

**The Role Of Masonic Lodges In The Assimilation Of Jewish
Immigrants Into The Cincinnati, Ohio Community In The Mid-
Nineteenth Century**

By

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Presented to A. Douglas Smith, Jr. Lodge of Research, #1949

On

March 29, 2003

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This is not so much a Masonic research paper as it is a short paper *about* a research paper. I have always had a curiosity about learning new things. Back in the days before cable TV and the Learning Channel, I used to reserve documentaries on 16 mm film at the public library and present them in the family room as my idea of an ideal evening's family activity. Now, all I have to do to scratch my curiosity itch is to use the remote to flip from esoteric topic to esoteric topic. I daresay most Masons are curious beings. Curiosity no doubt played at least a part in motivating them to knock at the door of Freemasonry.

Curiosity is at the heart of Masonic research. Joseph Gordon¹ lists curiosity as the most important trait expected of a Masonic researcher. As important as this trait may be to the entire historical research process, it is critical to the first step in preparing a historical paper — selecting a topic. The scope of this presentation will deal only with the second and third of the six steps or aspects of developing a Masonic research paper, as discussed by Gordon. These six topics are set forth below:

1. personal characteristics of the researcher
2. selecting a topic
3. finding information
4. filing and retrieving information
5. evaluating data
6. writing the paper

Gordon states that, "Selecting a topic is probably the most important and most difficult step in research." Now, if he had said, "Selecting a '*suitable*' topic is probably the most important and most difficult step in research." I don't think there would be any room for disagreement. But, I'll bet there are untold numbers of research papers that remain uncompleted because the topic selected by the neophyte

researcher was flawed. It may have been of interest to the author, he may have been curious about the subject, but like the term paper subject in college or the undergraduate research project, the topic was not sufficiently narrow, or the topic turned out to be too arcane to have sufficient source materials available. Since I have not completed the research on the topic of this paper, I'm not sure whether it is a "suitable" topic or not. Having some of the research methods at least in my mind, if not on paper, I tend to think that it is sufficiently narrow.

I want to tell you how I came to select this topic for research. Having accepted Wor Kwame Acquah's "invitation" to present a short paper at the March 2003 meeting of our Research Lodge, I had alerted my subconscious mind to be on the lookout for a suitable topic. I wanted this exercise to be enjoyable, not a drag. Being free to pick my own topic should go a long way toward allowing the experience to be fun.

My interest in this particular topic was piqued while on one of my wife's and my too rare visits to the Smithsonian. I had promised to take her to the National Museum of American History to see Julia Childs' kitchen. My wife Linda is a loyal fan of Food TV. It turned out, for me anyway, that seeing Julia's kitchen up close and personal was much less thrilling than I thought it might be. (The most moving exhibit we saw that day was the 9/11 display that included some of the actual rubble from the WTC and the Pentagon. I doubt there were any visitors who were not moved to tears as was I.)

While I waited for Linda to get her fill of the cooking display, I wandered around the second floor to get an overall feel for the place. As I scanned the panorama, my eyes hit on a wall hanging, expertly lighted and annotated with captions. "A Masonic

tracing board,” I thought. On closer examination, I learned that this display piece is called a “mizrach.” It was a small part of an exhibit entitled, “Communities in a Changing Nation.” The caption indicated that the mizrach was on loan from the Hebrew Union College, Skirball Cultural Center in Cincinnati. Ah! Something to go on. I made a note of this bit of information and resolved to get on the computer when I got home to see if perhaps I had stumbled on a topic for my Masonic research paper. I had.

First I wanted to learn what a mizrach is.

“...To symbolize the importance of facing eastward during prayer, the custom developed [among immigrant Jews] of hanging a plaque on the eastern wall of homes and synagogues. This plaque became known as a mizrach, since the Hebrew word was usually its most prominent feature. Over time, the mizrach developed into a significant form of Jewish folk art, embellished with a variety of Jewish texts and symbols.”

“...Occasionally, non-Jewish symbols were used. A mizrach made in Cincinnati about 1850, for example, contains an American eagle as well as a compass, a level, a plumb line and a trowel, symbols of the fraternal order of Freemasons.”²

I was on to something. Based on just cursory searches on the Internet, I found some material suggesting that more serious digging would yield a rich supply of reference material to support a meaningful paper on the topic I had selected.

- The website of The Northern Illinois University (niu.edu) coughed up a paper by David A. Frolick entitled, *From Immigration to Integration: Jewish Life in Quincy in the Nineteenth Century*. Before the author could talk about Jewish life in Quincy, Illinois, he had to tell about the first Jewish congregation beyond the Allegheny Mountains, i.e. one established by an English Jew by the name of Joseph Jonas. Joseph was followed by several relatives, including two brothers, Abraham and Edward.

“By 1824, there were enough Jewish residents to fulfill the requirement of ten adult males so that regular religious

services could be held...” “While in Cincinnati, Abraham joined the Freemasons, a ‘secret society’ which welcomed both Jews and gentiles.” After moving to Kentucky, Jonas operated a general store, was elected to the state legislature, organized a Masonic Lodge and in 1832 was elected Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky.³

- An extensive historical review by Barbara Franco, assistant director for museum programs at the Museum of Our National Heritage, Lexington, Mass, also downloaded from the Internet, provided this significant observation: “Writing in 1878, Charles Wesolowsky, a Freemason and a member of B’nai B’rith wrote that ‘Thanks to Providence B’B Lodge is now the supplement, and no matter where you are, the same work, the same sign, the same spirit, you are at home and amongst brothers indeed.’ The rites, regalia, and mottoes of these organizations, based on Freemasonry and Odd Fellowship, offered at (sic) American Aura that might be denied Jews elsewhere.”

“...On his tombstone [Wesolowsky] wanted the inscription to include his Masonic achievement, ‘Past Grand High Priest of Georgia’ because it demonstrated ‘the extent to which an immigrant Jew living in America could enter into brotherhood with his Gentile neighbours and still retain his identity as a Jew and pride in his Jewish heritage.’”⁴

How deep do I want to dig? I’ve barely scratched the surface. I’m sure there is much material I could uncover if I were to venture forth to the various Masonic libraries in the area and what about a trip to Cincinnati? Wouldn’t that be fun, and surely it would yield a treasure trove of material. There seems no end to ready material for researching this topic.

And, how about this for a possible sequel? Flipping through the January/February issue of my alumni magazine, *Ohio State*, I was arrested by a review of a book by an OSU alumnus, Roger Fortin. The article contained the following:

“In the beginning, while espousing separation of church and state and religious liberty, they wanted the church to adapt to the American way of life. In the mid 19th century, Cincinnati Catholics were dealing with a dominant Protestant culture and an environment that was at times hostile. Most Catholics saw themselves as outsiders. However by a century later the church had become more mainstream.”⁵

Maybe the Catholics should have joined the Masonic Lodge! But, that’s another topic.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Joseph S. Gordon, Ph.D., Methods of Historical Research Alexandria, Virginia: Transactions of A., Douglas Smith, Jr., Lodge of Research #1949, AF&AM, Volume 1 (1982-1987).
- ² "Symbols of Judaism: Mizrach," 2001, Temple Beth El, 31 Aug 2001, <http://www.uahc.org/ca/ca014/sermonaug01.html>.
- ³ David A. Frolick, "From Immigration to Integration: Jewish Life in Quincy in the Nineteenth Century," 2001, Historical Research and Narrative Howard Rubin Curriculum Materials The People's College: The Movement ..., 18 Dec 2001 <http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/ih519829.html>.
- ⁴ Barbara Franco , "Many Fraternal Groups Grew From Masonic Seed (Part 1 – 1730-1860)," 1999, LEI OMTP/Supreme Council, 33rd Degree Ancient & Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry Northern Masonic Jurisdiction United States of America, Vol. IV #11, 01 Nov 1999 <http://www.linshaw.ca/omtp/vol4no11.html>
- ⁵ Roger Fortin, "Faith and Action: A History of the Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 1821-1996," rev., OHIO STATE, January/February 2003 p 8.