

## **Brothers in-Law: Competing Ideologies of Jewish New York in the Shadow of the Russian Revolution**

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By the early 1900s, New York had become one of the largest and most important Jewish cities in the world. But it was divided into two distinct communities: a small number of German Jews who had immigrated half a century earlier -- the so-called 'uptown' Jews -- and the rapidly growing number from Eastern Europe who had arrived beginning in the 1890s -- the 'downtown' Jews. These communities differed in every way: class, education, language, religious practice, and politics. Most contentiously, they disagreed about whether America was fundamentally different from anti-Semitic Europe and how best to obtain political and economic equality. The 'uptown' establishment, led by lawyer Louis Marshall and his colleagues, was convinced that Jews could thrive within the democratic and capitalist system and that anti-Semitism should be addressed through outreach and education. The 'downtown' Jews, trapped in miserable working and living conditions on the Lower East Side, had less optimism. These Jews, embraced by Rabbi Judah Magnes and inspired by fervent labor and socialist organizers and newspapers, considered America to be little better than the Tsarist nightmare they had escaped, with city bosses and the police replacing the bureaucrats and Cossacks. Predictably, tensions between these two Jewish communities mounted as the 'downtown' population continued to grow and became increasingly radical. America's decision to join World War I and the outbreak of the October Revolution in Russia further inflamed these divides, as each community reacted in its own way to the promise and perils of a new geopolitical order. The two leaders, Marshall and Magnes -- who, in one of those ironic details of history, were brothers-in-law -- would try and fail to keep their communities aligned even while they spearheaded the different responses.

## The Jewish Establishment and Louis Marshall

German Jews began arriving in America in the 1840s, spreading to places as diverse as San Francisco and Kentucky. Their relatively small numbers and their useful traditional vocations of merchants and shopkeepers made it possible for them to quietly and successfully integrate, especially in the economic boom after the Civil War that came with the development of the railroads.<sup>1</sup> Within a few decades, some of these immigrants were able to form powerfully networked banking houses and merchant enterprises.<sup>2</sup> By the 1890s, leading German Jews were part of New York high society, building mansions on the cosmopolitan Upper East Side. Names like Schiff, Warburg and Rosenwald were mentioned along with Morgan and Rockefeller as the most powerful men in the country.<sup>3</sup> Like their Christian counterparts, these Jewish luminaries were involved in public affairs and philanthropy. They became concerned with the plight of their co-religionists suffering under the hated Tsar. (Jacob Schiff went so far as to finance Japan's war against Russia.) When impoverished Eastern European Jews began arriving in New York in the 1880s, leading 'uptown' Jews organized efforts to help them emigrate, settle and survive.<sup>4</sup> These initiatives led to the founding of the American Jewish Committee, which quickly became the preeminent Jewish political organization.<sup>5</sup> In 1906, Schiff, a banker and philanthropist; Felix Warburg, another banker; and Louis Marshall invited Jews from across the country to meet at the Waldorf Astoria to form the AJC. Its purpose was to unite the Jews of America under one representative body in addressing Jewish civil rights, immigration and anti-Semitism.<sup>6</sup>

Louis Marshall, one of the AJC's founders and its president from 1912 until his death in 1929, was a lawyer, civil rights supporter, conservationist, and a champion for the rights of Jews. Born in 1856 in Syracuse, New York, Marshall's parents were German Jews who had emigrated from Bavaria in 1849 and 1853. In 1913, Marshall took on the cause of Leo Frank, a Jew living in Georgia who was accused of killing a thirteen-year-old girl.<sup>7</sup> Marshall managed to muster public opinion in favor of Frank by bringing the case to the Supreme Court, leading Georgia's governor to commute his sentence to life imprisonment instead of death.<sup>8</sup> (However, an anti-Semitic mob kidnapped Frank from prison and lynched him.)<sup>9</sup> The resulting national story gave Marshall a reputation as a defender of American Jewry. At the end of World War I, Marshall went to the Paris Peace Conference in 1918, seeking to secure rights for Jews in Eastern Europe as part of the Treaty of

Versailles. He did succeed in adding clauses to protect Jews, though those were never enforced.<sup>10</sup> Marshall would also come to pass judgement on another issue: the American Jewish response to the Russian Revolution.

### The Jewish Radicals and Dr. Judah Leon Magnes

The late 1880s and '90s saw a massive wave of Jewish immigration from the vast dominions of the Russian Empire. Unlike previous waves, these Jews settled almost entirely in major cities, and within a few years, comprised more than 90 percent of New York's Jews.<sup>11</sup> They worked mainly in the garment industry and other light manufacturing, often forced to labor in small factories or within cramped tenement homes.<sup>12</sup> Conditions were hard. Unions and workers' councils were popular. Strikes and riots were frequent.<sup>13</sup> The Haymarket Affair in Chicago, in which 37 people died when a bomb went off during a strike, drove many Jewish laborers to learn more about anti-capitalist ideas and groups.<sup>14</sup> The foremost of those ideologies was socialism, which declared that a change was coming wherein industrial workers like them would organize against capitalists, take ownership of the means of production, and usher in a new era of economic equality.<sup>15</sup> Socialism was popular among Jews in America, but not all radical Jews were socialists. Some, like the communists, believed in revolution to achieve change. There was also a thriving Jewish anarchist movement, who argued against government as well as capitalism. Yiddish newspapers and periodicals further spread radical ideas, the most widely read Abe Cahan's *Jewish Daily Forward*.<sup>16</sup> These efforts created a radical community with strong convictions and political organization.

One important radical was Reform rabbi Judah Leon Magnes. Magnes whose parents emigrated from German-controlled Poland in the 1860s, was born in 1877 in San Francisco. Magnes' first major post was at the grand Temple Emanu-El, the flagship of the Reform Judaism movement, where he was famous for his passionate speeches.<sup>17</sup> Louis Marshall and his allies took note of Magnes' popularity, eager for leaders who could reach the changing American Jewish population. They embraced him as he became more renowned and included him as a founder of the AJC. His growing prominence even brought him into Marshall's family. In 1908, Magnes married Marshall's wife's sister, Beatrice Lowenstein. But the political marriage between Marshall and Magnes, and, by extension, with the American Jewish establishment, was never perfect and became fragile over time. This was first evident when Marshall criticized Magnes' commitment to Zionism, the ideology that Jews needed their own state in Palestine. At the time, this movement

was opposed by Marshall and many other establishment figures because it implied that Jews might not be primarily loyal to America.<sup>18</sup> Another conflict arose when, in a sermon at his synagogue, Temple Emanu-El, Magnes criticized Reform Judaism, the mostly secular strand of Judaism favored by the 'uptown' establishment, for its lack of authentic spirituality. This call for renewed devotion led to the termination of Magnes as rabbi in 1910, while Marshall was a key member of the synagogue's board.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these conflicts, the two men found common ground on the importance of a new institution connecting 'uptown' and 'downtown' Jews. The Kehillah, founded in 1909, was Magnes' brainchild. It was designed to unite the Jews of New York, including the AJC and radical groups, and address the problems of poverty and crime among new immigrants.<sup>20</sup> The new organization was composed of subgroups for education and other social programs. The Executive Committee, of which Marshall was a member, chose Magnes to lead the Kehillah in 1910.<sup>21</sup>

The Kehillah was initially successful. Experts like Samson Benderly and Abe Schoenfeld provided expertise in founding Jewish schools and dealing with criminals (such as "Kid Twist" and "Dopey Benny") on the Lower East Side respectively. Benderly successfully meshed American teaching techniques and Jewish education in order to form afterschools that helped remind immigrant children of their heritage.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, Schoenfeld and his allies formed a network of informants and spies throughout the Lower East Side, working towards a goal of limiting crime.<sup>23</sup> However, the Kehillah was plagued with financial difficulties, compounded by the lack of regular donors.<sup>24</sup> Eventually, as the First World War began, Jews in Poland and Russia were caught in the midst of a war that would ruin their homes and towns. As Marshall tried to unite the various Jewish community organizations under the AJC's banner to spearhead relief, the Kehillah was increasingly marginalized.<sup>25</sup> As Magnes grew increasingly radicalized, the Kehillah would become unimportant in the rising barrier between uptown and downtown.

Soon, the break would grow with Magnes' support of the First World War, that would finally tear the two apart.

### Magnes and the First World War

In late 1916, American politicians were slowly moving away from the neutral guarantee by President Wilson in 1914.<sup>26</sup> As the German U-Boat attacks increased in number over the year, American ships were sunk along with British ones. Famed cruise liners like the Lusitania were sunk by Germans without

warning, killing 128 American citizens, among others. In response, Wilson demanded an apology from the Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, along with a guarantee to halt the U-Boat campaign. Soon, a nationalistic opinion began to spread, following the deaths on the Lusitania.<sup>27</sup> Wilson began to align himself more closely to Britain and the war.

Meanwhile, in New York, the radicals of the Lower East Side also turned their attention to Europe and their response was one of pacifism. The radicals believed that entry into the war would drive America down a path of imperialism, along with killing many people. To them, the war was a European affair, and nothing more. Soon, a group known as the People's Council of America for Democracy and Terms of Peace appeared, led by radicals like Morris Hillquit and Roger Baldwin.<sup>28</sup> The Council began a series of rallies in Madison Square Garden, aiming to turn public opinion of the war to their favor. Judah Magnes was a supporter of the People's Council, joining in 1916 at the founding of the organization. He had previously lived through another war he found wrong, the Spanish-American War, which developed his pacifist beliefs.<sup>29</sup> At People's Council rallies, Magnes spoke against the Great War and the morality of war in general.<sup>30</sup> This brought Magnes back into conflict with the AJC and Louis Marshall over the split in their beliefs. Then, in late 1917, the debate escalated with the Russian Revolution.

### The Bolshevik Revolution and Jews

While the cosmopolitan German Jews of the Upper East Side and the poor Jews from the *shtetls* of the Pale of Settlement were different, they shared one enemy: the House of Romanov. To them, the Tsar of Russia, Nicholas II, was a savage murderer, dubbed "Bloody Nicholas." The Revolution in February 1917 toppled him, giving hope to Jews in Russia and removing the hesitation President Woodrow Wilson had to fighting alongside an autocracy. However, as the Provisional Government descended into chaos, Vladimir Lenin and his Bolshevik cadres took power.<sup>31</sup>

Lenin himself was a Russian Marxist who developed a unique ideology to represent his own country. In 1895, Lenin joined the Communist Party of Russia and helped to unite the Party.<sup>32</sup> However, the leader of the party, George Plekhanov, disagreed with Lenin over the makeup of the organization, Lenin favouring a small, well-organized unit centralized around his person, while Plekhanov wanted a larger party. In the end, Lenin split with Plekhanov, his followers becoming the Bolsheviks and Plekhanov, with the aid of Martov, forming the

Mensheviki.<sup>33</sup>

In 1917, the Bolshevik Party remained essentially the same organization. While Leon Trotsky had joined, Lenin remained the leader. As Alexander Kerensky began making missteps, Lenin won a Bolshevik party majority in the State Duma. Soon, Lenin was prepared to strike the Winter Palace in Petrograd. The Bolsheviks gathered units of disgruntled soldiers and their elite paramilitary force to attack the palace and take over the city.<sup>34</sup> Soon, Kerensky himself was forced to leave the Winter Palace under threat of Bolshevik attack, and Lenin himself had arrived with Trotsky to complete the takeover of Petrograd. Lenin then established control over the rest of Russia. By early 1918, Lenin had signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany, ending the Eastern Front.<sup>35</sup>

Of particular importance to the Jews of New York was the fact that many of the Bolshevik leaders were Jewish. One of them, Trotsky, had recently spent time in New York, and had met with many radical Jewish figures.<sup>36</sup> Not surprisingly, this new reality of Jewish revolutionaries was appreciated differently by the 'uptown' and 'downtown' communities.

#### The Jewish Establishment's Reaction to the Russian Revolution

The American Jewish Committee had two strong reasons to oppose the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>37</sup> Since its leadership was mostly wealthy capitalists, they were opposed to any movement that called for wealth redistribution.<sup>38</sup> But the concern on which they were most publicly focused was increased anti-Semitism. Because many Communist leaders, including Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Sverdlov, were Jewish, the 'uptown' establishment worried that gentile Americans would see all Jews as Communists and enemies of America.<sup>39</sup> As if to confirm these fears, the U.S. Senate's Overman Committee, tasked with investigating Bolshevik influence in America, featured blatantly anti-Semitic testimony. One witness declared that "nineteen out of twenty Communists were Jews." In response, Marshall and the AJC issued a statement, acknowledging that some Bolshevik leaders had Jewish ancestry, but the vast majority of Russian Jews were opposed to them, using the opportunity to criticize the Bolsheviks.<sup>40</sup>

During the same period, Judah Magnes was becoming more radical. With a firm conviction that pacifism was in keeping with the tradition of the biblical patriarch Jacob, in contrast to his brutish brother Esau,<sup>41</sup> he had joined the People's Council, an organization against World War I and conscription, and delivered the keynote at one of their massive rallies in Madison Square Garden.<sup>42</sup> It was also at

a People's Council rally<sup>43</sup> that Magnes revealed his support for Bolshevism<sup>44</sup> and the Revolution.<sup>45</sup> Magnes' public statements horrified Louis Marshall, who wrote in a letter to one of his closest AJC allies, Cyrus Sulzberger, that the radicals were led by the "harmful propaganda of Dr. Magnes."<sup>46</sup> Marshall criticized his wayward brother-in-law on his anti-war efforts and, soon after for his Bolshevism, strongly warning that Magnes' participation in the People's Council was "the very verge of sedition and treason."<sup>47</sup>

The uptown Jewish establishment went on the offensive against the Bolsheviks starting in 1918. A group led by AJC members known as the Russian Information Bureau operated out of the Woolworth Building and published anti-Soviet materials. A Brooklyn-based magazine known as the *Anti-Bolshevist* attacked Leon Trotsky and American labor leader Morris Hillquit. The recently founded Anti-Defamation League attempted to counteract the Jew-as-Bolshevik stereotype by sending essays to newspapers on Jewish opposition to Soviet rule. These efforts, coordinated by Marshall, were an attempt to prove that Jews were loyal American citizens also fighting Communism.<sup>48</sup>

#### The Palmer Raids, Magnes' Exit, and the Soviet Ark

By 1918, American public opinion had swung sharply against Communism.

A. Mitchell Palmer, the Attorney General under Woodrow Wilson was a staunch supporter of the early anti-Communists in America. To persuade the U.S. government to stamp out Communism, Palmer needed an excuse to expose radicals. The key event came in 1919 when Palmer himself was sent a mail bomb from Gallienists, militant anarchists. Part of his house was blown up.<sup>49</sup> Immediately, with Federal indignation and frustration, Palmer began preparing for war. His instrument, a young J. Edgar Hoover, would lead the raids.

Hoover took control of the newly created General Intelligence Division to monitor radicals, including Jews like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman.<sup>50</sup> Using sweeping authority from the Espionage Act, in November 1919, Palmer and Hoover obtained warrants to arrest hundreds of radicals, many of whom were Jewish. The next year, Palmer Raids led to even more arrests. Four thousand were arrested through January.<sup>51</sup> However, Hoover's intentions were not to simply crack down on radicals. He wanted to remove all organizations supporting the Bolsheviks. 1920 heralded the final of the major raids, an assault against the Communist parties. Meanwhile, his proposed bill to make a peacetime espionage bill stalled, thanks to Secretary of Labor Louis Post. Hoover attempted to remove Post

and get his bill passed. In response, the peacetime bill was removed, and the Palmer Raids came to an end.<sup>52</sup>

For Jewish radicals, shifting public opinion and pressure from law enforcement made their position within the community impossible. Judah Magnes was increasingly marginalized and then removed from the AJC Executive Committee in October 1918.<sup>53</sup> The U.S. government even took away Magnes' passport and only after efforts by Marshall was it returned.<sup>54</sup> By 1920, Magnes was forced to offer his resignation as the chairman of the Kehillah, his most significant institutional achievement. He was dejected and felt disowned by his fellow Jews.<sup>55</sup> Blocked from any important leadership position in America, he left for Palestine, where socialist Zionists were creating a proto-state under the British Mandate. Magnes poured his energies into the formation of a 'Hebrew University' in Jerusalem, becoming its first chancellor in 1925. Even within this like-minded community, Magnes remained a radical, arguing against Jewish nationalism in favor of a binational state. Without Magnes, the Kehillah, lacking any clear leadership, spun apart, finally dissolving in 1922.

Following the Palmer Raids, some radicals remained imprisoned and Palmer then deported them to Bolshevik Russia. Hoover commandeered an old cargo boat, the USS Buford, had the 249 imprisoned radicals loaded on, and sent it to Finland for them to be escorted into Russia. The ship, called the Soviet Ark by the media, departed on December 21, 1919, and arrived in Hango, Finland on January 16, 1920. They were escorted by train from the port to the Russian border.<sup>56</sup> Many famous names traveled on the Soviet Ark, including Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman.

The Palmer Raids and Soviet Ark created a new order within the Jewish communities of New York. Marshall took commanding leadership of the Jewish community from the late Jacob Schiff in a period known as 'Marshall Law,'<sup>57</sup> leading through numerous crises. The most famous of these were his actions against Henry Ford.<sup>58</sup> The renowned manufacturer had been publishing articles in his magazine, the *Dearborn Independent*, which portrayed Jews as trying to take over the world. Worried about the effects of such an important leader promoting anti-Semitism, in 1927 Marshall moved against Ford, issuing statements and lawsuits against his actions, of which Marshall led the legal defense. After a lawsuit from agriculture leader Aaron Sapiro, Ford conceded and was forced to make a public apology.<sup>59</sup> It was drafted by Marshall.



Louis Marshall died in 1929 in Zurich, with Magnes at his side.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

When the German Jews first arrived, they managed to assimilate quickly and supported the ideals of America. The Russian Jews, in their large numbers, did not initially find full assimilation or economic equality in America. They desired radical change. The Bolshevik Revolution provided exactly that and the radicals supported it, hailing it as the triumph of their time. Then, as public opinion shifted and the tables were turned, the radicals were scattered by the government's actions, a price for their support of the Revolution, while the German mainstream Jews aligned with American ideals. For Marshall, it was a great victory for American Jewish establishment politics, for Magnes, a fall from prestige and position, with grave consequences for the Jewish radicals and the silencing of their movement until the McCarthy era almost three decades later.

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<sup>17</sup> Kotzin, Judah Magnes, 70-71.

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<sup>22</sup> Goren, New York Jews, 112.

<sup>23</sup> Goren, New York Jews, 163.

<sup>24</sup> Goren, New York Jews, 180.

<sup>25</sup> Goren, New York Jews, 218.

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- <sup>59</sup> Silver, Louis Marshall. 399
- <sup>60</sup> Bentwich. For Zion's Sake, 145.

“Forest Brothers” was first coined in the Baltic region during the 1905 Russian Revolution, when many Eastern Europeans fled to the woods to escape the Tsarist regime. The group reemerged in the summer of 1940, when three Baltic nations were incorporated into the Soviet Union. Soviet troops enter Riga in 1940. Source: Public domain. They vehemently opposed the communist ideology and the loss of their countries’ independence. Undercover Soviet intelligence officers managed to infiltrate the ranks of the Forest Brothers, which had a significant impact on the movement’s numbers. The last squads of Forest Brothers were terminated in 1969. Forest Brothers in mass culture and public opinion. In describing this meeting in *Innocents Abroad*, Mark Twain wrote: Taking the kind expression that is in the Emperor's face and the gentleness that is in his young daughter's into consideration, I wondered if it would not tax the Czar's firmness to the utmost to condemn a supplicating wretch to misery in the wastes of Siberia if she pleaded for him. I have drawn no laws and no illustrations from the twin civilizations of hell and Russia. To have entered into that atmosphere would have defeated my purpose, which was to show a great and genuine progress in Christendom in these few later generations toward mercifulness -- a wide and general relaxing of the grip of the law.