cuba.

The tragedy of the St. Louis was compounded when the Cuban government in Cuba invalidated the passengers' government-issued landing certificates making them unable to come into Cuba. Two days before the ship arrived in Havana's harbor, 40,000 Cuban fascists demonstrated in the city demanding that the boat be turned away. Rabbi Meir Lasker worked tirelessly on behalf of the passengers. Working as an American intermediary with the FBI, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Cuban government, Lasker boarded the MS St. Louis and brought two passengers into Cuba. A total of 28 were given permission to enter the country, 22 of them Jewish. Before going on the ship, Lasker was instructed not to talk with anyone on the ship but nevertheless gathered valuable information. Lacking valid visas and failing to attract an extraordinary intervention by the American government, the ship returned to Europe. Ultimately, 254 passengers perished in the Holocaust while the majority found safe havens in Great Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and the United States. In contrast to the St. Louis, a British vessel, the *Orduna*, off loaded all its 72 passengers in the US-controlled canal zone in Panama.

¹⁵ Encyclopedia Judaica 1971, vol. 5

Many years later, Lasker lamented “how can one forget the cries, the pitiful cries for help, from those on board.” In a published eulogy written by Rabbi Simeon Maslin, Lasker is further quoted as saying :“We were helpless...because of the machinations both on the part of the Cuban government and our own.”¹⁶ Lasker’s recollections of the St. Louis often conflict with the official “narrative” of the tragic episode, a discrepancy that frequently placed him at odds with much of the American Jewish establishment.

In 1941 Lasker returned to the United States and was installed as the Rabbi of Philadelphia’s newest Reform congregation, Temple Judea. Formed in the West Oak Lane section of the City of Brotherly love in 1930, Temple Judea’s members had mostly belonged to Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel (KI). Established 1847, KI was the city’s oldest and largest reform congregation. At the time, it was located on North Broad Street in the heart of Temple University. In 1948, Temple Judea built a permanent home on 6929 North Broad Street, Philadelphia. The Temple was just below Cheltenham Avenue, on the northern border of Philadelphia, several miles north of the University. The congregation grew rapidly to 700 families and assistant Rabbis were eventually hired to help handle the expanding pastoral and educational requirements of the congregation.

During his 39 years at Temple Judea, Rabbi Meir Lasker was involved in a number of community based committees and organizations including being one of the past presidents of the Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia.¹⁷ He began doctoral studies in Rabbinics at nearby Dropsie College where he also taught graduate level classes. A student of Rabbinic literature, Lasker also edited his own Passover *Haggadah*. Additionally, he gave visiting lectures at several universities including at the historic all black college Lincoln University, near the town of Oxford, in Southern Chester, Pennsylvania, under the auspices of the Jewish Chautauqua Society. Lasker also provided Rabbinic support to patients and the nursing staff at Jewish Hospital (now Einstein Hospital), located on North Broad Street, and was the Chaplain of the Philadelphia Jewish Geriatric Center. He was also active with the Philadelphia Board of Rabbis and Labor Zionism.

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¹⁷ Letter by Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia signed May 16, 1988 in reference to Pollard case.

In 1980, Lasker retired from the active Rabbinate. Two years later, Temple Judea merged with KI which name him an Emeritus Rabbi of the congregation. KI had relocated to a suburban location in Elkins Park in 1957. As part of the merger, KI's art collection was combined with the art collection at Temple Judea which had been principally collected by Lasker. A new entity was created at KI called "The Temple Judea Museum." Judith Blumberg Maslin, wife of KI's Senior Rabbi, Simeon J. Maslin was named the first director of the museum, a position she held until 1995. A modern gallery was built in KI's large lobby to house the new museum including Temple Judea's handsome Ark and Eternal Light. Moreover, a lectureship in Jewish art was established by KI in honor of Rabbi and Sylvia Lasker.

Lasker began collecting a wide range of Jewish art from ritual objects to a large 19th century canvas painting. The significance of starting his collection in 1941 cannot be overstated. Allen Meyers, a popular historian of the Philadelphia Jewish experience, explains "the collection of many pieces of fine art came from Europe, at the time under siege of the Nazis, and included plates, candlestick holders, and Torah breast plates made of precious metals."¹⁸ Included in Lasker's collection was a large oil painting of a group of rabbis studying in a yeshiva by Lazar Krestin (1868-1938), a Lithuanian born artist famous in German art circles.

Lasker, after his retirement in 1971 at Temple Judea, reappeared in 1973 to help a community, Temple Beth Shalom of Arnold Maryland, expand as well as continue to lecture especially at Immaculata University in Philadelphia. Despite his ceaseless activities during his life Rabbi Meir Lasker died at home the 16th of October 1993. Although now mostly forgotten Rabbi Meir Lasker lived the Rabbinic dictum in Pirkei Avot "you are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist." From beginning to end, Rabbi Meir Lasker was involved in the story of liberal Judaism in the 21st century.

¹ Allen Meyers
