



Isidor Lewi
(Courtesy American Jewish Historical Society, from Schwarz-Lewi papers)

Isidor Lewi: Chronicler of History

LAWRENCE S. FREUND

When Isidor Lewi (1850–1939) died at the age of eighty-eight, it was not just the end of a long life; it was also the end of a long career in journalism—one that stretched across two centuries and extended even into his own retirement. While his own life merits remembrance, it is his role as a witness to and documentarian of history that stands out. Ever since childhood, Lewi had placed himself amid the central events and personalities of his era, which gave him a unique perspective that he shared with his close associates as well as with the general public. Today, his perspective—much of which is preserved in his articles, correspondence, and published history of Isaac M. Wise and Temple Emanu-El—opens a twenty-first-century window onto the events of his day, especially with regard to the evolution of Judaism in the United States.

Lewi was born in Albany, New York, on 9 May 1850. His parents were Joseph Lewi, a physician born in 1820 in the town of Radnitz [now Radnice], Bohemia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Bertha Schwarz, born in 1828 in Kassel, Germany, the daughter of Josef Emmanuel Schwarz, cantor of that city's synagogue. The couple were married in New York City and soon moved to Albany.¹

The transfer to the New York State capital was not a chance event. Its roots led back to Radnitz, Joseph Lewi's birthplace, where, in 1843, Isaac Mayer Weis [later changed to Wise] was a young rabbi who had secured an appointment as the spiritual leader of the Radnitz synagogue. At that time, Joseph Lewi was studying medicine at the University of Prague and the University of Vienna. But after his graduation, Lewi returned to Radnitz to practice medicine. His first patient was Emily

1 Isidor Lewi, "Notable Jews—No. XIV. Dr. Joseph Lewi," *Frank Leslie's Weekly* (6 July 1893): 7; "Gave Largely to Charity," *Canajoharie Courier* (24 February 1914): 1.

Weis, the one-year-old daughter of the town's rabbi. This meeting would be the beginning of a friendship between the rabbi and the physician that would last for decades and would follow them from Radnitz to Albany and beyond.

The Wise and Lewi Family Ties

"Shortly after his assumption of office in Radnitz," wrote Rabbi David Philipson, a close associate of Wise, "he came into friction with the government because of his democratic and radical expressions."² Several other collisions with established authorities—what Philipson described as "all this unpleasantness"—led Wise to leave Bohemia. "His ideas were radical," Philipson wrote. "He felt, too, that he would be hampered in teaching and preaching Judaism as he conceived it."³ Wise arrived in New York City with his wife Therese and his daughter Emily on 23 July 1846, "animated by high ideals and aspirations."⁴ But at the time of Wise's arrival, Philipson explained, "Jewish religious life in America was not such as to fill the breast of the new-comer with high hopes. When he entered the synagogue there was the same indecorum with which he had been but too familiar abroad."⁵

In October 1846, after excursions to New Haven, Syracuse, and Albany, Wise accepted the invitation of Albany's Congregation Beth-El to become its rabbi. "My position in Albany was not brilliant financially," Wise would write. "My salary was two hundred fifty dollars a year, and nine dollars for each pupil in my school. Albany was poor."⁶ As Wise and his family settled into Albany, Europe was in turmoil, culminating in what became known as the revolutions of March 1848, challenging the established rulers, including those of the Austrian Empire. From the Empire's outpost in Radnitz, Bohemia, the prospects for a successful outcome seemed dim to twenty-eight-year-old physician Joseph Lewi.

2 David Philipson and Louis Grossman, eds., *Selected Writings of Isaac M. Wise with a Biography* (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1900), 11.

3 *Ibid.*, 14.

4 *Ibid.*, 16.

5 *Ibid.*, 21.

6 Isaac M. Wise, *Reminiscences* (Cincinnati: Leo Wise and Co., 1901), 46–47.

“[A]t the outbreak of the ‘March Revolution,’” wrote his son Isidor, “knowing that the efforts of the revolutionists must end in disaster, he decided to go to America, leaving with his confrères a letter in which he prophesied the collapse of the Democratic movement, with which he was heartily in sympathy.”⁷ Joseph Lewi, following the pattern of his friend Wise, settled at first in New York City, where, on 13 May 1849, he married Bertha Schwarz.⁸ Just weeks earlier, Wise had written from Albany to the future bride, explaining that he was unable to appear at her wedding. “I wish to move you not to exclude me from the day of your wedding,” Wise wrote. “I was told that you precisely wish to celebrate your wedding day in New York,” he continued, explaining that he would not be able to attend because of a commitment to perform the marriage ceremony for another couple in Albany that same day. “I therefore hope you will do, as it is generally the fashion here and come up to us to Albany and we will rejoice here as friends do,” Wise added.⁹

Wise and Lewi had been in contact soon after Lewi’s arrival in New York. Wise would recall:

7 Lewi, “Notable Jews,” 7. The family surname in Bohemia was most likely “Lowy.” There is a record of a “Joseph Loy,” a 26-year-old physician, arriving in New York on 31 May 1848 from Bremen aboard the *Amazon*. See Registers of Vessels Arriving at the Port of New York from Foreign Ports, 1789–1919, Microfilm Publication M237, rolls 1–95. National Archives at Washington, DC.

8 Compiled Marriage Index, *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* (New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, 1932).

9 Letter from Isaac M. Wise to Bertha Schwarz, “By the especial permission of my friend Dr. Lewi,” 27 April 1849, Isaac Mayer Wise Digital Archive, <http://americanjewisharchives.org/collections/wise/view.php?id=2495> (accessed 13 January 2021). According to an obituary for Bertha Schwarz Lewi, she and Joseph Lewi were married by Rabbi Leo Merzbacher at the relatively new Temple Emanuel-El, then on Chrystie Street in Lower Manhattan. “Death of Mrs. Lewi,” *The American Hebrew & Jewish Messenger* (27 February 1914): 512. Merzbacher was the Bavarian-born first rabbi of Temple Emanu-El. Max B. May, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise’s grandson and biographer, described Merzbacher, who died in 1856, as “one of the few learned and progressive rabbis in the country, and a friend and supporter of Dr. Wise.” See Max B. May, *Isaac Mayer Wise: The Founder of American Judaism, A Biography* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916), 265. Wise himself said Merzbacher was “known as a true hearted and staunch reformer.” See “The Rev. Dr. Lilienthal,” *The Israelite* (11 August 1854): 37.

In the early summer of 1848 many immigrants came to these shores from France and Germany, and among them was Dr. Joseph Lewi from Bohemia. As soon as I heard of this, I commissioned a friend to bid the doctor come to me at once to Albany. He brought me the comical answer that Dr. Lewi was of the opinion that he would be a burden to me for some time, and that since all friendship ceases in America, each one had to look out for himself. Thereupon I wrote the following brief epistle, "Dr. Lewi, if you do not come to me at once to Albany, never call me friend again." Dr. Lewi made his appearance two days later at 77 Ferry Street, and I was heartily glad to have a house friend. We agreed very well with one another, and have remained friends.¹⁰

The newlyweds, Joseph and Bertha Lewi, chose Albany as their new home and, as their first-born child, Isidor, born in the spring of 1850, later recalled: "The Wise and Lewi families occupied the same house and the best room in that house was at times Dr. Lewi's consultation chamber and at other times Dr. Wise's study."¹¹ Lewi's first summer in Albany would not be easy, for, as Wise would write, "cholera broke out and spread fear and dread. There were scarcely any cases of cholera among the Jews. Only one member of our congregation was stricken, but he recovered."¹² However, in August 1849, cholera attacked the Wises' two-year-old second child, Laura. Isidor Lewi recounted the tragedy years later, in 1926:

Dr. Wise recalled the fact that when my father returned to his native town (from the University of Vienna), his first patient there was Wise's daughter Emily ... and as the child recovered speedily, so he said would little Laura. But it was not to be, and when the child fell into sleep eternal its parents and mine were the only ones present. It was a Sabbath morning and Dr. Wise, though bowed with grief, went to the Synagogue to conduct services, saying to those who would have restrained him "Ernst kommt die Pflicht" [duty must be taken seriously]. No one in the congregation knew of his bereavement until the service was over.¹³

10 Wise, *Reminiscences*, 100.

11 Isidor Lewi, "Dr. Isaac M. Wise in Albany," *American Israelite* (25 March 1926): 4.

12 Wise, *Reminiscences*, 124.

13 Lewi, "Wise in Albany," 4.

“The grief at the loss of the dear little angel dazed me at first,” Wise wrote, “and when I was myself again, I was as ill, exhausted, and downcast as I had been the year before.”¹⁴ However, despite the tragedy, the months ahead would be a crucial period for both Lewi and Wise, as well as for Reform Judaism in Albany and the United States. Isidor Lewi recalled the “simple, harmonious” dual household of the Wise and Lewi families, where, as he put it, “the foundation was laid” for Albany’s Reform congregation, one of the first in the United States. “As children,” he wrote, “we often heard the story of those day[s] which Wise spoke of as the era of Storm and Drang [*sic*] [turmoil], of the effort on the part of the ultra orthodox in opposition to the young idealist who was breaking the way to American reform Judaism, with emphasis on the ‘American.’”¹⁵

As Wise’s biographer, Sefton Temkin, explains, when the rabbi arrived at Congregation Beth El in 1846, the synagogue was essentially a traditional shul with a traditional liturgy. But early in Wise’s ministry, Temkin notes, “he took measures to improve the service, in particular by modernizing the music and instituting a choir. It was not plain sailing.”¹⁶ In fact, liturgical and theological tempests continued to batter Beth El, culminating in a shattering crisis in September 1850, when a synagogue faction opposing Wise’s liberalizing practices attempted to bar him from officiating at Rosh Hashanah services. The group was headed by synagogue president Louis Spanier. Wise remembered:

I step before the ark in order to take out the scrolls of the law as usual, and to offer prayer. Spanier steps in my way, and, without saying a word, smites me with his fist so that my cap falls from my head. This was the terrible signal for an uproar the like of which I have never experienced. The people acted like furies.¹⁷

14 Wise, *Reminiscences*, 124. In his memoir, Wise wrote that during the previous summer “I had a presentiment of approaching death... this condition set a limit to my plans to improve the world. I saw everything through a glass darkly, and was sadly depressed.” (See *Reminiscences*, 97).

15 Lewi, “Wise in Albany,” 4.

16 Sefton Temkin, “Isaac Mayer Wise: A Biographical Sketch,” in *A Guide to the Writings of Isaac Mayer Wise*, ed. Doris C. Sturzenberger (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1981), 19.

17 Wise, *Reminiscences*, 165.

The next day, supporters of Wise—including, notably, Joseph Lewi—adjourned to his home to conclude the holiday services. “The two rooms were crowded,” wrote Wise. “We had a number of members who were able to read the prayers. The service was conducted in an excellent manner. I preached comfort and consolation, and bade the worshippers confide in the holy cause of Israel. There was not one dry eye.”¹⁸ Beth-El’s angry split led to the founding of a new synagogue in Albany, Anshe Emeth, with Wise as its spiritual leader. At the time, Isidor Lewi was four months old, yet those events were to form a cornerstone of his spiritual inheritance. Eighty years later, he shared recollections of his godfather, Isaac Mayer Wise:

From the time when he started his little Albany flock with a plea for family pews, English in the ritual, uncovered heads for men in the Synagogue¹⁹ and a choir, he never faltered, never relaxed in his efforts to reach the chosen goal. Driven from his pulpit, beset by violent fanatics, he gathered about him a few friends who recognized in him a champion for progress and righteousness, and in an improvised synagogue, at a tiny table as a reading desk, he conducted his first reform service. Thus, in the camp of the enemies, he began the work which brought him finally to acknowledged leadership and made him the outstanding figure in the Judaism which he named AMERICAN.²⁰

18 Ibid., 166–167.

19 Available evidence indicates that the elimination of head covering for men was first introduced by Temple Emanu-El in New York in 1864 and was not adopted until ten years later by Isaac Mayer Wise’s congregation in Cincinnati. See Jack Wertheimer, ed., *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 89; Leon A. Jick, “Response: Comments on Washington Hebrew Congregation Article,” *American Jewish History* 84, no. 2 (June 1996): 101.

20 Isidor Lewi, *Isaac Mayer Wise and Emanu-El* (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1930), 1. In an earlier profile of Wise, Lewi wrote, “During his residence in Albany [Wise] gave the Jewish reform movement its first impetus, and in this work he was obliged to face not only obloquy, but even personal violence, from the members of his congregation, a majority of whom differed from him in opinion, and who succeeded, [in] spite of the efforts of his loyal friends, in driving him from his position. His prosecutors were ignorant people, who looked upon any deviation from the narrow religious customs to which they were accustomed in their rural German homes as a menace to Judaism.” Isidor Lewi, “Isaac M. Wise,” *Frank Leslie’s Weekly* (15 December 1892): 431.

Wise remained in Albany until 1854, when he moved to Cincinnati to accept the position of rabbi of B'nai Yeshurun synagogue (now Isaac M. Wise Temple). He nevertheless remained in close touch with his friends and associates in Albany, especially the Lewi family.

Early Experiences on the Stage of History



Lewi Family, composite photograph, 1884. Isidor is bearded man standing next to fireplace.
(Courtesy American Jewish Historical Society)

Over the next years, Joseph Lewi became one of Albany's leading physicians, an active supporter of the nascent Republican Party and a devoted parent to Isidor, the eldest of his and Bertha's fourteen children.²¹ Isidor recalled being dazzled as an eight-year-old in Albany by the city's candlelit celebration in 1858 of the completion of the Transatlantic Cable, allowing telegraphic communications between Britain and the United

21 Wise fathered an equal number of children—ten with his first wife, Therese Bloch, and another four with his second wife, Selma Bondi. "A Finding Aid to the Isaac Mayer Wise Papers, 1838–1931," MS-436, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter AJA).

States. Soon after, Joseph and Isidor boarded a train in Albany for a first-hand look at history in the making.

I went with my father to New York and with him to the [USS] Niagara, the ship which had played the American part in the laying of the cable. I saw the great coil of reserve cable in the hold, stood by and listened to the story of how the Agamemnon and the Niagara met in midocean, spliced the cable, and then both raced, paying it out to their respective ports. On leaving the ship my father bought from one of the sailors, who had them for sale, a four-inch piece of the cable, a souvenir of the great accomplishment. I still have the piece of twisted wire, with its tiny copper threads embedded in gutta-percha, and the scrapbook memorandum.²²

Two years later, in 1860, Isidor was again a witness to history as he rallied in Albany on behalf of the Republican Party's presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln. In later life, he told a reporter that he took to the streets with the pro-Lincoln group known as the Wide Awakes (in contrast to the Little Giants favoring the Democratic Party's candidate, Stephen A. Douglas):

All carried torches consisting of swinging lamps on four-foot sticks for the privates and vari-colored lanterns for the officers. These clubs served to escort the speakers to and from the meeting places, and also paraded independently almost every night. Never once was there any fighting between the groups in Albany. I have seen parades of opposing factions meet and pass each other quietly on opposite sides of the street. I was a member of a boys' Wide-awake club, and it was my duty to march as a guard next to the bearers of the transparencies, which were muslin-covered frames of wood on which were painted the names of the candidates and the campaign slogans.²³

The next year, on 11 February 1861, Lincoln, following his election in 1860, began a circuitous train trip to Washington from his home in

22 Isidor Lewi, "Atlantic Cable Memories," *New York Herald Tribune* (6 August 1932): 8.

23 "Reporter Recalls Lincoln Campaign," *New York Evening Post* (12 February 1932): 2.

Springfield, Illinois, arriving in Albany on 18 February. He was greeted there at a makeshift stop by a large, rambunctious crowd. A reporter at the scene described the president-elect:

Tired, sunburnt, adorned with huge whiskers, looks so unlike the pale, smooth shaven, red cheeked individual, who is represented upon the popular prints and dubbed the ‘rail splitter,’ that it is no wonder the people did not recognize him. Only his extreme height distinguished him.²⁴

Lincoln was greeted by Albany Mayor George Thacher. Also in the crowd was ten-year-old Isidor Lewi. He later wrote of the experience:

When fires, ratification meetings, torchlight processions and speeches were over when ‘Old Abe’ was elected, it was my good fortune to be in the crowd at the railroad station in Albany when the “Rail-Splitter” President-elect stepped from the train to rest in Albany on his way to his first inauguration. I saw him enter a carriage with Mayor Thatcher [*sic*], Senator [William] Ferry and Assemblyman Hall [Levi Chandler Ball], and later that day I went with my father to the Capitol, there to shake hands with the President-elect.²⁵

Strongly influenced by his father’s pro-Union, abolitionist sentiments—though too young to enlist in the Union Army—Isidor joined a unit of what he described as “Boy Zouaves,” youngsters in colorful uniforms modeled after French colonial military attire. “I remember marching as a member of one of these regiments to a camp of instruction on the outskirts of my home town,” he wrote, “where the 44th New York Infantry was making ready to leave for the front. The regiment bore the name at that time, ‘Ellsworth Avengers.’”²⁶ Another memory

24 “The Arrival and Reception at the State Capital,” *New York Herald* (19 February 1861): 1.

25 Isidor Lewi, “Abra-Hamlin-Coln,” *New York Herald Tribune* (13 February 1938): A11.

26 Isidor Lewi, “‘Elmer’ Achieved Popularity in Civil War,” *New York Herald Tribune* (27 January 1935): A8. Elmer Ellsworth, a close friend of Lincoln and commanding officer of the 11th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment (a Zouave unit), was killed on 24 May 1861 while removing a Confederate flag from the roof of an inn in Union-occupied

was the image of Union General Ambrose Burnside, chosen in 1862 to replace the demoted General George McClellan. Burnside was notable for his side whiskers if not his military leadership. “In my boyhood scrapbook,” Isidor wrote, “I had some of the cartoons in which Burnside and sideburns were the vehicle for alleged humor. After the defeat of the Army of the Potomac at Fredericksburg [11–15 December 1862], Burnside was transferred, and the sideburns jokes again came to the fore.”²⁷ When news reached Albany of the surrender of General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia on 9 April 1865, what one newspaper described as an “impromptu celebration” erupted in the city—as elsewhere in the North—with citizens bearing banners parading in the streets. “[I]n the evening,” according to the journal, “Chinese lanterns were suspended across streets and avenues. Stores and private residences were brilliantly illuminated.”²⁸ Just a few days later, on 15 April, Albany learned of the death of President Lincoln after he was shot by John Wilkes Booth the previous evening. “The streets were still gay with bunting celebrating the victories of Grant and others,” Isidor told a reporter many years later. “Then came the death of Lincoln and for a day everyone was busy taking down the gay bunting of red, white and blue and replacing it with the sober hue of mourning. It was as if a loved one had been stricken in every home.”²⁹ On 26 April, just short of his fifteenth birthday, Isidor and Joseph returned to the New York State Capitol building where they had met Lincoln four years earlier, now to view the president’s body on its route back to Illinois. Isidor wrote:

The flags with which nearly every house had been decorated in celebration of the victories at the front had been bordered with black; every house was one of mourning—Lincoln dead. Party lines were obliterated and brotherhood made itself manifest in common sorrow. I was of the

Alexandria, Virginia, becoming the first Union officer to die in the Civil War. The 44th New York Infantry (Ellsworth Avengers) left Albany in October 1861 and fought in many key battles of the Civil War, including Gettysburg.

27 Isidor Lewi, “Burnside and Sideburns,” *New York Herald Tribune* (31 July 1931): 14.

28 “The Impromptu Celebration,” *Atlas and Argus* (Albany, NY) (11 April 1865): 1.

29 “Reporter Recalls Lincoln Tragedy,” *New York Times* (15 April 1936): 19.

silent crowd that moved slowly through the dimly lighted chamber where I had seen and heard the voice of Lincoln before he was the Emancipator, and there I looked again upon Lincoln in his coffin, his earthly mission accomplished—on his way back to Springfield.³⁰

Isidor Lewi's two encounters with Lincoln would feature prominently in his recollections over the next decades, as he continued to witness and befriend the movers and shakers of his time. The following year, 1866, again escorted by his father, Isidor witnessed a speech in Albany by Lincoln's first vice president, Hannibal Hamlin, arguing on behalf of the proposed Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution that, along with guaranteeing all citizens equal protection of the laws, exempted the federal government and the states from paying debts incurred by the Confederate states—Hamlin's main concern. Isidor recalled:

Leaflets on which the text of the amendment was printed were distributed in the hall, and some of these were kept as souvenirs of the occasion. After the meeting, when many of the audience advanced to the platform to greet the speaker, I had the pleasure, led by my father, of shaking hands with Mr. Hamlin.³¹

In March 1868, the British author Charles Dickens arrived in Albany for the second of his two visits to the New York State capital. Tickets to his two readings at Tweddle Hall were quickly sold out, but Joseph Lewi was able to secure a ticket for himself next to the seat reserved for his friend, Albany attorney Nathan Swartz. Soon after Swartz arrived at the Lewi household to accompany his friend to the Dickens reading, a second man arrived at the door urgently requesting the services of Dr. Lewi. As a result, Isidor inherited his father's ticket and was present to hear Dickens read from his famous novel *David Copperfield* and his new novella *Doctor Marigold*.

The picture of the tall, bearded man in conventional dress, with a gold watch chain stretched across his vest, starting to read and throwing down

30 "Abra-Hamlin-Coln," *New York Herald Tribune* (13 February 1938): A11.

31 Isidor Lewi, "The Repudiated Debts," *New York Times* (1 August 1932): 14.

the book and “reading” without its aid, are still vivid in my memory, as is also the regret experienced at that time, despite my pleasure, because of my father’s absence; that he could not be in Tweddle Hall, listening to Dickens.³²

During these formative years, Isidor was a student at The Albany Academy, a prestigious college preparatory school established in 1813. While Joseph may have intended for Isidor to continue his academic training, Isidor moved in two other directions—one commercial, the other journalistic, the latter influenced by Isaac Mayer Wise. By 1854 Wise had established himself in Cincinnati as both rabbi of B’nai Yeshurun and founder of the nationally circulated newspaper *The Israelite*, which became *The American Israelite* in 1874. In September 1868, Wise traveled from Cincinnati to New York City, where he had been invited to speak at the dedication ceremony of the lavish new building of Temple Emanuel, an ambitious Moorish-style structure at 5th Avenue and 43rd Street in Manhattan. On his way to New York, Wise stopped at the Lewi home in Albany to try to persuade Joseph and Bertha to join him at the ceremony and, as Isidor put it, to “share with him the joy of witnessing in the dedication ceremonies the fruitful result to his constructive work in the cause of Reform.”³³ Joseph declined the invitation because he couldn’t leave his medical practice. “Let the boy come,” Wise responded, indicating Isidor, and so the eighteen-year-old witnessed the dedicatory ceremony on 11 September 1868.³⁴ About two years later, according to historian Bertram W. Korn, Isidor’s father sent him to Cincinnati “as an apprentice to Wise in the editorship of the *Israelite*.”³⁵ Isidor recalled that his first journalistic efforts appeared in Wise’s *Israelite* in 1871,³⁶ although he also noted that his first “service” to the publication was driving the rabbi in his horse-drawn carriage from his home, known as the Farm, to his office.

32 Isidor Lewi, “A Dickens Reading,” *New York Herald Tribune* (16 April 1931): 20.

33 Lewi, *Wise and Emanu-El*, 3–4.

34 “Last Service Held in Temple Emanuel,” *Reform Advocate* (30 July 1927): 15.

35 Bertram W. Korn, “Jewish 48’ers in America,” *American Jewish Archives* (June 1949): 16.

36 Isidor Lewi, “Letters from People—Isidor Lewi, New York; Old Friend and Contributor, Sends Congratulations,” *American Israelite* (8 July 1926): 5.

We were well underway and Dr. Wise was reading copy which he had prepared the night before at the Farm. There was no writing machine at the Farm in those days and every word had been written in the ancient, orthodox style and a sheaf of copy represented considerable manual exertion. Regardless of that fact a gust of wind caught the manuscript and scattered it broadcast over the muddy road. The horse was halted in its more or less mad career and seemed perfectly willing to stand still while I gathered the sheets of copy, which, when our journey's modest destination was reached—the modest Israelite office in Walnut street—Edward Bloch helped me to re-assemble and re-write. That was in 1872 when the Editorial Staff of the *Israelite* and the [German-language periodical] *Deborah* consisted chiefly of Dr. Wise.³⁷

After his training in Cincinnati, Isidor returned to Albany, where he worked for the *Albany Morning Express* and later the *Albany Argus*.³⁸ But his association with Wise—as a boy in the same household and as a young apprentice in journalism—proved to be foundational in his religious self-concept. Lewi was a committed Jew with a strong anti-Zionist resolve, which he had undoubtedly learned from Wise. It was an inheritance of discipleship not uncommon among the first-generation successors to Wise.

As early as 1848, Wise had pressed for an association of Jewish congregations in the United States “under whose auspices American rabbis would be trained, an American prayer book produced, and needful reforms authorized.”³⁹ But the organization, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations [UAHC], was not formally created until 1873, a quarter century later, and even then it did not include major synagogues in the East until a meeting of its council in Milwaukee, called five years later to approve crucial changes. As described by historian Sefton D. Temkin,

37 Isidor Lewi, “Three-Score Years and Ten”—“From A Valued Half Century Contributor,” *American Israelite* (4 September 1924): 4. Edward Bloch, Wise's brother-in-law, was founder of the Bloch Publishing Company and publisher of *The Israelite* and the German-language periodical *Die Deborah*.

38 “Lewi Funeral is Tomorrow,” *Knickerbocker News* (Albany, NY) (4 January 1939): 14A.

39 Sefton D. Temkin, “A Century of Reform Judaism in America,” *American Jewish Yearbook* (1973): 12.

The Eastern congregations did not join immediately. When the council met in Milwaukee in 1878, its president reported that, despite the efforts of the Board of Delegates, the requisite number had not been attained. However, while the council was in session, delegates from Emanu-El and Beth El of New York arrived and presented credentials, and an announcement was made that the requisite quota of Eastern congregations had been filled.⁴⁰

The dramatic arrival of the New York delegates was yet another consequence of the close friendship between Isaac Mayer Wise and Joseph Lewi.

As recounted by Isidor, Wise had once again traveled to New York City for a speaking engagement and on his return to Cincinnati stopped in Albany for what was intended to be a brief visit but was persuaded by his friend Joseph Lewi to spend the day in nearby Saratoga. There, “by the merest of chance, without any prearrangement,” Isidor wrote, Wise met several “influential members” of Temple Emanu-El, “the men whose co-operation Wise had been unable to win, who had the power to give the campaign of the Union the impetus essential to its success, and, seeing the opportunity to make a plea under most favorable auspices, Dr. Wise was quick to embrace it.”⁴¹ Wise’s plea to the New Yorkers bore fruit, Isidor added, and “the last barrier in the path of the Union’s success had been razed.”⁴²

From Merchant to Journalist

In the 1880s, Isidor Lewi set aside journalism and went to work for the Zylonite Comb and Brush Company, a firm near North Adams, Massachusetts, that manufactured many household items from a wood pulp-based product similar to celluloid. In 1885, some four hundred employees of the firm worked under the superintendency of Lewi,⁴³

40 Ibid., 34.

41 Isidor Lewi, “The Surrender at Saratoga—Not of Cornwallis,” *American Israelite* (27 March 1919):16.

42 Ibid.

43 Bernard A. Drew, “Zylonite Collars Have Day in Court,” *Berkshire Eagle* (Pittsfield, MA) (15 March 2014). The article refers to Isidor Lewi’s surname as “Lewis,” a not uncommon error in reporting about him.

two years later, the North Adams newspaper announced Lewi's promotion to superintendent of the consolidated company, noting that he had "been a resident of North Adams but a few years, and has taken a prominent place in society and business circles quite unusual in so short a time."⁴⁴ That same year, Lewi attended a reading in North Adams by Lew Wallace of his novel *Ben-Hur*, an event that he told Wallace "was so rich in pleasure that it made a lasting impression on my mind." Lewi was far from alone in his appreciation of the book. "Despite its 1880 publication date," writes Emily Clair Lord-Kambitsch in her doctoral dissertation on *Ben-Hur*, "Wallace's novel was the second best-selling book after the Bible, and the number one best-selling work of fiction in the United States of the nineteenth century."⁴⁵ The novel tells the story of Jesus—its full title is *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*—along with that of a Jewish prince, Judah Ben-Hur, who hopes for a Jewish king to defeat Rome and ultimately converts to Christianity. Lord-Kambitsch writes:

Nineteenth-century American Protestants' fond identification with the people of Israel in their historical struggle for religious and political freedom is channeled through the character of Judah Ben-Hur. Wallace's direction of American sympathies to his protagonist is otherwise frequently underscored by the characterization of Ben-Hur as steeped in prominent American value systems, such as patriotism, personal ambition, and familial affection and loyalty.⁴⁶

Lewi followed up his praise for Wallace and his novel by asking the author to autograph his copy of the book "as a souvenir of the evening when as Ben Hur's co-religionist (and your only Jewish auditor at North Adams) [I was] charmingly entertained by Ben Hur's gifted biographer."⁴⁷

44 *Argus* (Albany, NY), (3 April 1887): 8 (copied from *North Adams Transcript*).

45 Emily Clair Lord-Kambitsch, "Emotions in Ben-Hur: Dynamics of Emotion in Texts, Reception Contexts, and Audience Responses in the United States (1880–1931)," doctoral diss. (University College London, 2016), 19. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/> (accessed 24 August 2021).

46 *Ibid.*, 52.

47 Letter from Isidor Lewi to Lew Wallace, 9 February 1887, Lew and Susan Wallace

In January 1890 Lewi embarked on a European trip to pursue both his business and personal interests. Arriving in Budapest in March, he found the city “in a fever of excitement” because of the expected resignation the next day of the Hungarian prime minister, Kálmán Tisza. Anxious to witness the event, Lewi presented himself to a functionary as an American reporter. Asked to identify his publication, the businessman thought “something had to be done, and done without hesitation, or I was lost.”

Half a dozen well-known newspaper names flashed through my mind in that instant, but the realization that the use of any of them might involve exposure and disgrace prompted me to my second inspiration of the day, and without the slightest show of perturbation, I calmly and rather loftily announced:

The North Adams Transcript.

And with another low bow, he handed me the coveted card.

Well, it was a gorgeous spectacle; and I saw and heard it all, although, not being familiar with the language, I hadn't the slightest idea what the Premier's impassioned oration was all about. And when I got back to the hotel that evening my conscience smote me. So I sat down and wrote a long—and I flatter myself not uninteresting—account of the day's impressions from an American viewpoint, headed it “From Our Special Correspondent,” and dispatched it to the Transcript forthwith.⁴⁸

In the same month that Lewi visited Budapest, he also traveled to his father's birthplace, Radnitz, Bohemia, the town in which Wise first served as rabbi. In a note to Wise, Lewi wrote, “Dear Doctor: -- On my way to service at the house of worship where you once served, I stop to send you greetings. Your friend, I.L.” Writing briefly in his newspaper, Wise commented, “Thanks to our good friend, who remembers us in distant Bohemia. He is probably the only person in that city of Radnitz who still remembers us, for it was on the last day of *Pesach*, 1848, when

Multi-Institution Microfilm Project, Indiana Historical Society. Judah Ben-Hur, the fictional title character of Wallace's best seller, was a Jewish nobleman.

48 “Our Reporter at Budapest' Here,” *North Adams Transcript* (22 June 1933): 11.

we preached there the last time, closing a three years' engagement to leave for America."⁴⁹ The same issue of *The American Israelite* reported from Albany that Isidor, the son of Joseph Lewi, was on a tour through Europe and had "visited Radnitz (Bohemia), the Doctor's birth-place, and met with a hearty reception there. He also has been to Cassel, where his mother was born."⁵⁰ The news item by the Albany correspondent of *The American Israelite* was evidently prompted by a separate note from Isidor to his father.

In January 1891, Lewi's employer, the Zylonite company, folded under the combined weight of a million-dollar-plus patent-infringement judgment and a bank failure that severely damaged the financial holdings of one of the firm's founders.⁵¹ Whether by necessity, chance, or design, Lewi changed his vocation at about that time from merchant to journalist, joining the reporting staff of the *New York Tribune*, a daily founded by Horace Greeley and then edited and owned by Whitelaw Reid. Relying on his apprenticeship at *The American Israelite* and his training at Albany newspapers, Lewi was now singularly focused on the journalism career that would last the rest of his working life. Other Jews, in numbers disproportionately greater than their percentage in the nation's population, took the same path. "[J]ournalism," writes Brandeis University scholar Stephen J. Whitfield, "has been conspicuously attractive for talented Jews, whose role merits analysis and explanation."⁵² Whitfield turns to *Jews and American Politics* by journalist Stephen D. Isaacs for his analysis:

Isaacs argues that the intellectual and verbal resourcefulness that Jews have cherished historically is rewarded in the mass media.⁵³ ... Isaacs

49 Isaac M. Wise, *American Israelite* (3 April 1890): 4.

50 Nemo, "Albany, N.Y.," *American Israelite* (3 April 1890): 4. ("Nemo" was a pseudonym, likely for Theodore J. Lewi, an Albany, N.Y., pharmacist and a younger brother of Isidor Lewi.)

51 "The American Zylonite Company." <http://www.mernick.org.uk/zylonite/index.htm> (accessed 23 January 2021).

52 Stephen J. Whitfield, "The Jewish Contribution to American Journalism," *American Journalism* 3, no. 2 (1986): 101.

53 *Ibid.*, 105.

also notes the Jewish representation in a field which, “like all forms of mass education, prizes the non-ethnicity of universalism” and especially the ideal of objectivity. Those opting for journalism as a career might therefore hope to be judged by their merit, not their religious or national origin.⁵⁴

Whitfield adds the suggestion of his Brandeis University colleague, Jonathan D. Sarna, that “Jews had the kind of cosmopolitan outlook which journalism demands.”⁵⁵ But in the end, Whitfield concludes, “Too little curiosity has been piqued by this explanation of what has attracted Jews so disproportionately to journalism.”⁵⁶ Beyond all that, for Lewi, once his company folded, journalism presented the attraction of a paycheck. At about the time he began working as a reporter at the *Tribune*, journalists in New York City reportedly were earning from \$15 to \$60 a week (the highest rate in the country), averaging \$2.93 to \$4.53 a day, with long hours; in comparison, a plumber’s daily wage averaged \$3.19.⁵⁷ Edwin L. Shulman, a veteran journalist reflecting at that time on his profession, explained: “Newspaper writing, in the essential qualifications required, is a learned profession; but in its exactions and its comparative insecurity of employment it more nearly resembles a trade.”⁵⁸

To extend his writing horizon beyond the *Tribune* and also likely to extend his modest wages, in December 1892 Lewi began publishing in the popular illustrated periodical, *Frank Leslie’s Weekly*. His contribution was a series of more than twenty profiles of what were called “Notable Jews,” beginning—not surprisingly—with Wise and including Lewi’s father, Joseph. Other subjects included Adolph S. Ochs (a son-in-law of Wise and soon-to-be owner of *The New York Times*), Simon Rosendale

54 *Ibid.*, 106.

55 Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York, 1981), 6.

56 Whitfield, “Jewish Contribution,” 109.

57 Ted Curtis Smythe, “The Reporter: Working Conditions and Their Influence on the News,” *Journalism History* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 2.

58 Edwin L. Shulman, *Practical Journalism; A Complete Manual of the Best Newspaper Methods* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1903), 25.

(New York State's attorney general and another Albany native), and Rabbi Henry Pereira Mendes of New York City's Congregation Shearith Israel. *The American Israelite* advised its readers:

The subjects of the sketches are selected with great discrimination as might be expected from the fact that Mr. Isidor Lewi is their author. Mr. Lewi, in addition to fine literary capacity, has an extensive personal acquaintance with the leading Jews of the whole country, and more than ordinary knowledge of Jewish affairs.⁵⁹

In yet another effort to stretch his journalistic muscles and expand his income, Lewi reached out to Ochs, whom he had known for years, although the formality of their written communications questions the closeness of their bond.⁶⁰ Their association would be, paradoxically, both supportive and problematic in the decades to come. In 1878, at twenty years of age, Ochs had purchased full control of *The Chattanooga Times*. By 1882, according to biographer Doris Faber, he

began to think about finding a wife. Within a few months when he was calling on a business acquaintance in Cincinnati, he found her. The business friend was Leo Wise, son of Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, founder and president of Hebrew Union College, a man widely known for his scholarship and his wit... Besides his son, he had a pretty daughter, Iphigene. Waiting in the parlor for Leo, Adolph was startled by a slim, bright-eyed young woman who walked in and blithely announced: "I'm Effie Miriam Wise. Who are you?"⁶¹

59 Nickerdown, "Notes and Comments," *American Israelite* (25 May 1893): 1.

"Nickerdown" was the pen name of Dr. Julius Wise, a Chicago physician who was a son of Isaac M. Wise and a writer for *The American Israelite*, among other publications. See *New York Times* (20 April 1902): 7. Lewi's profile of Rabbi Wise, published on 15 December 1892 in *Frank Leslie's Weekly* (p. 431), did not appear under the "Notable Jews" rubric, although the second profile in the series, of financier Jesse Seligman, published 5 January 1893 (p. 7), is headed "Notable Jews—II," and the rest follow in sequence.

60 Letters between the two men consistently began with the formal salutations "Dear Mr. Ochs," "Dear Mr. Lewi." (See fn 62 for source.)

61 Doris Faber, *Printer's Devil to Publisher: Adolph S. Ochs of The New York Times* (New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1963), 52–53.

The couple was married on 28 February 1883. Ochs was now within the Wise family circle, which often broadened to include Isidor Lewi. Ten years later, in 1893, Lewi reached out to Ochs to offer a weekly letter from New York for *The Chattanooga Times*. Ochs responded that the “letter is excellent and I wish I were situated so as to arrange with you to serve us regularly with it, but I have already contracted for more special service for our Sunday edition than we can well handle.”⁶²

That same year, another of Lewi’s articles appeared in *Frank Leslie’s Weekly*, this one focused on the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a massive fair marking the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the New World. On 1 May 1893, the public first entered the gates of the exposition, whose most popular attractions were on what was called the Midway Plaisance, a narrow stretch of parkland that, in addition to the original Ferris wheel, included what were conceived as educational attractions, from an “Algerian and Tunisian Village and Theater” to a “Workingman’s Home.” Among those displays was a “Turkish Village and Theater” with appropriate architecture, decor, and costumed inhabitants. What was designed as a Turkish mosque, however, spontaneously became a Jewish house of worship on 19–20 September—Yom Kippur. Lewi was on the scene taking notes. Four out of five of the inhabitants of the Turkish village, he reported, were Jews.

Merchants, clerks, actors, servants, musicians, and even the dancing-girls, are of the Mosaic faith, though their looks and garb would lead one to believe them Mohammedans. That their Judaism is not of the passive character was demonstrated by the closed booths, shops, and curio places, by the silence in the otherwise noisy theatres and the general Sabbath-day air which pervaded the “Streets of Constantinople” on Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement. A more unique observance of the day never occurred in this country, and to the few Americans who

62 Letter from Adolph S. Ochs to Isidor Lewi, 4 January 1893, Box 20, 20–21, New York Times Company records, Adolph S. Ochs papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations (hereafter NYPL).

had the good fortune to be present it presented a picture of rare beauty and solemnity.

The “Oriental Jews,” Lewi continued, “assembled on Tuesday evening and read the *Kol Nidra* service,” and the following day, “a great bazaar, in which rugs and tapestries were on exhibition, was converted into a synagogue.”⁶³ Lewi’s report chronicling this stunning sight would become his most-quoted writing in the decades that followed.

On 29 August 1897, Theodor Herzl convened what became known as the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, at which some two hundred delegates approved a program calling for the establishment of a Jewish home in Palestine. Lewi’s newspaper, the *New York Tribune*, greeted the development with some enthusiasm, editorializing, “The return of the Jews to Palestine is no longer to be regarded as an empty dream. Dream it was, through weary centuries of persecution and outlawry.” The *Tribune* concluded that the new state “may never be formed. But the Jewish people throughout the world appear to be determined to establish it, and if it be established there will be little room to doubt its success.”⁶⁴ With both his own anti-Zionist commitment and that of his mentor, Wise, in mind, Lewi quickly sent Wise a telegram asking him to write a response for the *Tribune*. In a letter to “My dear friend Isidor,” Wise advised the reporter that his request had been pre-empted by Ochs, Wise’s son-in-law and the new owner of *The New York Times*. Wise explained:

Gladly would I have written the article you want for the Tribune, if I had not been handicapped by my son in law Adolph Ochs, who came a day or two before you with the same order like yours, and I had written and sent the MS to him, when your telegram came to hand, which was Monday morning. I am sorry to say, that I could not well write the same matter for two journals in the same city.... With love to all of our dear ones, Your Gevatter [godfather] Isaac M. Wise.⁶⁵

63 Isidor Lewi, “Yom Kippur on the Midway,” *Frank Leslie’s Weekly* (12 October 1893): 243.

64 “The Zionist Movement,” *New York Tribune* (29 August 1897): 6.

65 Letter from Isaac M. Wise to Isidor Lewi, 7 September 1897, Isaac Mayer Wise

A few days later, Wise's letter to the editor appeared in the *Times*, a lengthy and severe rejection of the Basel conference, Zionism, and the concept of a Jewish state in Palestine. The facts prove, Wise wrote, "that the Jews do not wish to and will not go back to Palestine." It was the message Lewi had hoped would appear in the *Tribune*.

Most of them, being citizens of this and other countries of advanced civilization approaching the ideals of Moses want no Jewish State; would join none if the establishment of such a State were possible. They will not separate themselves from the powerful organizations of the great nations of the world to set up a miniature statelet, a feeble dwarf of a Government of their own in Palestine or in any other country.... The Jewish Congress in the City of Basel was, in fact, a Congress of Russian emigrants in the various countries, with a few "Lovers of Zion" from Germany and Austria, who wish to colonize Palestine with Jewish agriculturists. The leaders of that body are two Hungarian gentlemen of literary renown.... Everything is possible in dreamland or in Utopia. That Congress in Basel was a novelty, a gathering of visionary and impractical dreamers who conceived and acted a romantic drama, and applauded it, all by themselves.⁶⁶

Wise's letter was a clear statement of his long-held vision of Judaism—which Lewi shared—that, as rabbi and historian Melvin Weinman has written, rejected any nationalistic view of the Jewish people. "He considered it un-Jewish to pray for, or work toward the restoration of a

Digital Archive, <http://americanjewisharchives.org/collections/wise/view.php?id=2431> (accessed 25 January 2021). Considering Ochs's own anti-Zionist commitment, it is not surprising that he quickly turned to his father-in-law for a commentary on the Zionist Congress. As Jerold S. Auerbach, author of *Print to Fit: The New York Times, Zionism and Israel (1896–2016)*, has written: "For Ochs, a proud Reform Jew, Judaism was a religion not a national identity. Fearful lest the loyalty of American Jews to the United States would be compromised by adherence even to the idea of Jewish statehood, Ochs pledged his loyalty to the United States by resolutely opposing Jewish nationalism." See Jerold S. Auerbach, "The Appalling New York Times Cartoon," *Times of Israel* blog (1 May 2019), <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-appalling-new-york-times-cartoon/> (accessed 26 January 2021).

⁶⁶ Isaac M. Wise, "A Jewish State Impossible," *New York Times* (10 September 1897): 6.

Jewish state. He considered it unnecessary, too, for he believed that in his own lifetime, constitutional liberties for Jews, patterned after those of the United States, would be established everywhere.”⁶⁷

Wise maintained that attitude until the end of his life three years later, in 1900, and his torch would be carried for another four decades by Lewi, his protégé and godson. In 1908, on the eighth anniversary of Wise’s death, Lewi wrote of the battles Wise had fought in what he regarded as the interest of Reform Judaism. “He won his fight,” Lewi declared. “He saw an American spirit infused into the ancient faith without jeopardizing its vitality. He saw Orientalism discarded and ancient usages modified to meet the demand of the age.” At the same time, Lewi warned:

The vacant place where once his gigantic figure stood is more conspicuous at this time because of the conditions which have arisen since he laid down his burden. A reactionary movement has set in; nationalism and Orientalism, organized and powerful, spurred by enthusiasm and encouraged by the support of men of high attainments, and of undoubted honesty of purpose, are undoing the work which Isaac M. Wise and his friends and followers accomplished.⁶⁸

In his analysis of “Converts to Zionism,” Sarna has drawn attention to some of the likely “men of high attainments”—Reform rabbinical leaders such as Bernhard Felsenthal, Gustav Gottheil and Max Heller—who had once argued against political Zionism but later adopted the cause.⁶⁹ Also, as Sarna points out, “not all Reform Zionists underwent conversion.... Reform Jews of this kind had been Zionists (or proto-Zionists) all along, in some cases even before they were Reform Jews. Stephen Wise, for one, imbibed love of Zion from his parents and

67 Melvin Weinman, “The Attitude of Isaac Mayer Wise Toward Zionism and Palestine,” *American Jewish Archives* 3, no. 2 (January 1951): 21.

68 Isidor Lewi, “Isaac M. Wise,” *American Israelite* (19 March 1908): 4.

69 Jonathan D. Sarna, “Converts to Zionism in the American Reform Movement,” in *Zionism and Religion*, ed. Shmuel Almog, Jehuda Reinharz, and Anita Shapira (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 188.

grandparents.”⁷⁰ The Zionist publication *The Maccabaeon*, in a 1907 editorial Sarna cited, asserted enthusiastically that “The Zionistic infection of Hebrew Union College seems to be spreading” and then, focusing on Isaac Mayer Wise’s *American Israelite*, commented, “Is it not absurd to think that a dozen men, aided by a defunct journal which still speaks through its worthy father’s old hat, should attempt to fix the first principles of liberal Jewish thought in religion on the basis of obsolete notions?”⁷¹

Lewi was possibly among the anti-Zionist “dozen men” attacked by *The Maccabaeon*, but there were many others—some of whom were sustained, like Lewi, by their close ties to the late “worthy father,” Wise. In several instances, Wise was very literally the “worthy father” or, in the case of Lewi, godfather. In fact, Lewi chose to define himself as “a disciple of Wise,”⁷² a description suitable for others as well.

Leo Wise, the eldest of Wise’s sons and one of his disciples, was born in Albany in 1849, a contemporary of Isidor Lewi. The two, Leo and Isidor, continued a close relationship throughout their lives. Leo, “as a lad,” according to one biographical sketch, “ran away from home and enlisted on a gunboat on the Mississippi River during the Civil War.”⁷³ Later, “he traveled as able seaman on the Seven Seas. The gold and diamond mines of South Africa knew him. He made his home with bushmen in Australia.”⁷⁴ In her recounting of the life of Rabbi Edward Benjamin Morris (“Alphabet”) Browne—a protégé of Isaac Wise and a near-contemporary of Leo—Janice Rothschild Blumberg writes of Leo’s absconding with his father’s funds, landing in a ship’s brig, and pleading for funds to provide medication for a friend’s abortion.⁷⁵ But eventually,

70 *Ibid.*, 68.

71 “Reform Converts,” *The Maccabaeon* 12, no. 4 (April 1907): 158.

72 Letter from Isidor Lewi to Adolph S. Ochs, 1 May 1922, Box 20, 20–21, New York Times Company records, Adolph S. Ochs papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.

73 “Leo Wise Dies at 84; Cincinnati Editor,” *New York Times* (8 January 1933): 13.

74 “Leo Wise,” *American Israelite* (2 February 1993): 4.

75 Janice Rothschild Blumberg, *Prophet in a Time of Priests* (Baltimore: Apprentice House, 2012), 61–63.

Leo settled down in Cincinnati as an assistant and then successor to his father at *The American Israelite*. And while his early rebelliousness might have suggested otherwise, he consistently supported his father's anti-Zionism. In late 1901/early 1902, Rabbi Max Heller, one of the converts to Zionism that Sarna described, publicly announced his conversion and then asked to amplify his thoughts in *The American Israelite*, to which he was a contributor. As Gary P. Zola writes, Leo Wise, now publisher of the newspaper, slammed the door. "Wise bluntly told Heller that he would not permit the columns of the *Israelite* to denigrate and libel that which his beloved father taught for nearly 60 years."⁷⁶ Twenty years later, Leo maintained that position. "The Jews," he wrote, "are not a nation and the large majority of them want no 'national home.' All they ask is equal rights with their fellow nationals of other faiths the world over, Palestine included."⁷⁷

Isaac Wise's next-born son, Julius, born in 1851, was a respected physician and a prolific writer, contributing to *The American Israelite* among other publications under the pen name "Nickerdown." "He was bold, vigorous, sarcastic, honest, a hater of shams, and yet with it all a God-fearing, religious man," noted *The New York Times* in his obituary.⁷⁸ Like his brother, Leo, Julius was also an anti-Zionist. "No Jew objects to colonies," he wrote in 1897. "But many, if not the majority, of those whose co-operation is worth having, do object to the wild dream of renationalization, which is a stultification of everything for which rational Judaism stands."⁷⁹ Two years later, he described Zionism as "that wild political phantasy."⁸⁰ Isidor Wise, born in 1856 after his father moved to Cincinnati, became an associate editor of *The American Israelite*. In the pages of that newspaper he accepted that "Zionism is a solution offered in all seriousness and sincerity," but then added, "To the extent that Zionism spends itself in perpetuating a puny

76 Gary P. Zola, "Reform Judaism's Pioneer Zionist: Maximilian Heller," *American Jewish History* 73, no. 4 (June 1984): 382.

77 Leo Wise, "More Opinions on Zionism," *American Hebrew* (12 May 1922): 724.

78 "Dr. Julius Wise Dead," *New York Times* (20 April 1902): 7.

79 Nickerdown, "Notes and Comments," *American Israelite* (28 October 1897): 4.

80 Nickerdown, "Notes and Comments," *American Israelite* (7 December 1899): 7.

nationalism, it defeats its own purpose. To consider the establishment of a tenth rate principality in Palestine as a consummation of Israel's heroic fight of 2000 years is a travesty on history."⁸¹ Jonah Wise, born in 1881, adopted the rabbinical career of his father as well as his father's anti-Zionist attitude—at least at first. In 1923, while rabbi of Temple Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon, Jonah Wise addressed a convention of the UAHC and rejected the traditional concept of "Goluth," that is, exile. "American Judaism has discarded this 'Goluth' idea," Wise declared. "It is for that reason, perhaps, that many American Jewish thinkers could not accept the proposition of theoretical Zionism.... That the 'Goluth' exile idea ... is essential to Judaism cannot be accepted by American Israel."⁸² Seven years later, now speaking at New York's Central Synagogue, Wise rejected what he called "nationalist Zionism," argued that a "Jewish national State in Palestine is not a major issue in American Jewish life", and added that "it does not now and never can achieve the place the Zionist nationalists demand for it."⁸³ However, in later years, in the face of the Holocaust, Wise would moderate his anti-Zionist views—as Central Synagogue recalled—"even as he maintained his reservations about that Movement's ideological base. His deeply nuanced approach separated him from many Classical Reform colleagues, but it brought him and the synagogue closer to the direction in which the Reform Movement was moving."⁸⁴

Also among the close disciples of Isaac Wise was Ochs, who had married Wise's daughter Effie. As writer Louis Rich noted at the time of Ochs's death in 1935:

As soon as he had the power to help and promote its progress, Mr. Ochs enlisted in the cause which his great father-in-law, Isaac M. Wise, was advancing, and contributed materially toward making it an active force

81 Isidor Wise, "Proposed 'Roads to Salvation,'" *American Israelite* (13 January 1927): 4.

82 "Ask Jews to Drop Yiddish and Wine," *New York Times* (25 January 1923): 10.

83 "Rabbi Jonah B. Wise on 'Zionism,'" *Jewish Exponent* (3 October 1930): 6.

84 Jeffrey S. Gurock, *The Wide World of Central Synagogue* (Central Synagogue: New York, 2014), 5, https://www.centraalsynagogue.org/assets/downloads/CenSyn_The-Wide-World-of-Central-Synagogue.pdf (accessed 18 August 2021).

in the life of the Jews in this country.... His strong conviction that the Jews owe allegiance only to the country whose citizens they are made him an opponent of Zionism.⁸⁵

In early 1922, Ochs traveled to Palestine for a first-hand look at the Zionists' projected homeland. In an interview at the end of his trip, he told a reporter in Tel Aviv:

I am not a Zionist. What I have seen in Palestine has not made me an avowed Zionist. But I can no longer be the anti-Zionist I was before I visited Palestine, although even now I do not believe it is necessary or even possible to create a Jewish state in Palestine. I believe, however, and I am convinced that those who do believe in the necessity and the possibility of creating a Jewish state in Palestine deserve no criticism and, far less, condemnation.⁸⁶

About a week later in Paris, shortly before his departure for home, Ochs repeated his admiration for the Zionist settlers in Palestine. But, as a reporter for *The American Israelite* noted,

He believes their cause is hopeless and he shudders at the danger to which he thinks they are exposed. The whole Arab population and all Islam is a unit against what they believe to be the aspirations of the Zionists, viz., dominance and political control of Palestine; and that feeling is growing more intense every day.... Mr. Ochs says he has always been unsympathetic with Zionism, as he understands it, because the Jewish religion is secondary.⁸⁷

Soon after his return to New York, Ochs apparently returned to his non-Zionist attitude, eliciting from Lewi the admiring comment,

As a disciple of Isaac M. Wise whose messages are as potent for good today as they were before he went to his reward; as one who sees daily the need of a champion of his caliber, his courage and his vision, I want to tell you how much your talk on the Dangers of Political Zionism pleased me.⁸⁸

85 Louis Rich, "Adolph S. Ochs," *American Jewish Year Book* (1935): 50–51.

86 "Adolph Ochs Lauds Zionists' Idealism," *Detroit Jewish Cornicle* (21 April 1922): 3.

87 "The Truth About Palestine," *American Israelite* (27 April 1922): 4.

88 Letter from Isidor Lewi to Adolph S. Ochs, 1 May 1922, Box 20, 20–21, New York

Upon Ochs's death in 1935, his son-in-law, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, succeeded him at the helm of *The New York Times* and continued the family's anti-Zionist tradition even as the tide in Reform Judaism began to turn. Laurel Leff writes:

The rise of Hitler in the 1930s posed the most serious challenge to the optimism of Reform Judaism. It set the stage for the decisive battles to save European Jewry and to establish a Jewish state in the 1940s. In this fight for the soul of Judaism Adolph Ochs initially and then more crucially his son-in-law, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, remained devoted disciples among an ever-shrinking band of followers of classical Reform Judaism.⁸⁹

Professional and Personal Changes

Meanwhile, Lewi had continued to report for the *New York Tribune* with varied assignments such as a multipage spread on the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis⁹⁰ and, in the spring of 1898, coverage for more than a month of the U.S. Army buildup for the Spanish-American War at its Georgia training camp.⁹¹ While still writing for the *Tribune*,

Times Company records, Adolph S. Ochs papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.

89 Laurel Leff, "A Tragic 'Fight in the Family': *The New York Times*, Reform Judaism and the Holocaust," *American Jewish History* 88, no. 1 (March 2000): 12.

90 Isidor Lewi, "Training for the Navy," *New York Tribune* (27 February 1898): B1–B3. As was common at that time, Lewi's article does not carry his byline, but his authorship is confirmed by a brief item from Annapolis that appeared in print shortly before the *Tribune* article: "Mr. Isidor Lewi, an attaché of the New York 'Tribune,' was here this week, gathering material for an article on the Naval Academy. He received many courtesies from the officers of the Institution." See "The Naval Academy," *Army and Navy Journal* (26 February 1898): 477.

91 Isidor Lewi's first article from Camp Thomas, the Army's training camp at Chickamauga Park (the Civil War battlefield), appeared in the *New York Tribune* on 21 April 1898; his final article from the camp appeared on 28 May 1898. Again, the articles do not carry his byline (typically "By Telegraph to the Tribune" or "From a Staff Correspondent of the Tribune"). Confirmation of his authorship is in a brief item carried by an Albany newspaper published immediately before Lewi filed his first story from Chickamauga: "Isidor Lewi passed through Albany yesterday on his way to Chickamauga

Lewi affiliated himself with a new entry in New York City journalism, a Yiddish-language daily called *Di Yidishe Velt* (*The Jewish World*), which published its first issue on 27 June 1902. The newspaper was largely organized and partly financed by Louis Marshall, an influential lawyer active in Jewish community affairs. Shareholders of the newspaper included a number of “Uptown” Jewish bankers and businessmen, while its intended readership were the “Downtown” Yiddish speakers. According to historian Lucy Dawidowicz, the newspaper “was intended to be an Americanizing and stabilizing force, intellectually, morally, religiously, and politically, among the east-European Jewish immigrants who crowded the East Side.”⁹² Eight men were appointed to the newspaper’s board: three from Downtown and a controlling five from Uptown, including Lewi, clearly chosen for his journalistic credentials but also likely for his “Americanizing” attitude inherited from Wise. Lewi shared Marshall’s attitude toward Judaism, “essentially that of the American Jew of German origin who thought of himself as an American of Jewish faith.”⁹³ However, Marshall’s attitude evolved into that of a non-Zionist, “using his mediation skills to close the gap between the ideologies of the non-Zionist and the political philosophies of the Zionist.”⁹⁴ *The Jewish World* folded at the end of 1904. As historian Jacob Rader Marcus explained, “the East Side throngs distrusted almost everything that was controlled by the ‘German’ elite.”⁹⁵ Or, as Lucy Dawidowicz put it, “The *Jewish World* failed because it could not encompass the worlds of uptown and downtown. Jews in America were

[sic], Tenn., where he will act as special correspondent of the New York Tribune.” See “Personal Mention,” *Argus* (Albany, NY) (18 April 1898): 5. Also see “Lewi Funeral is Tomorrow,” *Knickerbocker News* (Albany) (4 January 1939): 14A: “At the outbreak of the Spanish American War in 1898, Mr. Lewi was sent as correspondent to report military preparations.”

92 Lucy S. Dawidowicz, “Louis Marshall’s Yiddish Newspaper, ‘The Jewish World’: A Study in Contrasts,” *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 2 (April 1963): 102.

93 *Ibid.*, 113.

94 Ronald B. Sobel, “A History of New York’s Temple Emanu-El: The Second Half Century,” doctoral dissertation (New York University, 1980), 182.

95 Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776–1965*, vol. 4 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 417.

divided not merely by the boundaries of the East Side, but by the walls of two cultures and two classes.”⁹⁶

Even as Lewi served on the board of the short-lived Yiddish-language daily newspaper, in October 1903 he assumed the roles of publisher and editor of a distinguished monthly journal, the *New Era Jewish Magazine*, which was founded and edited in Boston by Rabbi Raphael Lasker. Lasker, who had served in synagogues in Ohio and New York before becoming spiritual leader of Temple Ohabei Shalom in Boston, returned to New York shortly before his death in 1904 after being in “poor health for several years.”⁹⁷ Once transferred to Lewi and New York,⁹⁸ the magazine’s name was changed, slightly but significantly, to *New Era Illustrated Magazine*; despite the alteration, its focus was decidedly on Jewish affairs and matters of interest to Jewish readers across the broader cultural spectrum. Lewi’s intentions were made clear in a letter sent to the Hungarian scholar Ignac Goldziher, explaining that “The magazine has been under new management ... and we are, naturally, anxious to know whether our efforts in the direction of making it a good, wholesome periodical, of interest to Jewish readers, have been successful.”⁹⁹ Despite Lewi’s efforts to sustain the monthly, it, too, folded, evidently in 1905.

In the first decade of the 1900s, Lewi’s role at the *Tribune* evolved from reporter to editorialist, one of the crew of writers who contributed the unsigned opinion articles appearing on its editorial page. Throughout those years, the newspaper published a series of anti-Zionist essays identically matching Lewi’s views, so his authorship can be assumed. In 1903, a *Tribune* editorial lauding Wise argued that the growth of the Zionist movement “has always been regarded by many Jews as

96 Dawidowicz, “Marshall’s Yiddish Newspaper,” 124.

97 “The Rev. Dr. Raphael Lasker Dead,” *New York Tribune* (14 September 1904): 8. The detail of Lasker’s obituary in Lewi’s *New York Tribune* suggests his hand in its preparation.

98 Offices of the *New Era Illustrated Magazine* were at 38 Park Row, a short walk from Lewi’s office at the Tribune Building on what was known then as Newspaper Row.

99 Letter signed “The New Era Illustrated Magazine” to Dr. Ignatz Goldziher, 24 February 1904, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, <http://real-ms.mtak.hu/9625/> (accessed 30 January 2021).

based on sentimentality and illogical theories.”¹⁰⁰ In 1910, under the headline “Decadent Zionism,” an editorial observed that “The American Jew who looks upon this country as his Zion has no sympathy with the men who preach Jewish nationalism and who would go beyond the United States for a home.”¹⁰¹

In 1905 Lewi was on assignment in Washington for the *Tribune* and, with time to spare, decided to call on William Loeb, the secretary to President Theodore Roosevelt. Loeb, like Lewi, was born and raised in Albany, although a generation later; Lewi described him as “my townsman and friend.” After waiting for the president to complete his formal appointments, the pair joined Roosevelt in what Lewi called “his sanctum.”

I knew Mr. Roosevelt when he was Police Commissioner [1894], and over my desk in the old city room there hung for a long time a piece of the fake bomb which he gave me, as souvenir of the excitement caused by its discovery. I knew him in the early days of the Spanish War when I was sent by the *Tribune* to see the stage set and the curtain rise on that opera bouffe episode. And when he was Governor we made the trip to Albany in company on many Sunday mornings, he to return to his duties and I to visit my mother.¹⁰²

During the White House meeting, Roosevelt—unaware of Loeb’s friendship with Lewi—asked his secretary whether he knew “Lewi of the *Tribune*,” and was told that indeed, he, Loeb, knew the entire Lewi family and had attended school “with at least half a dozen of the Lewi children.”

“Why,” said Roosevelt, turning to me, “how many are you?” “Well, Mr. President,” said I, “I have eight sisters and they each have six brothers.” Roosevelt arose halfway out of his chair and said: “The hell you say,” and then laughed as he put his fingers together and made fourteen.

100 “After Fifty Years,” *New York Tribune* (27 September 1903): 8.

101 “Decadent Zionism,” *New York Tribune* (3 July 1910): 6.

102 Isidor Lewi, “A T.R. Recollection,” *New York Herald Tribune* (29 October 1933): A11.

Theodore Roosevelt had nothing particularly to do at that time, except to be President of the United States, but he found time a few days later to send, through Loeb, a portrait of himself to my mother, which he inscribed:

To Mrs. Joseph Lewi

With Congratulations to Her as the Mother of Fourteen Children¹⁰³

As Lewi's professional life continued to advance, his personal life, too, would undergo change. Back in 1880, on 26 March, *The New York Times* had reported what it described as "A Brilliant Jewish Wedding"¹⁰⁴ between Lewis May, a fifty-six-year-old widower, wealthy financier, and president of Temple Emanu-El, to Emita Wolff, the twenty-seven-year-old Venezuelan-born daughter of a West Indian merchant who brought his family to New York when Emita was two "in order that his children might enjoy the benefit of the better school" in the city.¹⁰⁵ Officiating at the marriage ceremony had been Rabbi Gustav Gottheil of Temple Emanu-El. When May died seventeen years later, on 22 July 1897, he left behind a trust for Emita, with the capital to be distributed at her death to his surviving children, but providing a base distribution to her of \$18,000 a year (the equivalent of about \$600,000 in today's dollars).¹⁰⁶ Over the next few years, there began a quiet courtship between Emita and Lewi. On 21 November 1902, Emita gathered with her lawyers to complete a trust deed distributing the capital of her trust

103 Ibid. According to birth records collected by Lewi, these are the fourteen children of Joseph and Bertha Lewi: Isidor Lewi (9 May 1850); Wilhelmine Lewi (16 September 1851); Eduard (15 March 1853); Jeanette Lewi (10 October 1854); Auguste Anna Lewi (22 February 1856); Moritz (Maurice) Lewi (1 December 1857); Martha Washington Lewi (4 July 1859); Louise Lewi (4 November 1860); Theodor Lewi (4 February 1862); Franklin Louis Lewi (27 October 1863); Anna Sophie Lewi (2 September 1865); Laura N. Lewi (2 May 1867); Alice Lewi (4 October 1868); Wilhelm Grant Lewi (23 March 1870). Isidor Lewi Correspondence, SC-7156, AJA.

104 "A Brilliant Jewish Wedding," *New York Times* (26 March 1880): 8.

105 "Mrs. Emita May Lewi Dies in Her 80th Year," *New York Times* (24 January 1931): 14.

106 Record of Wills, 1665–1916; Index to Wills, 1662–1923 (New York County); New York. Surrogate's Court (New York County); New York, NY.

inheritance to her three surviving children,¹⁰⁷ and five days later, on 26 November, she married Lewi at the Madison Avenue residence of Gottheil—now Temple Emanu-El’s rabbi emeritus—who officiated at the ceremony. *The New York Times*, describing the couple as “well-known in Jewish society circles of the city,” reported that many of their close friends were surprised to learn of the wedding, adding that there were several intimate acquaintances of Emita’s family at her residential hotel, but none of them had heard of the wedding until several hours after it was solemnized.¹⁰⁸ According to the *Tribune*, “The couple started at once for Albany,” where Lewi’s widowed mother, Bertha, still resided.¹⁰⁹ There, the Lewi family presented Emita with several presents, including a “silver pitcher and tray, fruit dish, decanter and small bonbon dish.”¹¹⁰

On 20 June 1914, Lewi, Emita, and her maid sailed for Europe.¹¹¹ On what would have been roughly their day of arrival, 28 June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife Sophie were assassinated in Sarajevo, raising the curtain on World War I. On 29 July 1914, the *New York Tribune* carried a front-page story from Vienna, un-bylined but very likely written by Lewi, reporting a war manifesto proclaimed by Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph. “The city is absolutely without news to-night of the movements of the troops, which the papers are naturally forbidden to print,” according to the article. “A sharp censorship has been established over the press and all means of communication. A great, quiet crowd which constantly increased in numbers, assembled before the War Ministry, and cheers greeted the appearance of military officers and officials of the Ministry.”¹¹² Lewi remained in Europe

107 Last Will and Testament of Emita May Lewi, 1 March 1923; New York. Surrogate’s Court (New York County); New York, NY.

108 “Mrs. Lewis May Married,” *New York Times* (27 November 1902): 9. At the time of their marriage, bachelor Isidor Lewi was 52, widow Emita May was 51.

109 “Weddings Past and to Come,” *New York Tribune* (27 November 1902) 9. Bertha Lewi died in Albany 15 February 1914.

110 Last Will and Testament of Emita May Lewi.

111 Emergency Passport Application, Volume 169: Germany, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC (hereafter NARA).

112 “Francis Joseph Issues Manifesto; Addresses His People on Reasons Why He Has Grasped the Sword,” *New York Tribune* (29 July 1914): 1.



Emita Lewi
(Courtesy American Jewish Historical Society)

as war approached, and on 1 August, the day Germany declared war against Russia, he formally applied for a U.S. passport at the American Consulate in Frankfurt, Germany. The consul general noted that Lewi, described on the application as an assistant editor at the *Tribune*, had fully identified himself. That same day, Germany began the mobilization of its army, which advanced into Luxembourg.¹¹³ On 3 August—the day Germany declared war against France—Lewi was granted his passport.¹¹⁴

Lewi remained in Frankfurt during these events, chronicling them for a full-page *Tribune* article that appeared in late September. “When the mobilization orders were posted in Germany and men in all walks of life left their various spheres of activity to answer the call,” he wrote, “there were in the city of Frankfurt and in the summer resorts and cure places in its vicinity about 900 Americans, all anxious to get away.”¹¹⁵ Frankfurt streets became quiet, Lewi continued, with reduced automobile traffic.

The comparative quiet was broken many times every day by squads of recruits marching, dangling their uniform bundles, to the various headquarters where clerks, porters, physicians, actors, lawyers and men of all trades and professions were transformed into members of the great fighting force, where they lost their identity and became numbers. But they marched with a light step, responded to the cheers with which they were greeted and sang the national anthem with a vim born of enthusiasm.¹¹⁶

Years later, Lewi recalled the days in Frankfurt when he volunteered to assist the American consul general, Heaton W. Harris, with the “multitude of Americans marooned” in the German city at the outbreak of war:

One day, when the crowd of Americans seeking passports and information as to where letters of credit on England might be honored had dwindled, Harris and I went to a nearby restaurant, where I ordered

113 David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 238.

114 Emergency Passport Application, NARA.

115 Isidor Lewi, “When Mobilization Orders reached Frankfurt-on-Main,” *New York Tribune* (27 September 1914): D2.

116 *Ibid.*

“Frankfurter-Wuerstel” [sausage]. The waiter corrected my order, saying that I evidently wanted “wiener-wuerstel.” With our coffee came brown Straeusel-Kuchen [crumb cake]. Calling into action my very best German, I asked the waiter where one could find even better cake than that which he had served. To speak English at that time and place was to take a great risk, so in answering, the waiter leaned low over and whispered, in perfect English, “The best place I know is on Third Avenue near Fifty-eighth street.”¹¹⁷

An Active Retirement

Now in formal but active retirement, Lewi maintained close ties with both journalism and the two publications to which he had devoted decades of journalistic work: *The American Israelite* and the *New York Tribune*. In 1920 he took advantage of his links to both newspapers with a *Tribune* editorial he wrote¹¹⁸ in observance of Temple Emanu-El’s seventy-fifth anniversary.¹¹⁹ Turning to a familiar theme, he noted that the synagogue was “one of the first to Americanize” and its leaders had upheld the notion “that no man can be a good Jew who is not a good citizen and the advocates of Jewish nationalism found little support in the Temple Emanu-El.” Once more turning to the words of Wise, Lewi wrote:

“[W]hen the wave of Jewish nationalism was high, Rabbi Wise said the reform Jew represented the “sentiment of American Judaism,” with none of the “idiosyncrasies of the late immigrants,” and declared: “America is our Zion. Here, in the home of religious liberty we have aided in founding this new Zion, the fruition of the beginning laid

117 Isidor Lewi, “The Hot Dog Mystery,” *New York Tribune* (4 June 1931): 26.

118 In 1930, in a letter to the editor of *The American Israelite*, Lewi acknowledged that he had written the *Tribune* editorial that was later reprinted in the *Israelite*. See Isidor Lewi, “Ten Years Ago,” *American Israelite* (21 March 1930): 5.

119 Isidor Lewi became affiliated with Temple Emanu-El in 1903 and in 1906 joined the synagogue’s religious school committee, associating in the following years with members of Emanu-El’s lay and religious leadership (including Adolph Ochs, who joined the board of trustees in 1916).

in the old. The mission of Judaism is spiritual, not political; its aim is not to establish a state but to spread truths of religion and humanity throughout the world.”¹²⁰

A few days after Lewi’s editorial appeared in the *Tribune*, it was reprinted in full in *The American Israelite*.¹²¹

In 1927 Lewi was present for yet another of Temple Emanu-El’s milestones when it held its final service at its Moorish-style synagogue at 43rd Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Louis Marshall, Lewi’s former associate at *Di Yidische Velt* and now president of Emanu-El, had explained in 1925, “Sentiment will not enlarge our auditorium, will not fill our pews, will not render our services immune to the ever-growing distractions due to surrounding physical conditions which it is impossible to control.”¹²² The final service in the building was held on 23 July, with a sermon delivered by Emanu-El’s rabbi, Hyman Enelow. “Little groups of members of the congregation stood in the lobby yesterday as though hesitant to leave for the last time,” *The New York Times* reported. “Among them were men and women who had been attendants at the temple a score of years or more, and one man, Isidor Lewi, had been there when the building was dedicated on Sept. 11, 1868.”¹²³ In his published history of Temple Emanu-El and Wise, Lewi very briefly paraphrased the *Times* report, which noted that his “presence at the final service provided the connecting link with the dedication of the abandoned temple.”¹²⁴

Lewi’s thoughts on the link between Wise and Temple Emanu-El continued with his reflections on the design of the congregation’s new synagogue on Fifth Avenue and 65th Street. He began with a question:

120 Isidor Lewi, “The Emanu-El Celebration,” *New York Tribune* (16 April 1920): 12.

121 “Temple Emanu-El’s Diamond Jubilee,” *American Israelite* (22 April 1920): 1.

122 Lewi, *Wise and Emanu-El*, 81.

123 “Last Service Held in Temple Emanu-El,” *New York Times* (24 July, 1927): 18.

124 *Ibid.* In his book, Lewi wrote: “In its account of the last service in the Temple the *New York Times* said: ‘The presence of the Rev. Dr. Jonah B. Wise, whose father preached the dedication sermon September 11th 1868, and of Isidor Lewi, who was present on that occasion, were the connecting links with the dedication and the abandonment of the Temple.’ See Lewi, *Wise and Emanu-El*, 83–84.

“Who worships in this magnificent Temple?”

In his consecration sermon Isaac M. Wise visualized a stranger in the metropolis, standing at Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street, looking at the beautiful and unusual Moorish structure, the latest addition to the imposing houses of worship in New York. Wise answered the imaginary though pertinent query by saying: “A congregation of Israelites. God has brought them to praise and to fame among all the peoples of the city.” He who looks upon the architectural trinity which constitutes the new Temple Emanu-El will not ask “Who worships in that magnificent building?” because on both of its fronts Hebrew characters deeply cut into the stone answer: “This is a Jewish house of worship and those who have called it into being are proud of having it known as such.”¹²⁵

The ceremonial laying of Emanu-El’s cornerstone on 4 May 1928 was carried out by the synagogue’s president, Marshall, who, as quoted by Lewi, said the building would “symbolize Monotheism and the deathless story of Israel.”¹²⁶ Marshall died the following year; his funeral at Temple Emanu-El on 24 September 1929 was the first service held in the building, in advance of the planned opening service on Rosh Hashanah, 4 October 1929. “Here,” proclaimed Rabbi Nathan Krass, “we do not shun the new knowledge, but strive to blend the old faith with the modern culture.”¹²⁷ Among a small group of children participating in the formal dedication ceremony of Temple Emanu-El on 10 January 1930 was Marian Effie Sulzberger, one of Wise’s great-granddaughters.¹²⁸

Even as Temple Emanu-El’s congregation settled into its new Fifth Avenue building, it began to develop plans for a new hall honoring Wise—plans led and supported by his son-in-law, Ochs.¹²⁹ Dedication ceremonies were set for 29 March 1930, marking the 111th anniversary

125 Lewi, *Wise and Emanu-El*, 90–91.

126 *Ibid.*, 92.

127 “Temple Emanu-El Dedicated to Faith,” *New York Times* (5 October 1929): 24.

128 “2,500 at Dedication of Temple Emanu-El,” *New York Times* (11 January 1930): 23. Marian Effie Sulzberger married the future *Times* publisher Orvil Dryfoos in 1941 and became a director of the *Times* in 1963.

129 Rich, “Adolph S. Ochs,” 51.

of the rabbi's birth. In advance of that date, Ochs agreed with Lewi to finance a publication recording the historic links between Emanu-El and Wise. Lewi accepted the assignment enthusiastically; he saw it as an opportunity to review Wise's relationship with the synagogue, to record the life story of the rabbi, and also to call attention to Wise's first wife, Therese, whom Lewi believed had been ignored in the annals of the Wise family.¹³⁰ But in November 1929, Ochs, believing that Lewi's ambitious biographical plans had gone far beyond anything the publisher had anticipated, commented, "I should prefer that all the family feature of it and the biographical part be omitted, except perhaps a brief sketch of Dr. Wise."¹³¹ By February, as the dedication of the Wise Memorial Hall approached, Ochs determined to wash his hands of the entire project. "I have decided," he explained to Lewi, "that it is too voluminous and would entail a needless expenditure of money—though I appreciate the fact that a great deal of time and money have already been spent on it."¹³² "Lewi responded angrily to Ochs, "[Y]ou have made a scrap of my work," adding, "what you gave me to believe would develop into a thing worthwhile, a bit of sunshine as the snow of age which surrounds me, was only a dream from which you have awakened me, a sadder and a less hopeful man."¹³³ In the end, Lewi bound and distributed fifteen galleys of his book, *Isaac Mayer Wise and Emanu-El*, to a short list of libraries and individuals (with three copies assigned to Ochs).¹³⁴

130 Letter from Isidor Lewi to Adolph S. Ochs, 10 November 1929, Box 20, 20–21, New York Times Company records, Adolph S. Ochs papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.

131 Letter from Adolph Ochs to Isidor Lewi, 11 November 1929, Box 20, 20–21, New York Times Company records, Adolph S. Ochs papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.

132 Letter from Adolph Ochs to Isidor Lewi, 7 February 1930, Box 20, 20–21, New York Times Company records, Adolph S. Ochs papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.

133 Letter from Isidor Lewi to Adolph Ochs, 30 February 1930, Box 20, 20–21, New York Times Company records, Adolph S. Ochs papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.

134 The copy donated to the New York Public Library enclosed a card bearing the photograph and signature of Isidor Lewi (in his distinctive green ink), along with the following

At the same time as Lewi was writing his memorial volume in late 1929, he was tending to his ailing wife, Emita. “My every spare hour,” he wrote to Ochs, “is spent at home because of Mrs. Lewi’s illness.” Emita died on 23 January 1931; the funeral service was conducted at Temple Emanu-El by its rabbi, Nathan Krass, and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, whose brother, Joseph H. Wise, was married to one of Emita’s daughters. Wise read to the mourners instructions written by Emita shortly before her death: “I want no eulogy delivered. If my life cannot speak for me, I do not desire any praise.”¹³⁵ In her will, Emita left her wedding ring and household possessions to Lewi, but the wealth she inherited from her first husband, Lewis May, was transferred to her surviving children. She did set aside a bank account for Lewi’s benefit, but the informal bequest was successfully challenged by Emita’s legal heirs.¹³⁶ As a result, Lewi was left impoverished and forced to plead with Ochs for “a job of any kind.”¹³⁷ In August 1933 he received an eviction notice from the Upper East Side hotel where he had lived for years with Emita,¹³⁸ and he wrote to Ochs for support, noting that he was moving to a less-expensive boarding house.¹³⁹ Ochs quickly replied that he had

statement: “Blessed with the companionship of a noble wife, good health, friends of the real type—ideals, love for the beautiful and appreciation of all that makes for the betterment of the world unshattered—with abiding faith in my fellow-men and in the triumph of righteousness, I look back upon four-score yesteryears, grateful to a beneficent [*sic*] God, contented with the present and hopeful of the future.” In his history of Temple Emanu-El, Rabbi Ronald Sobel noted, “Lewi’s book is rare and, consequently, difficult to obtain.” See Ronald B. Sobel, *A History of New York’s Temple Emanu-El: The Second Half Century*, 21.

135 “Many at Funeral of Mrs. Isidor Lewi,” *New York Times* (26 January 1931): 15.

136 Letter from Isidor Lewi to Adolph Ochs, 28 August 1933, Box 20, 20–21, New York Times Company records, Adolph S. Ochs papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.

137 Note from Isidor Lewi to Adolph S. Ochs, n.d., Box 20, 20–21, New York Times Company records, Adolph S. Ochs papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.

138 Hotel Croydon Inter-Office Correspondence, 8 August 1933, Box 20, 20–21, New York Times Company records, Adolph S. Ochs papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.

139 Letter from Isidor Lewi to Adolph S. Ochs, 16 August 1933, Box 20, 20–21, New York Times Company records, Adolph S. Ochs papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.

thought the May family was paying Lewi's rent and providing him with an allowance, and outlined plans to contact Lewi's friends and family to establish a pension fund, adding "It is no disgrace, and need not be humiliating, that, having reached the age of eighty-four, having no means of support, and unable to secure employment, you allow your friends and those interested in your well-being to aid in creating such a fund."¹⁴⁰ Lewi declined the offer, concerned that it would suggest that Emita had failed to provide for him. Eventually a monthly pension was established for Lewi with modest contributions from Emita's daughters, Lewi's family, his lifelong Albany friend Simon Rosendale, and Ochs. The amount was sufficient to allow him to return to his longtime residence on East 86th Street.

Lewi, now in his ninth decade, continued his work, persistently describing himself as a "newspaperman" or, in one biographical sketch, "editorial writer (emeritus)."¹⁴¹ In early February 1932, a visiting journalist had described him as "a newspaper man, who at eighty-two, declares that he is 'still in the game and expects to furnish copy until he feels old.'"¹⁴²

Lewi's friend and Isaac Mayer Wise's eldest son, Leo Wise, had been editor and publisher of *The American Israelite* for thirty years before retiring in 1928. He, too, seemed compelled to continue chronicling stories in his retirement. Three years before Wise died, he and Lewi were vacationing together when Wise, who had been ill, took a turn for the worse:

For two days his life was despaired of, and when signs of improvement came, when the hand of death had not yet relaxed its hold, he sat in his bed and told me and his faithful valet the story of a man who, in an ocean liner, had once asked him whether all Americans advertise their

140 Letter from Adolph Ochs to Isidor Lewi, 18 August 1933, Box 20, 20–21, New York Times Company records, Adolph S. Ochs papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.

141 John Simons, ed., *Who's Who in American Jewry 1938–1939* (New York: National News Association, 1 January 1939), 648.

142 "Reporter Recalls Lincoln Campaign," *New York Evening Post* (12 February 1932): 2.

religious faith on their visiting cards, because Leo Wise's card bore the words "American Israelite" in the lower left corner.¹⁴³

Leo Wise died in Cincinnati on 27 January 1933. In 1933 Lewi penned a wistful epitaph for "his oldest friend," just seven months older than Lewi:

Born in the same house in Albany, at about the same time, of parents whose close friendship antedated our coming by many years, we were companions in youth, shared joys and sorrows, and through the many years that followed were so closely bound that we could, and did, disagree at many times without impairing the relationship.¹⁴⁴

The Final Years

Isidor Lewi had witnessed firsthand wars and conflicts from his earliest years, and now, as the 1930s advanced, he began to detect the grim signs in Germany that would lead to World War II. In May 1933, the Nazi Interior Minister Wilhelm Frick, at a conference of German state government ministers, had spoken of the nation's language, "whose purity," he declared, "is not always cared for as much as possible. Even government offices employ superfluous Fremdwörter [foreign words]," he continued, "which plainly endanger the comprehension of language among wide sections of the people."¹⁴⁵ *The New York*

143 Ibid.

144 Isidor Lewi, "A Tribute to Leo Wise. A Lifetime Friend Recalls the Editor's Personality," *New York Times* (30 January 1933): 12. In a letter to Leo's brother, Isidor Wise, four years earlier, Lewi wrote much the same after being advised of Leo's illness: "Sorry, beyond power of expression to hear about Leo—Be sure and remember me to him and say that—it seems strange not to consult him at a time when Israelite copy is required. Of course, I know that no one could do better than you, but I want Leo to know that I am thinking of him. And why should I not? He is my oldest friend and our friendship has been of a nature so real that we remain friends though each has told the other, many times truths which would have destroyed superficial friendship." Letter from Isidor Lewi to Isidor Wise, 27 September 1929, Isidor Lewi Correspondence, SC-7156, AJA. Wise, writer and associate editor of *The American Israelite*, died on 15 November 1929, less than two months after receiving Lewi's note.

145 Thomas Y. Levin, "Nationalities of Language: Adorno's Fremdwörter; An Introduction to 'On the Question: What is German?'" *New German Critique* 36 (1985): 118–119, fn12.

Tribune's successor newspaper, the *New York Herald Tribune*, to which Lewi remained closely attuned, commented, "It is not surprising to learn that the Nazis have finally got around to the 'purification' of the German language. Aggressive nationalism is always resentful of the fluid and ever-changing character of human speech."¹⁴⁶ Lewi quickly replied in a letter:

The Herald Tribune's editorial "The German Language Undefined," correctly forecasts the futility of the Hitler plan to ban all un-German from the German language. The various edicts, laws and strongarm methods aimed by Hitler toward the creation of a 100 per cent German Germany have been novelties, but expunging from its lexicon words not strictly German was a fantastic experiment many years ago under the leadership of men of high standing in the German literary world. The pulpit, press, schools and army were enlisted in the fight against Fremdwort, but to no appreciable effect.¹⁴⁷

A few weeks later, in another letter to the *Herald Tribune*, Lewi returned to the Nazis' language policy, but now with a broader concern: the burning of books.

When the works of Auerbach, Lessing, Heine, Kompert, Mendelssohn, Mosenthal, Hartmann, Einstein and others were burned amid jeers and the singing of hymns of hate, the German in them was not questioned, but the writers were of the people whence came the Decalogue and the Psalms, who preach peace on earth, whose goal is human brotherhood.¹⁴⁸

On 11 April 1936, in a dispatch from its correspondent in Berlin, the *Herald Tribune* reported that the German poet and playwright Goethe

is ruled out completely from a new reader for elementary schools which is to be made a compulsory textbook in Germany after Easter, but positions of distinction in it have been accorded to Chancellor Adolf Hitler,

146 "The German Language Undefined," *New York Herald Tribune* (1 July 1933): 8.

147 Isidor Lewi, "Tenacious Fremdwort," *New York Herald Tribune* (4 July 1933): 8.

148 Isidor Lewi, "'Pure German' Language," *New York Herald Tribune* (6 August 1933): A6.

Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment, and General Hermann Wilhelm Goering, Prussian Premier and German Minister for Air.¹⁴⁹

Immediately taking pen to hand, Lewi sent a letter to the newspaper, asking, “But why the Goethe ban? He was not a Jew—as yet he has not been openly denounced as one.”¹⁵⁰ Months later, the same newspaper reported the Nazis’ destruction of a statue of composer Felix Mendelssohn that had stood in front of Leipzig’s Gewandhaus concert hall, where Mendelssohn had once served as the orchestra’s music director.¹⁵¹ The *Herald Tribune* commented editorially that the destruction of the statue “is one of the most pitifully small-minded things that the Hitler regime has done to make ‘aryanism’ contemptible in the sight of the civilized world,”¹⁵² to which Lewi responded:

When the works of Moritz Hartmann, Leopold Kompert, Mendelssohn, Mosenthal, Einstein and others, with Lessing and Heine thrown in for good measure, were taken from the public library and from off the shelves in private residences and burned publicly in Munich, amid jeers and songs of hate, the civilized world witnessed an act of vandalism the recollection of which makes the destruction of the Mendelssohn monument a natural sequence. And one wonders what next.¹⁵³

Lewi had lived his days acutely aware of his cultural and religious heritage, and was committed to the ideals and principles he had inherited and had learned as a child. In 1937, his friend, Albany native, lawyer, and politician Simon Rosendale, died at the age of 94. He was, Lewi wrote, “above all a Jew. If the chronicle of his earthly journey were to

149 Ralph W. Barnes, “Reader Drops Goethe Poems,” *New York Herald Tribune* (11 April 1936): 1.

150 Isidor Lewi, “Goethe Banned at Easter,” *New York Herald Tribune* (19 April 1936) A7.

151 “Raze Mendelssohn’s Statue Because He Was a Jew,” *New York Herald Tribune* (15 November 1936): 1.

152 “Where Laughter is Treason,” *New York Herald Tribune* (16 November 1936): 14.

153 Isidor Lewi, “The Mendelssohn Statue,” *New York Herald Tribune* (22 November 1936): A15.

be preserved, it would have been his wish—those [who] knew him best think—that his name be counted among those who, by precept and example, added lust[er] to American Judaism.”¹⁵⁴ The same might have been said of Lewi. Deeply influenced by Isaac M. Wise, he maintained throughout his life a commitment to an “Americanized” Judaism and opposition to a Jewish homeland. At the same time, he appeared at least on good terms with one of the leading Reform Zionists of his time, Gustav Gottheil, the rabbi of Temple Emanu-El who volunteered his Upper East Side home for Lewi’s secretive marriage to Emita in May 1902.¹⁵⁵

Months after Lewi questioned “what next?” in his troubled letter to the *Herald Tribune* and as Hitler’s grip on Germany and elsewhere continued to tighten, American Reform rabbis met in Columbus, Ohio, and produced a new statement of principles on 27 May 1937.¹⁵⁶ Among other things, The Columbus Platform, as it became known, reversed the anti-Zionist posture long held by Reform Judaism, by

154 Isidor Lewi, “Simon W. Rosendale,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 35 (1939): 321. In a 1929 letter to Isidor Wise, Lewi provided further details of his close ties to Rosendale: “Simon Rosendale is my dear friend. He was dear to my parents and when my sister Minna and brother [-in-law Herman Bendell] celebrated their Golden wedding, Simon who was present when your father tied the matrimonial knot, was the only person present who was not a member of the Lewi family. Twelve of the fourteen Lewi children sat at the board and Simon spoke feelingly of the unique gathering and of his unbroken friendship through four generations.” Isidor Lewi Correspondence, SC-7156, AJA.

155 Rabbi Gottheil also presided over Emita’s 1880 wedding to Lewis May, so Lewi’s relationship with Gottheil may well have been based on Emita’s decades-old links with the rabbi. In 1893, Lewi included Gottheil among the “Notable Jews” he profiled, writing, “From the time of his coming to America till the present day Dr. Gottheil, by virtue of the high standing of his congregation, and because of his liberality and his acknowledged scholarship has occupied a high position in New York.” Isidor Lewi, “Notable Jews—IV. Dr. Gustav Gottheil,” *Frank Leslie’s Weekly* (9 February 1893): 87. As historian Jonathan D. Sarna notes, Gottheil outlined a clearly anti-Zionist position in a speech the same year Lewi published his profile, 1893, but changed his mind four years later “and became vice-president of the Federation of American Zionists as well as a staunch supporter of Theodor Herzl.” See Sarna, “Converts to Zionism,” 188.

156 “Rabbis in Conference Back ‘Labor’s Rights,’” *New York Times* (28 May 1937): 13.

Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, and by his close disciples. The Columbus Platform declared:

In the rehabilitation of Palestine, the land hallowed by memories and hopes, we behold the promise of renewed life for many of our brethren. We affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its upbuilding as a Jewish homeland by endeavoring to make it not only a haven of refuge for the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life.¹⁵⁷

As historian Jonathan D. Sarna notes, a group of Reform rabbis and laymen organized a “hugely controversial” anti-Zionist organization, the American Council for Judaism, in 1942. But by then, Sarna adds, “Reform Judaism had successfully reinvented itself, accommodating Zionism, a commitment to Jewish peoplehood, and many traditional customs and ceremonies as well.”¹⁵⁸

In the final days of 1938 and of what would be his life, Lewi received a note from Islay F. McCormick, the headmaster of the Albany Academy from which Lewi had graduated decades earlier. “Are you having a pleasant winter?” asked McCormick, to which the eighty-eight-year-old answered in the affirmative. “When one reaches my age, which is the deep Winter of Life,” he wrote, “the sunshine, the devotion of friends, the faith in God’s inscrutable wisdom; having ideals, love of the beautiful and belief in the triumph of righteousness unshattered—make the journey to the setting sun pleasant.”¹⁵⁹ In the last week of December 1938, Lewi set out for home after a visit with friends. A bitter wind swept the city, ushering in frigid weather after hours of seasonally mild temperatures. As Lewi struggled toward his home in the Hotel Croydon on East 86th Street he lost his footing, fell, and fractured his femur. He was taken to the Hospital for Joint Diseases [originally the Jewish Hospital for Deformities and Joint

157 “The Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism, ‘The Columbus Platform—1937,’” Central Conference of Reform Judaism, <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-guiding-principles-reform-judaism/> (accessed 8 February 2021).

158 Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 254.

159 “Lewi’s Last Letter,” *Albany Times Union* (26 February 1939): A11.

Diseases] on Madison Avenue in nearby Harlem. He remained there for two days and, according to reports, was “sufficiently improved” to return home to see in the new year. Despite his quick recovery, pneumonia set in, and just after midnight on 3 January 1939, Lewi died. The *Herald Tribune* marked his passing with a lengthy obituary, noting that following his reporting from Frankfurt at the outbreak of World War I, Lewi, in his late sixties, “then decided to come home himself, and retired from active newspaper work. He continued to contribute to the paper, though his articles became more and more infrequent. He never severed his connection with the staff nor gave up his mailbox in the editorial rooms.”¹⁶⁰ At the funeral service, Rabbi Samuel H. Goldenson of Temple Emanuel-El commented that Lewi “presented a kind of paradox. He was frail of body, short of stature and yet one could not be with him five minutes without realizing that there was a robust spirit dwelling within him and a majesty of soul. He had courage and strength and never yielded to the temptations of inactivity and despondency.”¹⁶¹ In his handwritten will, Lewi had requested the “funeral to be simple as possible. Burial, next to my wife.” He left his possessions to Emita’s daughters, Fanny Schafer and Josephine Wise, citing their “daughterly and never-failing devotion.”¹⁶² His estate consisted of \$162 in cash and possessions valued at \$93.¹⁶³

Lewi’s death was the closing scene for a man who was both on the stage of history as a player and in the audience as a witness to the events and personalities that shaped nearly nine decades and spanned two centuries. According to one account, he “saw” all the U.S. presidents from Lincoln to Franklin D. Roosevelt, with the exception

160 “Isidor Lewi, 88, Dies, Veteran of Tribune Staff; Reporter, Correspondent, Editorial Writer Active on Paper Many Years,” *New York Herald Tribune* (3 January 1939): 12.

161 “Services for Isidor Lewi, Veteran Journalist, Held,” *New York Herald Tribune* (6 January 1939): 14.

162 Last Will and Testament of Isidor Lewi, 7 October 1938; New York. Surrogate’s Court (New York County); New York, New York.

163 *Ibid.*

of Warren G. Harding.¹⁶⁴ Yet the essential focus of his life was the Judaism of his ancestors and of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, particularly Wise's intense support of an American Judaism and his intense opposition to the creation of a Jewish state. The attitude of Reform Judaism toward Zionism evolved during Lewi's lifetime, from the stern opposition typified in Wise's reaction to the declaration of the First Zionist Congress in 1897 to the Columbus Platform of 1937. However, among Wise's closest disciples, Lewi was not among the converts to Zionism, as they became known, and his attitude, like that of Wise, remained unchanged to the end, even as he worriedly assessed the antisemitic eruptions of Hitler's Germany. While never among the "Uptown" Jewish elite of German heritage, Lewi was closely associated with many of them, from banker Lewis May, the long-time president of Temple Emanu-El (whose widow Lewi married) to attorney Louis Marshall, who also served as president of Temple Emanu-El and came to see Zionism as a movement "of tremendous importance, worthy of serious, patient and sympathetic study and investigation."¹⁶⁵ Unmoved by such changing attitudes, Lewi's contribution lay otherwise: In Albany, Cincinnati, New York City, and many other locales, he had chronicled his first-hand observations of history and especially the history of Reform Judaism in the making. They remain a legacy of continuing worth.

164 "Isidor Lewi Dead; Long A Journalist," *New York Times* (3 January 1939): 17. Other widely published obituary claims ("wrote press notices for Mark Twain and for General Lew Wallace") are unproven. Lewi's only available link to Wallace is his 1887 letter to the author [see fn 47]; his only available link to Twain is a scrap of paper signed by Twain on 6 March 1906, inscribed to Isidor Lewi along with an aphorism from Twain's 1897 travelogue, *Following the Equator*: "Truth is the most valuable thing we have. Let us economise it." "SLC to Isidor Lewis [*sic*]," 6 March 1906, New York, NY, *Union Catalog of Clemens Letters*, ed. Paul Machlis (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 11645.

165 Louis Marshall, "Letters from People," *American Israelite* (5 September 1907): 7.

Lawrence S. Freund, a graduate of Queens College (City University of New York) and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, is a former news correspondent and editor. He has written extensively on the American Civil War among other subjects.