HENRY MONSKY

1890–1947

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By Henry W. Levy

I

HENRY MONSKY, who died suddenly on May 2, 1947, at the age of fifty-seven, was representative of the new leadership in American Jewry. Born in the Middle West of a family of an east European Orthodox background, he assumed a place of leadership in an American Jewish life that formerly had been directed chiefly from the eastern seaboard. That Monsky was a westerner, and of non-Germanic background, are points of significance in any attempt to understand the man and his works.

As the leader of B'nai B'rith, a fraternal and service organization which describes itself as a cross section of American Jewry and which is the nearest thing in Jewish life to Rotary and Kiwanis, Henry Monsky became the symbol and the leader of middle-class American Jewry. He was deeply American, but no less deeply Jewish. An independent Republican, and as an attorney, a counsellor for private enterprise, he was a devoted adherent of the principles of social justice that are a part of the tradition of prophetic Jewry. A lifelong Zionist, his Zionism was not of one party, nor fanatical. Though opposed to the concepts of assimilation in American Jewish life, he recognized the need for integration of American Jewry and was one of the staunchest supporters of the program of democratic action espoused by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and other Jewish defense agencies.

With Henry Monsky's death, there passed from the American Jewish scene one who was unswerving in his ideology yet a great compromiser in methods to attain those ideological objectives. In all of the many aspects of his Jewish organizational life, Monsky was to be found somewhere in the center. An ardent exponent of unity in Jewish life, he was able to

maintain close relationships with upholders of divergent views in the councils of the National Community Relations Advisory Council and the American Jewish Conference.

II

Henry Monsky was born in Omaha, Nebraska, on February 4, 1890, the son of Abraham Monsky, an Orthodox cantor who had immigrated to the United States from Lithuania in the early years of the previous decade. Thus Monsky was born two years after the beginning of the so-called third era of American Jewish immigration which originated in eastern Europe. Unlike so many of the two million east European Jews who were to come to the United States between 1888 and 1921, however, the Monsky family had bypassed New York and settled some two thousand miles away, in Nebraska.

There already was a Jewish community in Omaha—a Reform temple, Temple Israel, having been organized in 1870—but this Nebraska community still possessed some of the aspects of a frontier town when Henry Monsky was born. He had a typical American Midwestern boyhood, except that along with his public school education he went to *cheder*. A brilliant student in both high school and college, Monsky received his Bachelor of Laws degree from Creighton University, Omaha's Jesuit school, in 1912.

A year earlier Henry Monsky had joined the Omaha lodge of B'nai B'rith. His rise to leadership within the organization was rapid. In 1913, at the age of twenty-three, he became president of his lodge. Soon he entered the council of leaders of District No. 6 and in 1921 was elected district president. When a vacancy occurred on B'nai B'rith's National Executive Committee in 1923, Monsky was chosen to represent District 6. In 1938, he became president of the Supreme Lodge, marking the beginning of a vital period in the development of the order.

By the time of Monsky's death, the membership included over 200,000 men in 812 lodges, 95,000 women in 466 chapters and 30,000 young people in 1,200 youth units in the United States, Canada, England, Australia, China, France and Palestine. The order's Anti-Defamation League, one of the leading Jewish defense agencies, had 17 offices in com-

munities throughout the United States; its Hillel Foundation Commission had grown to 66 full-time groups and 111 counselorships on college campuses in the United States and Canada.

Monsky brought to B'nai B'rith the Midwestern concept of the service organization, of Rotary and Kiwanis, and continued the conversion of what formerly had been mainly a fraternal order into a Jewish service organization. In this area, his greatest opportunity came with the outbreak of World War II and his appointment of a B'nai B'rith National War Service Committee, of which he was chairman. Its service on behalf of camps and ships won citations from the War and Navy Departments.

At the end of the war, Monsky merged the service activities of B'nai B'rith with its Americanism Commission and launched a many-sided program that featured work in the prevention of child delinquency. In this effort Monsky cooperated with United States Attorney General Tom C. Clark and was elected chairman of the Executive Committee of the National Conference for the Prevention and Control of Juvenile Delinquency.

A major part of the works of Henry Monsky was his devotion to B'nai B'rith, with which he was associated for thirty-six of his fifty-seven years. Another significant aspect of his life, however, was the part he played in the organization and growth of the American Jewish Conference. The Conference was born of a letter he sent in January, 1943, after intensive negotiations with the heads of the thirty-five largest Jewish national membership organizations in the country. At the first meeting, in June, Monsky was elected one of the three co-chairmen of the interim committee; in 1946, at the Conference's third session, he was named chairman. In addition, in June, 1945, he had been chosen by the Conference as its consultant to the American delegation at the United Nations deliberations in San Francisco.

Although Monsky had originally convened the American Jewish Conference as a temporary organization, designed particularly to develop a measure of unity among American Jewry in its approach to the peace conferences of World War II, he later agreed to submit a plan for a permanent

Conference. In fact, he was arguing for such a Conference at the meeting of the Interim Committee when he was fatally stricken on May 2, 1947. On that day the committee approved a plan for a permanent Conference. Though not written by Monsky, the proposal bore his imprint. The plan did not envision an all-encompassing, highly disciplined Jewish organization which would have the attributes of a modern *Kehilla.* Its authority is limited to one area — representing American Jewry in the councils of the nations of the world. In American affairs, the Conference is to be a central clearing house through which the various Jewish organizations can report to the American Jewish public. On Zionism, the Conference's sole activity will be cooperating with accredited Zionist agencies.

This plan did not satisfy the extremists within the Conference who sought an all-embracing organization. But neither did it completely alienate the non-nationalist-minded Jews who opposed the creation of anything that resembled a government within a government. Thus the plan exemplified the Monsky approach to a problem. It was the approach of the lawyer who knows the limitations imposed upon him and who seeks to win his case under the rules set down for him. Henry Monsky was a statesman who knew well the limits of possible achievement.

A devoted Zionist, Monsky adopted the same realistic approach to the many problems concerning Palestine. Maurice Bisgyer, national secretary of B'nai B'rith and his close associate for many years, said that Monsky never compromised his Zionism in all the years he knew him. At the same time, Monsky never sought to impose his personal Zionism on the B'nai B'rith, nor did he ever show disrespect for the non-Zionist views held by others.

As an individual, however, and in his capacity as chairman of the American Jewish Conference, Monsky time and again expressed his belief in political Zionism. Speaking in behalf of the Conference at the hearings of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine in January, 1946, he said

> I would consider it unfortunate, gentlemen, if your consideration of the problems which have been referred to you should be limited to the matter of finding a haven or

a sanctuary for Jewish refugees, although I do not minimize in the slightest the vital necessity for immediate action in that regard. Any ultimate recommendations based upon such a limited perspective, however, would be only a temporary expedient and would contribute little to the solution of the status of the Jewish people. Your recommendations, we fervently hope, therefore, will be based upon the long-range point of view and we hope that you will, after the many years of vacillating and changing attitudes with respect to this vital problem, concern yourselves with the restoration of the Jewish people to status and security in a national Jewish homeland, as was intended by His Majesty's Government when the Balfour Declaration was issued.

In collaborating with other Jewish defense agencies in the National Community Relations Advisory Council, Henry Monsky continually adhered to his practical approach. Unity in defense agencies, the dream of a single agency, has long been hoped for, but in the councils of the NCRAC Monsky always defended the viewpoint that varying ideological differences in American Jewry made it impossible to create one defense agency. He argued that the different agencies complemented one another and that the highest state of efficiency in defense work could be achieved not by unification but by co-ordination.

III

In his home city of Omaha, Monsky was known as a brilliant and successful lawyer and a social-minded citizen who was a leader in local communal affairs as well as in national Jewish life. In 1922, he was one of the founders of Omaha's Community Chest, an organization in which he held board membership continuously and on which he served first as vice-president and later as president. He was an active collaborator with Father Flanagan in the development of Boy's Town, and it is generally believed that the Jewish friend of Father Flanagan depicted in the motion picture *Boys' Town* honored Monsky's close collaboration with the priest. Monsky also was a director of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce,

president of the Nebraska Conference of Social Work, president of the Omaha Council of Boy Scouts and a member of the Omaha Welfare Fund.

Personally, Henry Monsky was a very friendly man, in the Midwestern tradition. He maintained the quiet dignity and respect that is a component of leadership but very few people called him "Mr. Monsky." He was "Henry" to all his associates, whether they were professional staff members or fellow lay workers.

In religion, Monsky was a Reform Jew, but he always maintained membership affiliation with the Omaha Orthodox Congregation. His funeral services in Omaha, which were held at Temple Israel on May 7, 1947, were conducted jointly by Reform and Orthodox rabbis.

Henry Monsky's philosophy of Jewish life is best described in his statement on being awarded an honorary degree at Dropsie College, in Philadelphia, in 1942. Declaring that it is the responsibility of contemporary American Jewry to pass on to its descendants the Jewish heritage and to continue Israel's contribution to the betterment of humanity, he said

> Judaism is something more than philanthropy and social service. It is a civilization many-faceted, rich and profound in its diversity. Down through the centuries of our history and throughout our literature, in the Talmud, in the Midrash and in other great Jewish classics, we find emphasis on Jewish education as a vital, life-giving force, and as a primary philosophy of Jewish life. . . . .
> There are those among our people who feel it is a liability to be a Jew. This does not occur to the Jew who has had an adequate Jewish background. The glories of his people, the luster of their history, the magnificent values which constitute the essence of his religion, the recognized fountainhead of all religions of modern civilization, condition him to avert such self-hatred and self-pity. He can understand why the martyrs in Israel's history died for their ideals. Their pride of ancestry gave them courage to accept and endure the most extraordinary punishment. Their thorough appreciation of their history was a sustaining force against shock and against confusion. It constituted a basis for the rebuilding of dignity and self-respect.