

# A German-Jewish Immigrant's Perception of America, 1853-54: Some Further Notes on Mordecai M. Noah, a Jewel Robbery, and Isaac M. Wise

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Gershon Greenberg's translation of *Deutsch-Amerikanische Skizzen fuer juedische Auswanderer und Nichtauswanderer (D.A.S.)*<sup>1</sup> makes available to a wide audience an important document in the history of German Jewish immigration to America. It is to be hoped that future researchers will expand on Greenberg, and speculate on such important questions as who wrote *D.A.S.* and what influence did the volume have on Jews in Europe and America. Our aim is more modest. We wish merely to modify three of Greenberg's statements by presenting new data on: 1) Mordecai Noah's Ararat project 2) the Polari jewel robbery and 3) Isaac Mayer Wise's reaction to *D.A.S.*

## I

Both the author of *D.A.S.* and Greenberg have fallen into error in their brief discussion of Mordecai Noah's Ararat project (pp. 317, 339):

1) Noah did not call upon Jews in 1824. His first petition to the New York Legislature requesting that it survey, value and sell him Grand Island in the Niagara River was dated January 16, 1820. After the Legislature voted the proposal down on February 28th, Noah on December 1, 1820 put forward Newport, Rhode Island as "the most eligible spot for Jewish immigrants." But this plan was stillborn; it aroused no enthusiasm whatsoever. Noah said nothing more in public about Ararat until 1825 when, along with many other investors, he purchased through his agent, Samuel Leggett, 2555 choice acres on Grand Island, and made plans to dedicate his colony. *D.A.S.* notwithstanding, New York State never transferred ownership of Grand Island to Noah.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Gershon Greenberg, "A German-Jewish Immigrant's Perception of America, 1853-1854," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, LXVII, 4 (June, 1978), 307-341.

2 Noah's petition to the legislature is reprinted in *National Advocate*, January 24, 1820, p. 2 col. 3-4. The legislature's debate is described in March 6, 1820, p. 2 col. 2 and the Newport plan is found in December 1, 1820, p. 2 col. 2; see also G. Herbert Cone, "New Material Relating to Mordecai M. Noah," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (PAJHS)*, XI (1903), 132-133; and

2) Greenberg has already corrected the *D.A.S.* error regarding the date of Noah's Grand Island dedication (1825 not 1826). He might have added that the large gathering at the dedication was composed mainly of women; it was not composed "mostly of respectful Freemasons." Furthermore, Noah's cornerstone (what *D.A.S.* calls "the petrified memorial to human weakness") makes no mention of Noah as "governor and judge of Israel." That piece of supererogation was confined to Noah's Ararat proclamation.<sup>3</sup>

3) Finally, Greenberg is in error when he claims (note 15) that "Noah issued a call in his newspaper, *The National Advocate*, for Jews to assemble. . . ." This error dates back to Lewis Allen's nineteenth century account of the Ararat plan and has been too often repeated. In fact, by 1825, Noah was editor of the *New York National Advocate*, a different and competing journal.<sup>4</sup>

## II

After describing - or misdescribing - Noah's Ararat efforts, *D.A.S.* claims that Noah "once caught a jewel thief who'd fled

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Seebert J. Goldowsky, "Newport as Ararat," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*, VI (November, 1974), 604-609. Both Bernard D. Weinryb, "Noah's Ararat Jewish State in its Historical Setting," *PAJHS*, XLIII (1954), 172-173 and Natan M. Gelber, "Mordecai Emanuel [sic] Noah: His Dream of a Jewish State in America," *Sura*, III (1957-58), 385 cite a garbled account of the Ararat plan appearing in *Koblenzer Anzeiger* dated July 2, 1819. The author of *D.A.S.* may have been familiar with the debate in the *Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden* on Ararat, best described in Hans G. Reissner, "Gans-town - U.S.A.: A German Jewish Dream," *American Jewish Archives*, XIV (April, 1962), 20-31; *idem*, *Eduard Gens: Ein Leben im Vormarz* (Tubingen: 1965), pp. 83-102; see also Michael A. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew* (Detroit: 1967), p. 179. On Noah's purchase of Ararat see the standard account in Lewis F. Allen, "Founding of the City of Ararat on Grand Island by Mordecai M. Noah," *Buffalo Historical Society Publications*, I (1879), 305-28; reprinted in *PAJHS*, VIII (1900) 98-118, and with new matter in *Buffalo Historical Society Publications*, XXV (1921), 113-44. This should be modified by information in earlier accounts: Levi Beardsley, *Reminiscences* (New York: 1852), pp. 156-157; *Black Rock Gazette*, June 21, 1825, p. 3 col. 4-5; *New York Evening Post*, March 8, 1826; *New York National Advocate*, October 1, 1825, p. 2 col. 2; and Noah to Azariah Flagg (November 19, 1933), Noah Papers, American Jewish Historical Society.

3) On the large number of females at the Ararat dedication see *Buffalo Patriot Extra*, September 17, 1825, pp. 1-2 and Allen, *op. cit.* A photograph of the cornerstone on Grand Island is found in Isaac Goldberg, *Major Noah* (Philadelphia: 1938). Noah's Ararat proclamation is reprinted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: 1963), vol. III, pp. 894-900.

4) Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 121; Noah broke with the *National Advocate* and founded the *New York National Advocate* on December 16, 1824. On July 6, 1826 he closed out this latter paper and founded the *New York Enquirer*.

from Holland to America and bravely defended himself against ensuing slander by [James Gordon] Bennett, well-known editor of the popular *New York Herald*." Greenberg, with commendable honesty, admits that he has "been unable to trace the theft incident" (p. 317). No wonder; it has been neglected by all of Noah's biographers. Actually, *D.A.S.* itself got the facts wrong. Noah played no role at all in catching Constant Polari, an Italian who stole the Dutch crown jewels in 1829 and was caught in New York City on July 28, 1831. As Noah reveals in his article on the crown jewels (reprinted in the Appendix), he was simply the surveyor of the port in 1831, and therefore shared in the reward paid by the Dutch government. Eighteen years later, James Gordon Bennett charged Noah with malfeasance in the Polari affair (Bennett and Noah had been at loggerheads for almost two decades<sup>5</sup>), and Noah sued Bennett for libel. Noah was collecting documents on the affair when he suffered a stroke and died on March 22, 1851. Much to the regret of Bennett's enemies - the author of *D.A.S.* was apparently among them - Noah's heirs discontinued the libel suit, and did not trouble themselves to clear Noah's name. It is, however, quite unlikely that Noah's reputation, much less Shearith Israel's, suffered at all from the discontinuance - despite what *D.A.S.* claims. At most, James Gordon Bennett was saved from yet another conviction and yet another inconsequential fine.<sup>6</sup>

## III

Greenberg believes that *D.A.S.* was ignored by all of its contemporaries save Ludwig Philippson's *Allgemeine Zeitung des Juden-*

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5) The relationship of James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* with Noah and the Jewish community deserves a separate study. Bennett's *Herald* at times spewed forth notorious anti-Semitism, apart from its usual fare of anti-Noah caricatures, all of which provoked strong Jewish responses, especially from the aggrieved Noah. See, in particular, "Mysteries of the Talmud," *New York Herald*, April 6, 1850, p. 1, col. 5; and the response in April 12, 1850, p. 6 col. 5; see also Isaac C. Pray, *Memoirs of James Gordon Bennett and His Times* (New York: 1855), pp. 294-295; Frederick Hudson, *Journalism in the United States from 1690 to 1872* (New York: 1873), pp. 287, 459-462; and Leonard I. Gappenberg, "M.M. Noah and the Evening Star: Whig Journalism, 1833-1840," (unpublished Ed.D., Yeshiva University, 1970), pp. 51-59.

6) In addition to the appendix and notes thereto see *New York Herald* January 29, 1850, p. 2 col. 3; March 18, 1850, p. 2 col. 2; April 29, 1850, p. 2 col. 3; May 6, 1850, p. 2 col. 3; June 13, 1850, p. 2 col. 3; December 20, 1850, p. 2 col. 4. Noah requested documents on the Polari affair in his letter to Governor Hamilton Fish (December 21, 1850), container 24, Fish Papers; see Fish's negative reply (December 23, 1850), box 193, Fish Papers, both in Library of Congress, Washington D.C. For other Noah comments on the affair see *Sunday*

thumbs (p. 307). Greenberg may be correct in saying that *D.A.S.* received little attention, but to underestimate the ever-vigilant Isaac Mayer Wise is perilous. In fact, Wise devoted three full columns to *D.A.S.* in his German language periodical, the *Deborah*, and he found scarcely a good word for the entire production.<sup>7</sup> Wise scorned the author, "who lacked the courage to give his name," and suggested that he resembled "the late Dr. Emf<sup>8</sup> of the *Asmonean*." Wise then proceeded to lambast every section of the volume – particularly those which seemed hostile to religious reform. In his last few paragraphs, Wise left off attacking "the author who is so base as to lie to the public at the expense of his countrymen and co-religionists," and turned the full force of his ire upon the three "distinguished doctors of philosophy" who oversaw the institute which sponsored *D.A.S.* (Institute zur Förderung der israelitischen Literatur): Ludwig Philippson, Adolph Jellinek and I.M. Jost. Only the action of Jost mystified Wise, and he asked the "honest man and historian" to explain himself.<sup>9</sup> That the other two attacked American Jewry did not surprise Wise at all.

Easily lost amid the torrent of abuse which Wise rained down on *D.A.S.* lay several important criticisms of the 108-page pamphlet. First, Wise claimed that it unfairly disgraced and dishonored all American Jews as a group. This perhaps explains why the Americanized and patriotic Wise attacked the volume with such vehemence – although the anti-reform bias of *D.A.S.* may have been sufficient provocation in itself. Second, Wise noted a considerable number of misstatements in the work – Wise, of course, called them lies – and even truth, he felt, was too often misinterpreted. Wise was certainly correct about the misstatements; whether or not they were willful may be open to dispute. Finally, Wise observed that the sketches, while claiming to portray all of American Jewry, in fact devoted almost no space whatsoever to "the 86 [Jewish] communities outside New York." Sitting as he did in Cincinnati, it is not surprising that Wise was suspicious of any Gotham-centered view of American Jewry. What he read in *D.A.S.* no doubt confirmed his worst fears.

In spite of Wise's strictures, *D.A.S.* continues to be a valuable

*Times and Noah's Weekly Messenger*, February 3, 1850, p. 2. col. 2; March 10, 1850, p. 2. col. 3; March 17, 1850, p. 2. col. 2; April 7, 1850, p. 2. col. 3; May 12, 1850, p. 2. col. 2.

<sup>7</sup> The review may be found in the *Deborah*, #43, June 12, 1857, 340-341.

<sup>8</sup> We are unable to further identify Dr. Emf.

<sup>9</sup> Wise had translated some of Jost's work into English in the *Asmonean*, and considered Jost a progenitor of Reform Judaism. James G. Heller, *Isaac M. Wise: His Life, Work and Thought* (New York: 1965), p. 223.

document for American Jewish historians. It must be handled with care, and its facts must be checked, but *D.A.S.* can still shed considerable light on a period in American Jewish history about which far too little is known.

#### Appendix The Crown Jewels<sup>10</sup>

The application of Mr. Seeley [sic] to the United States government,<sup>11</sup> for aid to compel the Dutch government to pay his claim for the recovery of the crown jewels, has revived the recollection of that singular event, and several versions of it have found their way into the public papers, and among others the Herald.<sup>12</sup> The value of the jewels, supposed to be nearly a million of dollars, was of itself sufficient to excite considerable attention, and induce the Dutch government to have book containing the shape and form of each jewel engraved, with copious descriptions of their settings, &c. But there was also another consideration which rendered the search for and detection of the robber of great importance; and that was, a suspicion that the diamonds had been stolen by the Prince of Orange, and lost at the gaming-table. This interested the Emperor of Russia, whose sister had married in the family. The Herald says that "a Dutch Jew, by the name of Constant Polari, alias Carrare, in 1829, obtained admittance into the palace at Lacken, and carried off the jewels." Polari was no more a Jew than Bennett is a Christian. His very name proved him to have been an Italian.<sup>13</sup> He was, however, cunning enough to conceal them in Holland, and not to excite suspicion by offering them for sale. After burying a part in that country he sailed for this port, and succeeded in smuggling the balance in various ways on shore. A Frenchman of the name of Roumage became acquainted with Polari, and one day, seeing his child playing with two valuable diamonds, he suspected where they

<sup>10</sup> *Sunday Times and Noah's Weekly Messenger*, January 27, 1850, p. 2 col. 5.

<sup>11</sup> William A. Seely was a prominent New York lawyer who was employed by the Dutch government as its agent in recovering the stolen crown jewels. In 1850, Seely petitioned Congress for redress, claiming that he was not paid by the Dutch. His 84-page petition remains the best source on the Polari affair. See "Petition of William A. Seely," *Senate Miscellaneous Documents*, vol. 1, #127, 31st Congress, 1st session (Washington: 1850).

<sup>12</sup> The affair was originally reported in the *New York Evening Post*, July 29-August 4, 1831; see also I.N. Phelps Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island* (New York: 1926), vol. V, p. 1704.

<sup>13</sup> Polari swore that he was a baptised Italian; see "Petition of William A. Seely," p. 34.

came from, and denounced him to the Dutch minister as the robber. After considerable difficulty he was arrested, a part of the jewels recovered through the vigilance of Mr. Seeley, the collector of the port, and the police. It was arranged that the seizure by the collector of the port should be considered on the same principle as other seizures under the violation of the revenue.

The Herald says that Polari was kept here for nearly two years, under some arrangement with the collector, in which we assisted, and for which we received from the Dutch government the sum of \$10,000, as surveyor of the port. The fact is, we never saw Polari – we never saw the diamonds – we had no agency in the matter at all.<sup>14</sup> The collector, naval officer, and surveyor, under the old law, received their share of the confiscated articles, the amount of which we do not now remember. Probably it was \$10,000 divided among the three: *N'importe*. We now come to the gist of the story.

A few years ago some wag fooled Bennett with the idea that we had received \$10,000 from the Dutch government, and had, to use his words, "salted it down." Bennett determined to possess himself of this nice little sum but how to get it puzzled him. He felt no inclination to break into our strongbox and carry it off *vi et armis*. Besides, it might not have been there, which was the fact, so he made the attempt in another way. He was in the constant habit of abusing us in the most shameful terms, all of which we bore with Christian patience and philosophy,<sup>15</sup> occasionally firing a mustard shot at him through our columns, which seldom damaged him. One fatal day, however, we charged him with going over to Hoboken with a certain Mrs. O'Shaugnessy, and drinking tea and eating hot rolls and Scotch herrings together. It was no very serious offence, but he forthwith commenced a libel suit against us for \$10,000.<sup>16</sup> The cat is now out of the bag. It now appears that Bennett wanted to get from us the identical \$10,000 which he imagined the Dutch government had given us in the way of black mail, and which he thought was poaching on his manor. The jury, however, who were out five minutes, gave him *six cents*. The balance of the \$10,000 he must try some other way of obtaining from us, and "we wish he may get it."

14 According to Seely's petition (p. 11): "the jewels seized by the collector were libelled in form by Mordecai M. Noah, the surveyor of the customs." In other words, Noah was responsible for writing up documents.

15 Here and elsewhere Noah used the term "Christian" to denote the highest standards of morality and character. He adopted as his own the values and terminology—but not the religion—of the surrounding community.

16 *New York Herald*, January 29, 1846, p. 2, col 2.

The Dutch government obtained the jewels at some cost, but they should have paid their agent liberally for the sacrifice he made, and not allowed the case to go before the Senate. Still, we ought to state that the arrest of Polari was made by Mr. Swartwout,<sup>17</sup> and not by Mr. Seely. It seems that Roumage, the friend and companion of Polari, suspected his agency in having stolen the diamonds, and desirous of sharing the reward, communicated the fact to the collector, with an intimation of where he was to be found, which was in a house in Pearl Street, near Broadway. Mr. Swartwout, with Mr. Jacob Hays,<sup>18</sup> went after dark to the house, and burst open the door suddenly. Polari sprang for his pistols and bowie knife, but Swartwout seized him before he could obtain his weapons, and Hays secured him. "You are both lucky," said Polari, "for if I had secured my pistols, I should have killed you both," and he would have done so, as he was as powerful as well as a desperate brigand.

The Dutch government apportioned \$10,000 to the seizing officers, from which \$1,000 was distributed among several who aided in the arrest, leaving about \$9,000. Our government neither received anything, nor relinquished her duties.

17 Samuel Swartwout was Collector of the Port. Seven years later the government discovered that Swartwout had bilked the treasury of over one million dollars; see Isaac J. Cox, "Samuel Swartwout," *Dictionary of American Biography*, XVIII, 238.

18 Jacob Hays, born of Jewish parents, was longtime high constable of New York. Hays regularly attended a Presbyterian congregation, although his Jewish ancestry was well known. See *Cyclopedia of American Biography*, XII (1904), 354; Samuel I. Prime, *Life in New York* (New York: 1847), p. 149; and Noah's own epitaph of Hays, *Sunday Times and Noah's Weekly Messenger*, June 23, 1850, reprinted in Jerome Mushkat "Epitaphs by Mordecai Noah," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, LV (July, 1971), 263-265.