

## SIMON WOLF

By

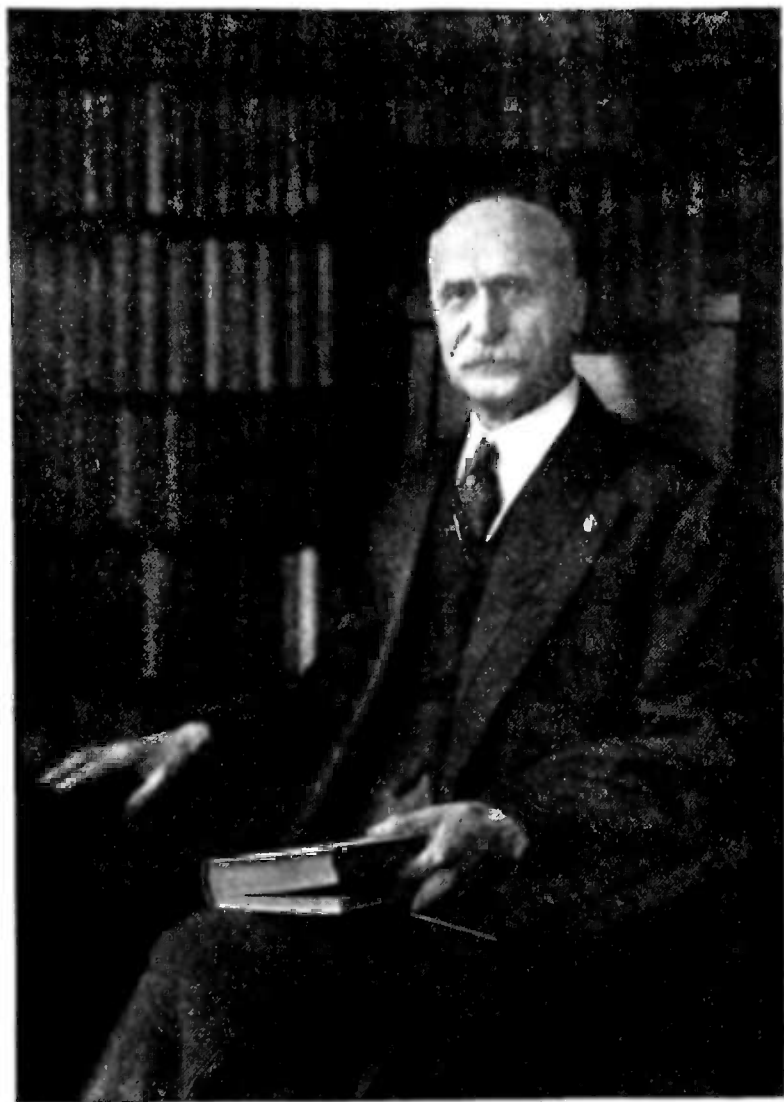
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Simon Wolf, who went to his eternal reward on June 4th, 1923 in his 87th year, was often aptly described as "Ambassador of the Jews of the United States to Washington," so completely did he identify himself with the protection of the rights of his co-religionists at our national capital for over sixty years. Justice Wendell Phillips Stafford a distinguished Washingtonian, familiar at close range with his activities, said of him in the "Foreword" to his "The Presidents I Have Known from 1860 to 1918": "becoming in his own way the typical man of his race in this country, he has been nothing more truly or more completely than this—a fearless, honest, uncompromising defender of free principles, a loyal and patriotic American." A well-informed Chicago Jewish journalist, Herman Eliassof, in an elaborate study of "German-American Jews," contributed to the *Year Book* of the German American Historical Society of Illinois for 1914, linked his name with Jacob H. Schiff and Oscar S. Straus as the three most prominent Jewish leaders in the United States at that time, (pp. 385-6) and there is no justification for deleting his name from such a group, whatever disposition there may be to augment it. He achieved distinction in such varied fields as those of the philanthropist, the publicist, the historian, the communal worker, the orator, and the statesman.

A concise account of Simon Wolf's personal career may conveniently begin at the threshold. Born in Hinzweiler, Rheinisch-Bavaria, Germany, on October 28th, 1836, he accompanied his grandparents to the United States in the memorable year 1848, and was, indeed, a "48er" in his love for democratic and liberal government, devotion to country and high ideals. His father, Levi Wolf (1811-1893), long an invalid, was a teacher of Hebrew, and it was doubtless from him that the young lad acquired his fondness for learning, devotion to the Jewish faith, and the unquenchable love for literature and the arts, which never left him, finding expression in familiarity with the classics of various tongues and keeping him abreast of the latest works of history, fiction and Jewish lore to his last day. But it was to his devoted mother, Amalia Ulman, that he was particularly fond of expressing his indebtedness—to quote the dedication of his "Presidents"—for the "inspiring optimism and constant teaching of the Golden Rule (which) gave impulse and direction to my course of life." His grandfather, Benjamin Wolf, settled in Cleveland, and it was there and, soon afterwards, in Uhrichsville, Ohio, that the young boy acquired the rudiments of an English education, soon followed by service as salesman and book-keeper in the store of his uncles, Abraham and Elias Wolf. His love for professional life and learning however, induced him in 1859, to read law in the office of Judge Yancey of New Philadelphia, and to attend the Cleveland Law School from which he was graduated with honors; he was admitted to the Ohio bar on July 19th, 1861, on the day the battle of Bull Run was fought. Defective eye-sight caused his rejection when he volunteered to serve his country on the

battle-field, and, after practising law in Ohio, and marrying Caroline Hahn of Suffield, Ohio, in 1857, he moved to Washington, D. C. in June 1862. An interesting document lies before me, dated Cleveland, August 7th, 1861, signed by a committee of three, headed by Benjamin F. Peixotto, expressing regrets on behalf of the local Young Men's Hebrew Literary Society, at Simon Wolf's departure from Cleveland at the close of his law course, as he had then already actively identified himself with the political and Jewish religious interests of the place of his sojourn. In fact, even earlier he had been prominent in political affairs, had identified himself with the northern or Douglas wing of the Democratic party, and had served as alternate at the Charleston and Baltimore Democratic national convention of 1860. Shortly after he became an active Republican by reason of developments of the slavery and union questions.

While practising law in Washington, he soon became representative at the capital of important Jewish national organizations, particularly of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites (merged in 1878 with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations) and of the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith, and it was chiefly to communal interests that he devoted his time unceasingly and unstintingly in Washington for many decades. His masterly oratory was requisitioned in every national political campaign from 1868 to 1900, and during a still larger span of years he served as a member of the Presidential inaugural exercises committees. In 1869 President Grant appointed him Recorder for the District of Columbia, which post he held until 1878. In July 1881 President Garfield selected him to be Consul General to Egypt, a more important



SIMON WOLF



American diplomatic post than any theretofore held by a professing Jew, but he resigned the office about a year later owing to illness in his family. For his co-religionists in Egypt his appointment seemed to be a revival of the days of Joseph. Previous to his Egyptian mission, he had been appointed a Justice in the District of Columbia, and for many years he served as a member of the Boards of Charities and of Education of the District. But while his public services indicate governmental recognition of his invaluable activities, his claim to fame rests upon his untiring efforts as a private citizen in the ranks.

Simon Wolf placed on record his faith in President Buchanan's loyalty and desire to serve his country according to his lights, and mentions the interesting circumstance that when he expressed to Buchanan his and his friend Henry Greenebaum's appreciation of his services, the President facetiously remarked: "That is a good setoff for Judah P. Benjamin," whose conspicuous devotion to the slavery cause often led to erroneous references to "Israelites with Egyptian principles." Typical of Wolf's services during the Civil War is his narrative of an interview he succeeded in securing about two o'clock one morning with President Lincoln, to obtain a pardon for a young Jewish soldier, awaiting immediate execution as a deserter, this sentence having resulted from his desire to heed his dying mother's request to receive her last message in person. As in many other cases, Lincoln disregarded Secretary Stanton's wishes, pardoned the young man, and lived to learn of his being subsequently shot to death, fighting for his country, at the battle of Cold Harbor. Simon Wolf was active in causing General Butler to modify

his offensive reference to Jews in an official war despatch, and was one of a group to persuade President Lincoln to rescind Gen. Grant's famous "Order No. 11" of 1862, excluding Jewish civilians as a class from the army lines, and in giving publicity to Grant's own explanation that he had had no personal participation in the issuance of the order. In November 1864, he published in the *New York Evening Post* a widely reprinted conclusive "Defence of the Jewish Race" against unjustified criticisms born of prejudice, which sought improperly to identify the Jews with the Confederate cause. Scarcely less pronounced was Simon Wolf's continuing defence, for decades, of the patriotic Americans of German Christian origin, whom also he represented at the capital for many years.

With President Grant, Simon Wolf's relations were particularly close. During the Presidential campaign which resulted in Grant's first election to the chief magistracy, Wolf took particular pains to clear away Jewish resentment at "Order No 11," having become convinced, after careful investigation, that no libel upon the Jewish race was intended. When in April, 1869, early in his administration, President Grant decided to appoint Simon Wolf recorder of the District of Columbia, the latter was at first disposed to decline an appointment which would take him away from his professional activities as a lawyer, but when he ascertained that confirmation of the appointment was being opposed because of his Jewish faith, he announced his desire to accept, fought the battle on this very issue, and, with the assistance of Hannibal Hamlin, John W. Patterson, Carl Schurz and John A. Bingham, secured unanimous confirmation.

It was during Grant's administration that the persecution of the Jews in Roumania became acute, and Simon Wolf was the leading advocate of the appointment of Benjamin F. Peixotto as United States Consul at Bucharest, with a particular view of devising plans to ameliorate their condition. On behalf of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites and of the Independent Order B'nai B'rith, Wolf toured the country several times, aroused interest in this question, and collected large sums of money in aid of Peixotto's undertaking. In the work entitled "Jewish Disabilities in the Balkan States," published by him and the present writer jointly in 1916, details of this important mission were published, including excerpts from contemporaneous reports rendered to him by Peixotto. During the same administration, largely through Wolf's influence, the Independent Order B'nai B'rith raised money for the presentation of Sir Moses Ezekiel's statue of "Religious Liberty" standing in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, in commemoration of the first centenary of the republic. One of the earliest separately published addresses of Simon Wolf that has come under notice was a memorial to Isaac Leeser, published in 1868, though the increasing demands on his oratorical gifts is evidenced by the publication in pamphlet form, already in 1863, of an address delivered before the Washington Literary and Dramatic Association. In the very year 1868 when his eulogy on Leeser was published, appeared a further address entitled "Random Thoughts" as delivered before the Washington lodge of the I. O. B. B. Probably no American Jew was called upon to use his oratorical powers for beneficent ends as frequently as or more widely than he.



Simon Wolf, all his life-time was a devoted Jew, and never begrudged either time or effort when he could serve the ancestral faith, or other worthy causes whose name was indeed legion, appealing to him. He served the Washington Jewish congregation repeatedly as president, and often preached from its pulpit, ably expounding the principles of Reform Judaism in consonance with his American patriotism. Thoroughly imbued with the value of organization and union, he was an early and untiring ally of Isaac M. Wise in founding and maintaining the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and was always active at its biennial conventions, sometimes as presiding officer. It was upon his motion that the Board of Delegates of American Israelites, in which he had long been active, was merged in 1878 with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and he was the untiring and indefatigable Chairman of the Board of Delegates on Civil Rights of that body for over thirty-three years, so that its history was virtually a narrative of Simon Wolf's public activities, as I had occasion to establish in a history of that body, published in 1923, its jubilee year. Its annual printed reports are a continuous narrative of his tireless, unremunerated and self-sacrificing activities on behalf of his co-religionists, day and night, knowing no cessation, in connection with every question that arose affecting their interests, particularly those of immigrants. No activity which concerned the welfare of American Jews, from 1870 to 1923, found him passive. If, in a rare instance, he was not directly appealed to by those immediately concerned, the Government itself would call him into council, so well-known were his devotion to Jewish interests, his good judgment, and his sterling American patriotism.

His activities on behalf of the Independent Order B'nai B'rith (which he joined in 1865) were scarcely less pronounced than those on behalf of the Board of Delegates, and many of his actions were taken in their joint behalf, as he was the Washington Resident Member of the Order for about 60 years, presided over its Grand Lodge Conventions in 1875 and 1879, served as president of his District for two terms and was president of the organization, as successor to Leo N. Levi, in 1904-5. Almost alone, he collected \$150,000 for the establishment of the Atlanta Hebrew Orphan Asylum, which he founded and of which he was president for over a quarter of a century, and he was also one of the founders of the Baltimore Orphan Asylum. Scarcely less conspicuous were his services to the Masons of the United States, to the Order Keshet Shel Barzel, to the Red Cross Association and to German and non-sectarian Washington charities.

Reference has been made to his service in securing the appointment of Peixotto to work for the amelioration of the condition of Roumanian Jews on behalf of our Government. Long after Peixotto had passed away, Simon Wolf worked day in and day out for the emancipation of the Roumanian Jew, and he was one of the small group that induced President Roosevelt to despatch the famous Hay note on Roumania, and ultimately to interest President Wilson in plans for protecting Jewish religious minorities in Roumania in the peace treaties signed at the close of the World War.

His services on behalf of the persecuted Jews of Russia were no less devoted and incessant. They began early in Grant's second administration, when he attended a

meeting of the Cabinet, called to devise measures to help the Jews of Bessarabia, whose expulsion from Russian territory was then imminent, Our Government, largely through his efforts, made repeated representations on behalf of the persecuted Russian Jews; these rendered temporary aid, but little fundamental change of attitude resulted. Sometimes the conditions was complicated by American Russophiles, like Eugene Schuyler, one time Secretary of the Legation at St. Petersburg, whose promotion to a more responsible post Wolf successfully opposed.

Almost from Grant's day on, one important phase of this question was Russia's discrimination against American citizens of the Jewish religion, whose passports Russia declined to honor, in breach of treaty faith, by reason of her own domestic racial and religious discriminations, and Simon Wolf's efforts to right this wrong, through appeals to President, State Department and congressional committees, were incessant. In 1903, when Léo N. Levi conceived the plan of having our Government submit the "Kishineff Massacre Petition" to Russia, Simon Wolf was one of the leading factors in inducing President Roosevelt to forward the petition, and it was to him that Secretary Hay, under date of June 24, 1903, wrote the formal official communication, asking for delivery of the petition for transmittal to Russia. Significant was President Roosevelt's introduction of Simon Wolf to Wm. H. Moody, his Secretary of the Navy, in a letter under date of June 19, 1904, in which he said: "Mr. Wolf is as good an American as can be found on this continent. . ." When, during president Taft's administration, Louis Marshall, Jacob H. Schiff and their associates in the American Jewish Committee

concluded that the abrogation of the dishonored Russian passport treaty was the only solution of that controversy, Simon Wolf was one of the conferees to whom the President turned for advice on February 15th, 1911. Simon Wolf's "Presidents I Have Known" gives the ablest extant report of the movement which culminated in this abrogation as also of the Kishineff Massacre Petition incident. The movement for the abrogation of the Russia Treaty had his loyal support. It should, moreover, be remembered that until the American Jewish Committee was formed in 1906, the Board of Delegates, under Simon Wolf's chairmanship, had for decades, been the only official body representing Jews of our country, with respect to protection of civil and religious rights, and his activities did not abate, when the new organization was formed.

Simon Wolf's services in championing the absolute separation of Church and State and opposing all infringements upon religious liberty were untiring. They embraced movements against governmental classification of Hebrews as such, the use of the Bible and sectarian instruction in the public schools, and discrimination against his co-religionists in public offices and institutions as well as all efforts to organize a "Jewish vote" on any civic issue. His complete identification with his beloved country, and his firm acceptance of Reform Judaism also made him a strong opponent of political Zionism, till his dying day. On the other hand, little appealed to him more than the need for religious education for American Jews and the promotion of congregational activities.

It is, however, as the champion and the devoted friend of the immigrant that Simon Wolf is likely to be best remem-

bered, and when a wide-scaled celebration of his 80th birthday took place in 1916, the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society tendered him a banquet in New York, devoting its December 1916 "Bulletin" entirely to an account of it. It was there calculated that he had been instrumental in preventing the deportation of no fewer than 103,000 Jewish immigrants, thus opening to them the opportunity to become worthy and self-supporting Americans. Beginning early in 1881, at no hour of the day or night were the ears of this American patriot closed to the entreaties of those of his unfortunate East European co-religionists, who sought to enter this land of promise. Such self-sacrificing, indefatigable, and disinterested devotion is indeed unique. No eight hour or twice eight hour day was long enough to afford time for such achievement, which meant incessant personal communication with the immigration officials during their office hours, and telephonic and written communications long before and after such hours. Secretary of Labor Nagel well described his methods by saying: "The way Mr. Wolf approaches us is calculated to get best results, because he comes to us fairly, good-naturedly, and when he is defeated, he recognizes our point of view,. That is the spirit in which you ought to come. You must keep in mind that an organization engaged in the protection of alien people naturally assumes the character of an advocate. It is bound to do it. It is human." His warm sympathy, his conscientious fidelity to truth, and his devotion, above all, to the interest of our country on the one hand, and, on the other the respect which he aroused for his indefatigable self-sacrificing zeal and sane and tactful petitioning, account for such a record

of admissions of unfortunate fugitives from persecution. This work by this German-born American patriot, almost exclusively for the benefit of Russian and Roumanian co-religionists, many of whom had been disposed abroad to quarrel and dislike each other has been an important factor in abolishing in the United States, the distinction between a "Portuguese Jewish Synagogue," and English, Bohemian, German, Polish, Russian and Roumanian congregations. Our unifying and democratic melting pot welds them all alike into patriotic American citizens of the Jewish faith.

In fact, it was largely due to Simon Wolf, aided in later years, by Jacob H. Schiff, Louis Marshall and a few others, that America Jews ardently espoused the policy of the "open-door" for their persecuted European brethren, and did not follow the dictates of self-interest or the line of least resistance, as did English Jews in 1771, and concur in efforts to exclude them from our land. Generally, Simon Wolf's role was wisely that of a mild Aaron, rather than that of a fiery Moses, but he could, when occasion called for it, be righteously indignant, and he loved to associate more vehement spirits in his activities. His published correspondence with Senator Chandler, the opponent of the Jewish immigrant of the early nineties, was not lacking in vehemence, nor was his disapproval of Commissioner Williams' lawlessness in 1910. In 1891 he secured from Secretary of State Foster, one of the ablest state-papers we have, which justified the admission of the Russian refugees from religious persecution who counted on the assistance of relatives and friends here for temporary maintenance, and thereby kept the door open to these

unhappy fugitives, and a decade later, Wolf secured an important ruling that persons dependent on private charity are not public charges. Able and convincing arguments were made by him on behalf of the immigrants, before the United States Industrial Commission of 1891, and the United States Immigration Commission of 1910, and before numerous Congressional committees. He it was who led the movement for the federal legislation which compelled the steamship companies, under heavy penalties, to give the immigrants a physical examination before their embarkation, so that these companies should not close their eyes to obvious excluding defects, in order to fill their own coffers. Nor were either negro or Chinaman beyond the reach of his sympathetic voice or pen, and Father Walter of St. Patrick's Church of Washington once said: "The best Christian in Washington is Simon Wolf, the Jew."

Amidst all his other pursuits, Simon Wolf found time for important historical and literary labors. To him we owe our most important study in American Jewish history, published in 1895 under the title "the American Jew as Patriot, Soldier and Citizen." As already observed, even while the Civil War was in progress, he had published a strong defence of the Jews of America against the charge of lack of patriotism. Aroused by an absurdly false statement in the *North American Review* in 1891 denying that Jews had served their country on the battle-field during the great struggle for union, Simon Wolf, single-handed, attempted a task which scores jointly would have hesitated to undertake, namely a systematic examination of the army rolls of all our States, as well as those of the navy, followed up by careful confirmation, with the result that he was able

to publish, alphabetically arranged under state divisions, the names of over 800 Jewish soldiers of that combat, establishing the fact that Jews had participated far beyond their quota on a population basis. Seldom, if ever, did a more conclusive refutation of a libel appear. The work was supplemented by interesting accounts of Jewish patriotism, on the battle-field and in civic life, covering our entire national history, as well as a valuable compilation of characterizations by distinguished non-Jews, of Jewish contributions to civilization. The proceeds of the sale of the work were devoted to his favorite charity, the Atlanta Jewish Orphans' Home.

An active charter member and director of the American Jewish Historical Society from its organization, in 1892, he also published interesting biographies of Mordecai M. Noah and Commodore Uriah P. Levy. His autobiography, "The Presidents I Have Known from 1860 to 1918," which has been cited several times, appeared five years before his death, and is invaluable to the student of American Jewish history because it describes vividly and accurately many important incidents in which Simon Wolf figured. While space does not permit even an enumeration of the hundreds of pamphlets and articles he published during a busy life, at least a passing reference is in order to one of his best-known and felicitous lectures, published in 1888 under the title "Influence of the Jews on the Progress of the World."

Enthusiastic, untiring and mentally vigorous until carried off in his 87th year, few careers can challenge comparison with his for continuing beneficence and ceaseless activity. To the loving care of his second wife, Amy Lichtenstein, a



niece of his intimate associate Julius Bien, whom he married November 3rd, 1892, is largely due much of his activity during the last few decades of his life. There were born to him, by his first marriage, children who achieved distinction: Adolph Grant Wolf, Judge of the Supreme Court of Porto Rico since 1904, Florence W. Gotthold, a distinguished artist, Helen W. Cohen, wife of his long-time partner and associate, Myer Cohen, and May V. Wolf.

Among those closing incidents in his career of which Simon Wolf was particularly proud, was the matter of securing written assurances from President Wilson that he would use whatever opportunities the peace conference would afford for international protection of persecuted Jews the world over. Woodrow Wilson wrote to him: "I hope that it is not necessary for me to state again my determination to do the right and possible thing at the right and feasible time with regard to the great interest you so eloquently allude to in your letter," and he fully redeemed this promise at the Peace Conference of Versailles, besides using his efforts at the very end of his administration to keep the door open to the victim of European persecution, by vetoing the first immigration percentum restriction bill. On the occasion of Simon Wolf's 80th birthday, the same great War president wrote for the year-book then presented to Wolf the appropriate sentiment: "Prejudice is provincial, truth and justice go hand and hand in this blessed country."

On the occasion of Simon Wolf's 85th birthday, President Harding wrote: "It is impossible to think of him as anything but a young, an eternally active, a working American. His is the spirit of everlasting youth and usefulness." When Simon Wolf passed away, his intimate friend Chief

Justice Taft said: "He was a leader in Israel, and had the interests of his people deeply at heart. He labored much for them. He was a man of intellectual force, of conviction and courage of expression. He was greatly respected by all who knew him, and this included all the prominent men in the Government for many decades of his long and honored life. In his death the country loses a patriot, and the Jewish people a strong man." But no more felicitous tribute was brought to him than this of ex-Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels: "No man has been more forward to reach out a helping hand to those in need. Truly it may be said of him, as it was of Abou ben Adhem: 'Write me as one who loves his fellow-men.'"