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AlexandriaHistoricalSociety@gmail.com www.AlexandriaHistoricalSociety.org

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“Wide-awake Merchants” and Reform-minded Women: A Peek into Alexandria’s Early 20th Century Jewish Community — The Rosenfeld Family of 518-520 King Street

by Tatiana Niculescu

Introduction

In the summer of 1856, Rabbi Isaac Leeser travelled to Alexandria and reported that “this ancient town’s” Jewish residents were “all in good circumstances.” An important religious and cultural leader Leeser viewed the freedoms possible in the United States as “an unprecedented opportunity for spiritual revitalization and culture excellence” (Sussman 1995:12). He shaped American Judaism by authoring and translating several pivotal theological works, publishing the first American Jewish periodical the *Occident* newspaper, and founding Maimonides College, known as the first American Jewish Theological Seminary (Kiron n.d.: 2-3). Leeser tirelessly advocated for uniting disparate Jewish communities around shared traditional beliefs and practices in the face of the growing Reform movement. In 1865, the *Jewish Messenger* newspaper noted that “Jewish matters have improved beyond description in the past three years” in Alexandria after the arrival of federal troops during the Civil War. Over the next few decades, a small group of German and later Eastern European Jewish families came to call Alexandria home. They started businesses along King Street, established a benevolent society, cemeteries, and synagogues, forming a thriving community.

This article begins by discussing the history of Alexandria’s Jewish communities from the 18th century through the early 20th century. It then focuses on the Rosenfeld family who lived at 518-520 King Street (archaeological site number



518-520 King St., 1967
before demolition

44AX1, Feature 4) during the first two decades of the 20th century. Their lives serve as a microcosm of Jewish experiences outside of major cities at the turn of the 20th century. The Rosenfelds carefully balanced tradition and innovation, while creating new cultural paths for themselves and their community (Praetzellis 2021:1053). This work explores the ways in which Max and Jennie Rosenfeld created and maintained a Jewish identity shaped by religion, ethnicity, and race and weaves together evidence from archaeological artifacts and historic documents to learn more about their lives.

A Brief History of Alexandria's Jewish Communities

Jewish immigration to the United States occurred in two main waves: German or Central European Jews arrived from the 1840s through the 1880s followed by a wave of Russian or Eastern European immigrants through the 1920s (Gurock 1998). Jewish settlement in Alexandria generally followed these wider trends with local twists. Several excellent, detailed histories of Alexandria, Northern Virginia, and D.C. Jewish communities already exist (Baker 1983, 1986, 1990, 1992; Beth El Hebrew Congregation 1984, 2009; Dilles and Dilles 2022) so this will not rehash these in detail here. Instead, this article provides a brief history of Jewish settlement in Alexandria through the 1920s using illustrative vignettes.

Most histories of Jewish Alexandria begin in the mid-19th century, but evidence suggests that there may have been a few Jewish residents in Alexandria before then. Other cities around the state, including Richmond and Norfolk, had growing Jewish communities in the late 18th century so it is likely that an important port city like Alexandria also had some Jewish residents at this time (Urofsky 1997). One example is Jacob Cohen who served as a Captain of Cavalry during the Revolutionary War (Burgess 1927:1031; Hühner 1911:96-100). He was likely born in Cumberland County, Virginia, sometime around 1740 (Gwathmey 1938: 164) but little else is known about his upbringing before his military service. Jacob passed away in 1798 in Alexandria (Fairfax County Will Book G:36) and his children William, Robert, and Margaret continued to live in and around the city until the mid-nineteenth century (*Alexandria Gazette* 1845:1;1854b:1; Miller 1991:74). However, they did not identify themselves as Jewish and did not participate in any Jewish organizations as adults. For example, William married Catherine Cary in April 1801 at the First Presbyterian Church (Miller 1987:67; Wright and Pippenger 1996:122) and was buried at St. Paul's Episcopal Cemetery in October 1850. Meanwhile, Mary married her second husband William Reynolds in the Presbyterian Church (Miller 1987: 139; Pippenger 2001:110; Wardell 1986:100; Alexandria Will Book 7:299). Jacob Cohen's children's departure from their father's religion during their adult lives may be because no Jewish organizations existed locally, their personal religious convictions, or because it was politically or socially expedient to be Christian. The Cohen siblings' reasoning may be lost to the past, but they provide an example where further historical research could lead to more information about other early Alexandrians of Jewish heritage.

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Few Continental European immigrants settled long-term in Alexandria before the 1830s. Though Alexandria was an immigration port of minor importance in the 18th and early 19th centuries, most immigrants, including a wave of Germans, quickly moved west (Wust 1969:33, 104). Alexandria began attracting more immigrants as neighboring Baltimore became a bigger entry port for new Americans. In the 1830s, ships carrying American tobacco sailed to Bremen, Germany and brought back Central European immigrants to Baltimore and Richmond (Weiner and Goldstein 2018:5; Wust 1956:34). Some of these new arrivals moved on to other locales, including Alexandria.

As manufacturing expanded and diversified between the 1840s and the Civil War, Alexandria's population also expanded. The city experienced its most rapid population growth of the 19th century between 1850 and 1860, growing by 45% to include 12,652 residents in 1860 (Shephard 1986:78-79). The 1850 census, the first to list every free person residing in a household by name, recorded 74 German born individuals (17.8% of the foreign-born population or 0.8% of the total population). Many of these Central European immigrants, both Jewish and non-Jewish, were simultaneously fleeing the failed 1848 revolutions while being drawn to the promise of economic opportunity and religious freedom in the United States (Diner 1992; Weiner and Goldstein 2018:5; Topp 2003:69; Urofsky 1997).

SCHEDULE I.—Free Inhabitants in the Town of Alexandria in the County of Alexandria State of Virginia enumerated by me, on the 10th day of Aug^r 1850. David Casper Ass't Marshal.

Dwelling-houses numbered in the order of valuation.	Families numbered in order of valuation.	The Name of every Person whose usual place of abode on the first day of June, 1850, was in this family.	DESCRIPTION.			Profession, Occupation, or Trade of each Male Person over 15 years of age.	Value of Real Estate owned.	Place of Birth. Naming the State, Territory, or Country.	Married within the year.	Attended School within the year.	Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict.	367
			Age.	Sex.	Color, (including Mulatto.)							
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
		E. G. Evans	26	M				Ireland				1
		Amelia Evans	17	F				Ill				
		Ann Smith	32	F				I				
400	937	John Glick	38	M		Shoemaker	6000	Ireland				
		Henrietta Glick	30	F								
		Matilda Glick	6	F								
902	940	Lipman Glick	4	M								
		Henry Glick	3	M								
		Virginia Glick	7	F								
		Albert Glick	21	M								

1850 Federal Census lists Jonas (John) Glick (Merchant Tailor) and his family, living in Alexandria

A systematic review of German born individuals listed in the 1850 Alexandria census suggests that at least one Jewish family, consisting of Jonas (John) Glick, a 38-year-old merchant tailor from Germany; his wife Henrietta (30); and children Matilda (6), Lipman (4), Henry (3), and Virginia (0) lived in the city. Glick first appears in the area in the 1849 Alexandria County Personal Property Tax list but moves to D.C. by 1857 where he is an active member of the greater Washington, D.C. Jewish community (*Evening Star* 1858:2; *Evening Star* 1863:3). Jonas Glick provides another illustration of why additional historic research may yield more information on Alexandria's Jewish community. For example, historic rec-

ords present a glimpse into how one German Jewish immigrant engaged with the institution of slavery. The 1850 Census provides very basic information, showing that Jonas Glick enslaved one 30-year-old Black woman. The 1850 Personal Property Tax is even more basic, simply listing Glick as being taxed for one enslaved person over the age of 16. A July 2, 1850 *Alexandria Gazette* (1850:3) runaway notice gives more details, including the name of the enslaved woman – Nancy Jackson, something that more official records omitted as unimportant. Jackson had been hired out to Glick by John Birch of Alexandria County but had fled with her child. Glick was invested enough in the institution of slavery to hire enslaved labor and provide a reward for Jackson’s return, though he may not have purchased enslaved individuals himself.

On the eve of the Civil War in 1860, Alexandria’s Jewish community had grown and flourished. Before establishing a synagogue in the city, individuals travelled into D.C. to attend services at the Washington Hebrew Congregation (Beth El Hebrew Congregation 1984:1) and later held services in rented facilities and above businesses owned by congregants in Alexandria. The 1860 census lists at least 11 German Jewish households in the city, consisting of 59 men, women, and children. Many Jewish Alexandrians at this time came from southern Germany. In places like Prussia and Bavaria, 18th century Jewish Emancipation, promising equal opportunity and protection from persecution, never fully came to fruition, leading many to seek opportunities elsewhere (Weiner and Goldstein 2018:5).

A brief 1862 newspaper series entitled “Sketches from the Seat of War” authored simply by a “Jewish Soldier” provides a glimpse of Alexandria in the 1860s as seen through the eyes of a Union soldier. The first installment on February 21, 1862, is not kind in its assessment of the city, criticizing everything from the unreliable ferry service to D.C., to the poor quality of the streets. The author does note that “no city on this continent, except New York and New Orleans is so favorably situated for commercial purposes,” but continues that this can only be attributed to the “depressing effects of slavery” (*Jewish Messenger* 1862:55). He then goes on to note that the Union presence in Alexandria was good for the economy, including several Jewish owned businesses. On the main commercial corridor (King Street), the author “could easily identify half the firms as belonging to the well-known Jewish nomenclature; two kasher [sic] boarding houses are already established there, which is not bad for a place where a year ago there was not a single representative of the chosen race” (*Jewish Messenger* 1862:54). The unnamed soldier is partially correct in his assessment. By the 1860s several Jewish owned businesses did line King Street between Washington Street and the Potomac River. However, these individuals did not all arrive after the start of the Civil War. Alexandria was already home to a small number of Jewish individuals and families before 1860.



Historic Marker for Beth El Congregation, in front of 206 N. Washington St., Alexandria, VA

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Alexandria suffered a period of economic and social uncertainty. Many who arrived during the war left the city leading to what historian Melvin Urofsky (1997:92) characterizes as “a slow but steady erosion of the Jewish population.” However, Alexandria continued to grow and by 1870 was home to at least 32 German Jewish households, consisting of 176 individuals. The religious community focused its efforts on purchasing a synagogue building, holding a variety of fundraisers including a Purim Ball to support this effort (Beth El Hebrew Congregation 1984:6; *Alexandria Gazette* 1871:3). The congregation succeeded in its goal, building a new synagogue on Washington Street and celebrating its dedication on September 1, 1871 (Beth El Hebrew Congregation 1984: v).

The predominantly German Jewish community expanded and contracted between the 1880s and 1920s. The 1880 census lists at least 23 households, consisting of 132 individuals, who identified as Jewish. Beth El’s membership hovered around 20 families between the 1880s and early 20th century, varying from a low of 12 in 1888 and 1895-1899 to a high of 26 in 1927 (Beth El Hebrew Congregation 1984:10). By 1900, only about 150 Jewish individuals remained in Alexandria, making up about 1% of the town’s residents (Baker 1990). As older community members passed away and their children moved, some religious, civic, and social institutions suffered. Those children who remained took over the businesses their parents had established decades earlier and remained involved in city affairs. Alexandria’s German Jewish community at the turn of the 20th century was a “stable, unified, comfortably assimilated group whose members, with rare exceptions, were financially secure and intensely involved in commercial and civic life” (Baker 1990:20).

“...for the larger group of Eastern Europeans the rituals and observances of the Reform Jews were as foreign and unacceptable to them as membership in a Christian church”

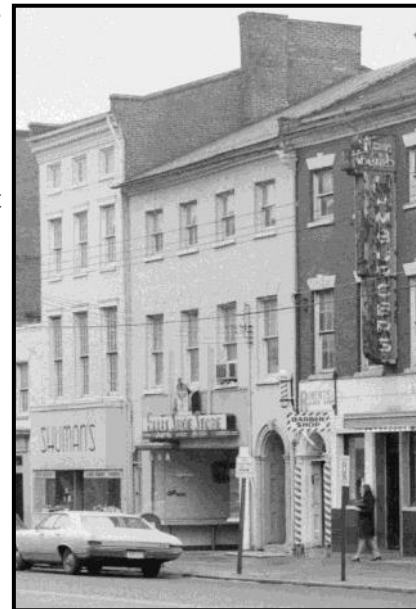
However, this stability changed with the arrival of new immigrants from Russia and Eastern Europe. Between the 1880s and 1920s, established German Jewish communities in the United States witnessed the arrival of millions of newcomers fleeing the volatile political situation in Russia and Eastern Europe (Eisenberg 1995:13; Rogger 1986). Of these millions, about 25 men and their associated families settled in Alexandria by the end of World War I with the first arriving around 1898 (Baker 1986:72). Religious, economic, and social tensions arose between Alexandria’s German Jewish community and these new immigrants. Historian Ruth Sinberg Baker (1983) notes that “although a few Russian Jews temporarily associated themselves with Beth El, for the larger group of Eastern Europeans the rituals and observances of the Reform Jews were as foreign and unacceptable to them as membership in a Christian church” and by 1916 they had established their own congregation Agudas Achim to serve their religious needs. Ben Hayman’s oral history suggests other tensions between the established German community and the Russian newcomers. Ben, son of early 20th century Agudas Achim member Jay Hayman, remembered that in the early days “...the Reformed Jews were much better educated. Most of the Orthodox didn’t have much schooling, and they [Reformed] looked down

upon the Orthodox” (Hayman and Hayman 2001). This hints at some underlying tension and resentment between the two groups in the early decades of the 20th century.

The 1920 census also points to another trend – the increasing number of American born Jewish Alexandrians, including 11 heads of household. These individuals were the children and grandchildren of mostly German immigrants who were committed to their Jewish faith and also active participants in broader political and civic life. One example is Robert P. Whitestone, a wholesale grocer, and his family. Born in Culpeper, Virginia, sometime around 1873, Robert was the son of two Prussian immigrants, Isaac, a dry goods merchant, and Joanna. He arrived in Alexandria between 1910 when the census records him as living in Culpeper and 1913 when he appears in an Alexandria city directory as a proprietor of Hotel Rammel. One of Robert’s sons Isaac identified as Jewish his entire life, having a bar mitzvah in 1920 (*Alexandria Gazette* 1920:1) and eventually being buried alongside his family at Home of Peace. Robert’s other son Julian, on the other hand, was married by a Methodist Episcopal minister (Virginia Department of Health 1974) and was buried at St. Mary’s Catholic Cemetery. His path and changing religious affiliations were more like those of the early 19th century Cohen family. These two brothers illustrate different paths for Jewish Alexandrians. One maintained his Jewish identity while the other drifted away from his ethnic and religious roots. Julian and Isaac Whitestone show the complexity of Jewish identity and how it can change over time.

The Rosenfeld Family at 518-520 King Street

In October 1903, Max Rosenfeld announced the grand opening of his new dry goods shop in “Schwarz’s Old Stand” (*Alexandria Gazette* 1903:3). The location (518-520 King Street) had previously been home to Isaac Schwarz’s family, who had resided there since the 1850s (*Alexandria Gazette* 1854a:3). Schwarz, a successful dry goods merchant and active member of Alexandria’s early Jewish community (Terrie 1979:54), had only recently passed away in 1898, leaving the property and business to his son Samuel. The Rosenfeld family – Max, Jennie, and their son Norman – went on to live and work at the King Street property until 1920. The Rosenfelds’ lives in Alexandria serve as a microcosm of Jewish experiences in smaller cities at the turn of the 20th century. They balanced tradition and modernity while creating new cultural paths for themselves and their community. This next section explores three examples, including the family’s evolving economic choices, Jennie Rosenfeld’s involvement in the National Council of Jewish Women and the choices she made about her home, and the ways in which the family navigated the broader early 20th century racial landscape.



518-520 King Street with the sign for Ellis Shoe Store next to Shuman’s Bakery in the early 1960s

Born in Alexandria to German parents, Jennie Rosenfeld (née Eichberg) was well connected to her community. Her father Isaac Eichberg helped found Beth El Hebrew Congregation (Beth El Hebrew Congregation 1984) and her mother Babette was well respected in Alexandria, noted for her philanthropy and benevolence (*Alexandria Gazette* 1916b). Jennie's husband Max was born around 1861 (or 1858 based on his death certificate) in Prussia, from where he immigrated to the U.S. in 1881, and was naturalized in 1892 (1920 Federal Census). He is first mentioned in Alexandria at the time of his wedding in August 1893. *Alexandria Gazette* (1893:3) and *Evening Star* (1893:3) articles detail this small and private event performed by Rabbi Stern of D.C. "according to the Jewish faith." The articles mention that Max is from Trenton, New Jersey, and that the young couple intended to settle there and not Alexandria. The 1895 New Jersey State Census confirms this and lists Max, Jennie, and their young son Norman living in Trenton's first ward. However, after 1895 Max does not appear in any Trenton city directories suggesting that he and his family had moved.

*...the rental agreement
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Jennie and Max again appear in Alexandria in the 1900 Census, living with Jennie's parents Babette and Isaac Eichberg at 114 North Washington Street. In 1903, Max Rosenfeld struck out on his own and the family began living and working at 518-520 King Street, renting the property from Samuel Schwarz. The 1910 city tax records confirm this arrangement, listing Schwarz as the owner of the lot while Max Rosenfeld was taxed for the furniture, indicating that he was occupying and renting the property. However, though Max Rosenfeld was from New Jersey, he and Sam Schwarz were not strangers. In fact, Samuel Schwarz and Jennie Rosenfeld were cousins (*Alexandria Gazette* 1916b). The rental arrangement between Schwarz and Rosenfeld was reinforced and facilitated by familial connections. Though Max was not from Alexandria, he and his family were familiar with and known to the community due to his wife's deep connections.

The Rosenfelds were active members of Alexandria's Jewish community. Their son Norman had his bar mitzvah in May 1909 in D.C., and the family celebrated this rite of passage at home (*Evening Star* 1909: Part VII). Ten years later, the family celebrated Norman's marriage to Alison [Ella] Louise Greenberg of Buffalo, New York, which was held in Rev. Dr. Simon's home in Washington, D.C. (*Alexandria Gazette* 1919:1). Interestingly, though the Rosenfeld family lived in Alexandria for over two decades they do not appear to have been members of Beth El (Weinraub personal communication 2023). According to their death records (Virginia Department of Health 1926; 1929) and other historic sources both Max and Norman (*Evening Star* 1929:9) were intended to be buried at Home of Peace, but cemetery surveys (Pippenger 1992) suggest that this may not have happened. Jennie, who did not pass away until 1954, was cremated (Virginia Department of Health 1954), which was an unusual choice for a Jewish individual (Shapiro 1986).

A great deal can be learned about the Rosenfelds' lives from the historic record, but clues also remain in the detritus of everyday life. People use objects to represent and create their identity and archaeological artifacts provide tangible evidence of past people's identities

(Beaudry 1993:89-90; Rosengarten 2006; Yamin 2000:11). Evidence from historical documents and the archaeological assemblage from a well/privy behind 518-520 King Street, excavated in 1977 (Cressey 1979), come together to better understand the Rosenfelds' lives.

Changing Economic Choices

Max Rosenfeld never purchased 518-520 King Street from Samuel Schwarz. However, between 1914 and 1916, the Rosenfelds did acquire four sets of properties in Alexandria, improving the buildings and renting them out. Their purchases included the former slave pen at 1315 Duke Street, which had been transformed into a boarding house and apartments since the end of the Civil War (*Alexandria Gazette* 1915:1; Skolnik 2021). This unoccupied property was repeatedly vandalized by unknown persons (*Alexandria Gazette* 1917a:1). In 1916, Rosenfeld purchased 608-610 King Street (*Alexandria Gazette* 1916d:3) with ambitious plans to erect a modern two-story apartment building on the lot (*Alexandria Gazette* 1916c:1). By January 1917, he had leased this property to the Woolworth Company for 15 years who demolished the existing three-story brick structure and began building a new store (*Alexandria Gazette* 1917b). Max and Jennie Rosenfeld expanded their economic options by shifting from the dry goods business to real estate development, leaving a legacy for their son Norman.

Date Bought	Address	
4/24/1914	1016, 1018, 1102 King Street 113, 115 South Henry Street	
6/12/1915	Duke Street between Payne and West Streets, north side	
9/27/1915	Block bounded by Wolfe, Wilkes, Alfred, and Patrick Streets	
8/28/1916	608-610 King Street	

Properties acquired by the Rosenfeld Family

The archaeological record also speaks to the Rosenfeld family's economic choices. They used their capital to reinvest in the future and not necessarily to acquire expensive things. Overall, they consumed fewer high value goods, such as porcelain, than their non-Jewish neighbors of similar economic status and instead opted for American made, embossed rim Warwick China that was simple, elegant, functional, and economical (Niculescu 2022:230). These ceramics were designed to look like more expensive French porcelain (*The Daily Morning Journal and Courier* 1900:6). Similarly, a moon man figurine, possibly manufactured by German company Schafer and Vater, may have been designed to imitate more costly Wedgewood Jasperware (White 2016). The Rosenfelds chose to purchase economical

items that looked like more expensive products, participating in the consumer economy on their own terms.

Research at other Jewish and non-Jewish sites has found that some households did not participate in conspicuous consumption to the degree expected based on their economic status, instead choosing to apply their money towards other investments (Bell 2000; Mullins 1996; 1999; 2011). Rebecca Yamin (2000) has noted that mid-19th century Jewish households in the New York's Five Points area acquired fewer home goods than their Irish neighbors though they were of similar economic status. Instead, those Jewish households spent their money on domestic help, reinvesting in their businesses, or buying property. The ways in which the Rosenfelds chose to spend their extra money are consistent with these other examples and illustrate that not all households prioritized using their wealth to buy expensive objects.



Moon Man Figurine (44AX1, Feature 4)

A Reform-minded Lady Balancing Progress and Tradition

Newspaper accounts and archaeological remains provide a glimpse into Jennie Rosenfeld's religious and civic life. She was an active member of welfare organizations, continuing her mother Babette Eichberg's legacy of philanthropy. Jennie Rosenfeld's participation aligned with broader trends seen in the first few decades of the 20th century as middle-class women expanded their roles beyond the household, working as social reformers (Baker 1984; Cott 1987, Muncey 1991; Rotman 2005:4), advocating for the right to vote (Peterson 2011; Schneir 1994:x-xi), or advocating for economic and marriage reform (MacDonald and Dildar 2018). Rosenfeld served as president of the Alexandria chapter of the Council of Jewish Women, an organization that sought to redefine the role of Jewish women as public and active participants in religious and cultural life. The Council hoped to combat assimilation by educating women about their faith to strengthen Jewish homes and preserve Jewish heritage (Elwell 1982; Katz-Hyman 1999; Rogow 1999). As president of the local chapter, Rosenfeld advocated on behalf of European Jews caught in the crossfire of World War One (*Alexandria Gazette* 1916a:4). Her leadership suggests that she was an active participant in creating a Jewish world for her family and community.

Additionally, the Council provided women with new opportunities to study, debate, and interpret religious doctrine, leading to new constructions of diasporic identity. In 1913, Jennie Rosenfeld hosted Sadie American (*Alexandria Gazette* 1913:2), the executive secretary of the national organization. American was also a proponent of radical Reform Judaism and was critical in shaping the Council's social reform and immigrant assistance projects (Katz-

Hyman 1999). Historic records do not indicate how philosophically aligned Sadie and Jennie may have been, but the fact that Rosenfeld hosted American suggests that there may have been some affinity.

ALEXANDRIA GAZETTE THURSDAY, APRIL 17, 1913.

<p>S</p> <p>ully.</p> <p>Shoes,</p> <p>s</p> <p>t heels,</p> <p>factory.</p> <p>injure</p> <p>Prices.</p> <p>... 95c</p> <p>... \$1.15</p> <p>... \$1.25</p> <p>NTS.</p> <p>Palms</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">SOCIAL AND PERSONAL</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Interesting News Notes About People of Alexandria-- Happenings in Society.</p> <hr/> <p>Mrs. George Abbott is able to be out again after an attack of grippe.</p> <div style="border: 2px solid red; padding: 5px;"> <p>Miss Sadie American, of New York, of the National Council of Women, is the guest of Mrs. Max Rosenfeld.</p> </div> <hr/> <p>Mrs. W. S. Corby entertained yesterday at her residence in Chevy Chase, D. C., in honor of the delegates of the National Council of Women. Mrs. Corby was assisted in receiving by Mrs. Stevens and Mrs. Roberts. A number of Alexandrians were present among whom were Mrs. Edward Fawcett, Miss Rose McDonald Mrs. Robert Barrett, Mrs. Charles E. Nicol, Mrs. Lycurgus Uhler and Miss Kitty Barrett.</p> <hr/> <p>Miss Annie Hopkins, of Onancock, is visiting her cousin, Mrs. Carpenter, at Grace Church rectory.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">TO CURB CHURCH DEB</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">No Church May Contract Loans Mortgages Without Consent</p> <hr/> <p>Hereafter no Presbyterian Church in this section can contract any permanent debts without the consent of the presbytery, according to a resolution taken just before the close of the spring meeting of the Presbytery of Washington yesterday afternoon at the Washington Heights Presbyterian Church.</p> <p>The Rev. Paul Robinson Hickey, pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church; the Rev. Henry Rumer, pastor of the Kensington, Md. Presbyterian Church; Elder James T. Newell of the Washington Heights Presbyterian Church, and Elder Edward T. Ring, of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, were chosen commissioners to the Presbyterian general assembly to be held in Atlanta in May.</p> <p>The alternates chosen were the</p>
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Alexandria Gazette Social Column, April 17, 1913

Archaeological evidence points to subtle tensions within the Rosenfeld household between new interpretations of what it meant to be Jewish that were shaped by Progressive politics and more conservative practices rooted in tradition. Ceramic artifacts and animal bones suggest the nuanced ways in which this household, likely led by Jennie's preferences and ideas, interpreted kosher rules. There is no evidence that the Rosenfelds had two distinct sets of dishes – one for meat and one for dairy – as would be expected if they kept strictly kosher. Instead, like many other German Jewish households across the United States at the time (Praetzellis 2021), they used minimally decorated refined white earthenware ceramics and gilded porcelain.

On the other hand, animal bones indicate that Rosenfeld was trying to maintain the semblance of a kosher diet for her family, connecting them to millennia of Jewish forebearers. The household consumed significantly less pork and more chicken than their non-Jewish neighbors and appear to have preferred cuts of beef from the front of the animal. This evidence suggests that the Rosenfelds were attempting to follow kosher rules at home, avoiding *treyf* species and cuts (Niculescu 2022:249, 281). However, like many other Jewish Americans, they did not keep strictly kosher, instead reinterpreting tradition in ways that made sense for them based on their personal preferences, convictions, and local options (Diner 1992:127-128).

Navigating the Early 20th Century Racial Landscape

American racial dynamics played an important role in creating new diasporic identities among Jewish immigrants. American Jews occupied a fraught position within the country's Black-white racial dyad (Brodin 1998; Goldstein 2006; Roediger 2018). Goldstein and Weiner (2018:4, 122) argue that understanding this racial positionality is even more important in a border city like Alexandria where race relations were often much more complex than in the deep South or North and changed over time. In fact, American society increasingly racialized Jewish individuals, both foreign and native born, after the Civil War and through World War II. Evidence of how the Rosenfelds may have navigated this complex landscape lingers in several documentary records.

Newspaper records show that Max Rosenfeld financially supported the construction of an Arlington Confederate Monument (*Alexandria Gazette* 1912:6). Scholars have argued that these monuments were intended to intimidate African Americans, are linked to incidences of lynching (Henderson et al. 2021) and reflect a racist history (American Historical Association 2017; Green 2021). By financially contributing to this monument, Max Rosenfeld was implicitly endorsing Jim Crow policies and practices, which in turn likely served to solidify the family's position as "white" within Alexandria society.

However, by the 1920s, the racial landscape around the Rosenfeld family was changing, as pseudo-scientific views of race gained traction and anti-Semitism rose (Grant and Mislan 2020: 477; Jacobsen 1998:184; Pascoe 2009). Max and Norman's death certificates suggest that by the time of their deaths, Jewish identity was viewed and understood via a racial lens. Both certificates list their race as either "White, Jew" in the case of Max or "White" typewritten with "Jewish" handwritten over it in the case of Norman. Clearly "Jewish" as a racial distinction, as opposed to merely a religious affiliation, was important to someone – either the Rosenfelds themselves or government officials.

Starting in June of 1912, the Commonwealth of Virginia began requiring local registrars to file vital records with the state that included information about an individual's race. Bureaucrats used these records against everyday Virginians to enforce the state's miscegenation laws, including the 1924 Virginia Racial Integrity Act that codified the one-drop rule (Pascoe 2009:140-141). At a time when some racial definitions still included "Semite" along with "Caucasian" (Baum 2006; Jacobsen 1998), it is not difficult to see how "Jewish" ended up on the Max and Norman Rosenfeld's death certificates. No Virginia law explicitly mentions "Hebrews" "Jews" or "Semites" as distinct racial categories, but the definition of white as only Caucasian left room for individual registrars to apply their own interpretation and understanding of race. Furthermore, by the 1930s Virginia eugenicists started paying attention to interactions between Jewish and non-Jewish individuals. This included tracking and restricting the number of admitted Jewish students to Virginia universities and white supremacists using back handed compliments towards Jewish communities, simultaneously praising their racial integrity while deriding their "clannishness" as a threat to American stability (Dorr 2000:556, 580). These actions and rhetoric indicate that before World War II, Jewish Virginians were still provisionally white and faced discrimination and monitoring. Individuals like the Rosenfelds likely landed in the crosshairs.

FORM NO. 18

11307 *Ch. D. Lang*

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS
STATE BOARD OF HEALTH

1 PLACE OF DEATH
COUNTY OF _____
MAGISTERIAL DISTRICT OF _____
OR
INC. TOWN OF _____
OR CITY OF Alexandria

REGISTRATION DISTRICT No. 2000 REGISTERED No. 152
(TO BE INSERTED BY REGISTRAR) (FOR USE OF LOCAL REGISTRAR)
(No. _____ ST. _____ WARD _____)

(If death occurred in a hospital or other institution, give its NAME instead of street and number)

2 FULL NAME Max Rosenfeld
(A) RESIDENCE Washington D. C. ST. _____ WARD _____
(Usual place of abode) (If non-resident give city or town and State)

Length of residence in city or town where death occurred _____ yrs. _____ mos. _____ ds. How long in U. S., if of foreign birth? _____ yrs. _____ mos. _____ ds.

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

3 SEX Male COLOR OR RACE White, Jew SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED MARRIED
16 DATE OF DEATH (MONTH, DAY, AND YEAR, WRITE NAME OF MONTH) May 27 19 26

5A IF MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED (OR) WIFE OF Jennie Rosenfeld
I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT I ATTENDED DECEASED FROM March 7, 1925 TO May 27, 1926
THAT I LAST SAW HIM/LIVE ON May 27, 1926 AT _____ A. M.

6 DATE OF BIRTH (MONTH, DAY, AND YEAR, WRITE NAME OF MONTH) April 26, 1858 19 _____
AND THAT DEATH OCCURRED, ON DATE STATED ABOVE, AT _____ M.
THE CAUSE OF DEATH* WAS AS FOLLOWS: Arrhythmia of Liver

7 AGE YEARS _____ MONTHS _____ DAYS _____ IF LESS THAN 1 DAY, _____ HRS. OR _____ MIN.

8 OCCUPATION OF DECEASED (A) TRADE, PROFESSION, OR PARTICULAR KIND OF WORK Retired Merchant
(B) GENERAL NATURE OF INDUSTRY, BUSINESS, OR ESTABLISHMENT IN WHICH EMPLOYED (OR EMPLOYER) _____
(C) NAME OF EMPLOYER _____

9 BIRTHPLACE (CITY OR TOWN) _____ (STATE OR COUNTRY) Germany

10 NAME OF FATHER Nathan Rosenfeld

11 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (CITY OR TOWN) _____ (STATE OR COUNTRY) Germany

12 MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER Unknown

13 BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (CITY OR TOWN) _____ (STATE OR COUNTRY) Unknown

14 INFORMANT Norman Rosenfeld
(Address) Phila, Penna.

15 FILED 5-29, 1926 _____ REGISTRAR

17 CONTRIBUTORY (SECONDARY) Cyprian (DURATION) _____ YRS. _____ MOS. _____ DRS.

18 WHERE WAS DISEASE CONTRACTED IF NOT AT PLACE OF DEATH? Washington D. C. (DURATION) _____ YRS. _____ MOS. _____ DRS.

DID AN OPERATION PRECEDE DEATH? No DATE OF _____
WAS THERE AN AUTOPSY? No

19 PLACE OF BURIAL, CREMATION, OR RE-MOVAL Home of Peace Alexs, DATE OF BURIAL 5/30/26

20 UNDERTAKER B. Whealtesy
Address Alexandria, Va.

WHAT TEST CONFIRMED DIAGNOSIS? _____
(Signed) W. D. Pittman M.D. (Address) Alexs, Va.
*State the DISEASE CAUSING DEATH, or in deaths from VIOLENT CAUSES, state (1) MEANS AND NATURE OF INJURY, and (2) whether ACCIDENTAL, SUICIDAL, or HOMICIDAL.

MARGIN RESERVED FOR BINDING

N. B.—WRITE PLAINLY, WITH UNFADING INK (WRITING FLUID)—THIS IS A PERMANENT RECORD. EVERY ITEM OF INFORMATION SHOULD BE CAREFULLY SUPPLIED. AGE SHOULD BE STATED EXACTLY. PHYSICIANS SHOULD STATE THE CAUSE OF DEATH IN PLAIN TERMS, SO THAT IT MAY BE PROPERLY CLASSIFIED. EXACT STATEMENT OF OCCUPATION IS VERY IMPORTANT.

Death Certificate for Max Rosenfeld, 1926

Taking this broader context into account, the logic behind the racial distinction on Max's 1926 death certificate is still unclear. The main sections of the certificate were typed, making it difficult to match up handwriting. The addition of "Jew" to the record may have been the

editorialization of the individual typing the form or it may reflect information dictated by the informant, Max's son Norman. The informant was typically responsible for providing as much accurate information as known for the "personal and statistical particulars" sections on the document. Perhaps Norman knew that his father understood his Jewishness along racial lines.

The handwriting "Jewish" over the typewritten "white" on Norman's 1929 death certificate suggest that someone wished to erase or qualify Norman's white identity after the fact. The local or state registrar may be the most likely candidate to have altered this document after it was submitted by the informant (Norman's mother, Jennie) and the attending physician. The handwriting of "Jewish" most closely resembles the handwriting in the registration fields meant to be inserted by the registrar. Officials at this time were known to compare documents and "fix" discrepancies they thought they saw (Pascoe 2009:145). It is possible that someone remembered that Max had been listed as "White, Jew" and decided that his son needed to carry the same racial designation even though this was not the information provided by the informant.

FORM NO. 18

MARGIN RESERVED FOR BINDING

N. B.—WRITE PLAINLY, WITH UNFADING INK (WRITING FLUID)—THIS IS A PERMANENT RECORD. EVERY ITEM OF INFORMATION SHOULD BE CAREFULLY SUPPLIED. AGE SHOULD BE STATED EXACTLY. PHYSICIANS SHOULD STATE THE CAUSE OF DEATH IN PLAIN TERMS, SO THAT IT MAY BE PROPERLY CLASSIFIED. EXACT STATEMENT OF OCCUPATION IS VERY IMPORTANT.

1 PLACE OF DEATH

COUNTY OF _____
MAGISTERIAL DISTRICT OF _____
OR
INC. TOWN OF _____
OR
CITY OF Alexandria, Va.

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS
STATE BOARD OF HEALTH

265

REGISTRATION DISTRICT NO. 2020 REGISTERED NO. 25
(TO BE INSERTED BY REGISTRAR) (FOR USE OF LOCAL REGISTRAR)
(No. 1922 King ST. 3rd WARD)
(If death occurred in a hospital or other institution, give its NAME instead of street and number)

2 FULL NAME Norman E. Rosenfeld
(A) RESIDENCE, No. 1922 King St. ST. _____ WARD _____
(Usual place of abode) (If non-resident give city or town and State)
Length of residence in city or town where death occurred yrs. mos. ds. How long in U. S., if of foreign birth yrs. mos. ds.

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

3 SEX Male 4 COLOR OR RACE Jewish SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED (write the word) Married

5A IF MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED HUSBAND OF (OR) WIFE OF Silla L. Rosenfeld

6 DATE OF BIRTH (MONTH, DAY, AND YEAR, WRITE NAME OF MONTH) Dec. 24, 1894 19 _____

7 AGE YEARS MONTHS DAYS IF LESS THAN 1 DAY, HRS OR MIN. 34

8 OCCUPATION OF DECEASED (A) TRADE, PROFESSION, OR PARTICULAR KIND OF WORK Real Estate Dealer
(B) GENERAL NATURE OF INDUSTRY, BUSINESS, OR ESTABLISHMENT IN WHICH EMPLOYED (OR EMPLOYER)
(C) NAME OF EMPLOYER

9 BIRTHPLACE (CITY OR TOWN) Alexandria,
(STATE OR COUNTRY) Va.

10 NAME OF FATHER Max Rosenfeld

11 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (CITY OR TOWN) Germany
(STATE OR COUNTRY)

12 MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER Jennie E. Eichberg

13 BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (CITY OR TOWN) Alexandria,
(STATE OR COUNTRY) Va.

14 INFORMANT Mrs. Max Rosenfeld
(Address) Alexandria, Va.

15 FILED 1-24, 1929 H. Lewis Selzer, MD
REGISTRAR

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

16 DATE OF DEATH (MONTH, DAY, AND YEAR, WRITE NAME OF MONTH) Jan. 22 19 29

17 I HEREBY CERTIFY, THAT I ATTENDED DECEASED FROM Jan 15, 1929, TO Jan 22, 1929
THAT I LAST SAW HIM ALIVE ON Jan 22, 1929
AND THAT DEATH OCCURRED, ON DATE STATED ABOVE, AT 230 A M.
THE CAUSE OF DEATH* WAS AS FOLLOWS:
Influenza
Influenza 11a
(DURATION) _____ YRS. _____ MOS. _____ DS.

CONTRIBUTORY (SECONDARY) _____ (DURATION) _____ YRS. _____ MOS. _____ DS.

18 WHERE WAS DISEASE CONTRACTED IF NOT AT PLACE OF DEATH? _____

DID AN OPERATION PRECEDE DEATH? _____ DATE OF _____

WAS THERE AN AUTOPSY? _____

WHAT TEST CONFIRMED DIAGNOSIS?
(SIGNED) C. A. Arnold, M. D.
(ADDRESS) Alex. Va.

*State the DISEASE CAUSING DEATH, or in deaths from VIOLENT CAUSES, state (1) MEANS AND NATURE OF INJURY, and (2) whether ACCIDENTAL, SUICIDAL, or HOMICIDAL.

19 PLACE OF BURIAL, CREMATION, OR RE-MOVAL DATE OF BURIAL Home of Peace Cemetery 1/24/29

20 UNDERTAKER B. Wheatley
ADDRESS Alexandria, Va.

Death Certificate for Norman Rosenfeld, 1929

The varied use of the “race” field on death certificates in Virginia in the first few decades of the 20th century was not unique to the Rosenfeld documents. Some birth and death certificates from the time included “Italian” or “Jew” in the race field while many others from the same period labeled Jewish and Italian individuals as simply “white.” This inconsistency in categorization points to the inherent instability of socially constructed racial categories, which have no basis in biology. This broader context may underlie the information presented in the race field on Max and Norman’s death records. The instability of the idea of race may have led a registrar to label both men as racially Jewish. Additionally, a new concern for monitoring the assimilation and upward mobility of Jewish individuals may have also led someone to record this information prominently on a vital record.

Alternatively, perhaps it was the Rosenfelds’ own wishes to be identified as racially Jewish. In the early 20th century, some Jewish scholars defined Jewishness as a racial categorization as a mode of political resistance and self-defense (Jacobs 1891; Jacobson 1998:180). During this time, even Reform rabbis used the idea of race to explain Jewish difference. This strategy attempted to avoid the pitfalls and political connotations of explaining differences in ethnic terms that could appear traitorous and unpatriotic (Goldstein 2006). Jennie Rosenfeld’s involvement with the National Council of Jewish Women, noted earlier, suggests an above average identification with and interest in Jewish religion and heritage, though with perhaps a progressive bent. Perhaps, the identification as racially Jewish on these death certificates is also due to her influence and agenda while still reflecting the prevailing power of racial thinking in the early 20th century.

Conclusion

This article provided a brief overview of Jewish Alexandria history using short vignettes focused on Jacob Cohen in the 18th century, Jonas Glick in the 19th century, and Robert Whitestone in the 20th century. These three men’s experiences show how individuals worked hard to establish Jewish space in Alexandria while fighting for independence from Britain, weathering social and political ruptures during the Civil War, and responding to a changing region in the early 20th century. The Rosenfeld family who lived at 518-520 King Street provided a more in-depth case study for understanding the intricate interplay of religion, race, ethnicity, and gender in creating new Jewish identities in smaller cities at the turn of the 20th century. Max, Norman, and Jennie carefully balanced tradition and innovation while creating new cultural paths for themselves and their community (Praetzellis 2021:1053). Alexandria’s rich historical and archaeological records weave a complex tapestry that provides a fuller understanding of this past.



518-520 King Street today

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About the Author:

Dr. Tatiana Niculescu is an archaeologist and collections manager for the City of Alexandria. She holds bachelor’s degrees in physics and archaeology from the University of Virginia and master’s and doctoral degrees in anthropology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her work focuses on how individuals and communities constructed social identities through things and space and the ways in which people navigated a rapidly changing racial landscape at the turn of the 20th century.

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