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Biographical Sketch of Dr. K. Kohler.

By

Max J. Kohler, New York.

Dr. Kaufmann Kohler was born in Fürth, Bavaria, May 10th, 1843, being the oldest child of Moritz Kohler and Babette Löwenmayer Kohler. His parents were very pious and orthodox, and such were also Dr. Kohler's early years, and he cherished from birth on, an ardent love and sympathy for Orthodox Judaism at its best, with all its sanctifying and holy ceremonies. He was named "Kaufmann" after one of his grandfathers, and his own father was also a merchant, but one whose heart was more imbued with love for the law and deeds of benevolence, than for accumulation of this world's goods. On his mother's side, he was descended from a long line of rabbis for many generations back, and his grandfather David Löwenmayer, reader at Sulzberg, his uncle Rabbi Löwenmayer of Sulzberg and his cousin Dr. Löwenmayer of Frankfurt on the Oder, followed this ancestral calling; the great-great-great-grandfather of Dr. Kohler was Rabbi Ezra Jehuda Jacob of Sulzberg, who was quite a celebrity in his day, and his ethical will, made in 1755, was printed in the catalogue of the Hebrew manuscripts in the library of Judge Mayer Sulzberger, who is also a descendant of this same scholar. His mother was also a great grand-daughter of Rabbi David ben Joel Dispeck, Rabbi of Metz, whose scholarly career is also outlined in the Jewish Encyclopedia. Kaufmann Kohler's studies began at the school of the Jewish Orphan Asylum at Fürth, of which his father was one of the directors, and he paid for his son's instruction there, which was conducted in company with indigent Jewish orphans under the direction of the teacher, Reb. Simon Bamberger. The late Jewish journalist Moritz Ellinger, who was an inmate of this orphan asylum some thirteen years earlier, penned a beautiful tribute in German to Moritz Kohler, on the occasion of the latter's death, in the „Jewish Reformer“ of March 12th, 1886, as also in his own reminiscences, entitled "From the Old to the New" in the "Menorah" in 1898 (Vol. 25 p. 358). Mr. Ellinger portrayed the scenes of his own childhood,

in describing Reb. Moritz Kohler, while still a young man, attending conscientiously every day at the Orphan Asylum Synagogue, beginning at six o'clock in the morning in summer and at seven in winter, to see that the children were provided for and that every ceremonial was properly observed, for a trustee held no sincecure, and none was more conscientious or even scrupulous in performance of such holy obligations than he. So also it was my privilege to pay a last tribute of respect to the beloved mother of Kaufmann Kohler, in the shape of a brief necrology in the "American Hebrew", following her death in her ninetieth year on June 18th, 1905, and to note there certain other inherited traits and formative influences in her son's career, her loving and self-sacrificing devotion to husband and children, happiness at being able to contribute to the faith a teacher in Israel, self-belittling appreciation and gratitude over every joy befalling her, pious resignation over every sorrow, love for all the hallowed Jewish rites and ceremonies, and quaint blending of rigid orthodox beliefs and practices, with love for Schiller and Goethe and liberty of thought. In his biographical essay on "David Einhorn", published in the "David Einhorn Memorial Volume", Dr. Kohler has himself admirably portrayed religious conditions in Fürth, as they still were in his own school-days,

When Kaufmann Kohler reached his tenth year, Reb. Bamberger announced that he could not teach him anything further, but that his Talmudic bent ought to be encouraged elsewhere, and he was accordingly sent to study at Hassfurt on the Main for three years under Reb. Schülherr and was Bar Mitzwah there, and moved with him to Hochstädt near Würzburg in May 1857 for a further year, where he studied under Rabbi Lazarus Ottensoser also. Upon leaving there, he studied at Mayence for four years under Dr. M. Lehmann, Rabbi of the orthodox congregation there, and then attended the Yeshibah at Altona for two years under Rabbi Jacob Ettlinger. Thus far he had obtained secular instruction in addition under private teachers, but in the fall of 1862 he began to study for a year and a half at the Gymnasium at Frankfurt on the Main, and continued his Rabbinical studies under Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the distinguished orthodox leader. It is characteristic of his then frame of mind that he was far too orthodox even to hear Abraham Geiger, who was then lecturing at Frankfurt, much less study under him, though two of Geiger's sons, Ludwig Geiger and Berthold Geiger were his fellow pupils. When only twelve or thirteen years of age, he had preached from the pulpit of his uncle Dr. Löwenmayer, at Sulzberg, and his parents proudly named him "Weiser Salomon", disliking his first-name, "Kaufmann".

He also preached twice as a young man from the Nüremberg pulpit, as well as from the pulpit of his cousin, Dr. Löwenmayer, at Frankfurt. Dr. Kohler gave an excellent account of his religious state and early formative influences in a beautiful tribute, which he paid to his teacher, Samson Raphael Hirsch, before the Central Conference of American Rabbis, on the occasion of the celebration of the hundreth anniversary of that great teacher's birth in 1908 (See "Year Book", Vol. XVIII, pp. 210—14). Dr. Kohler well said: "I gladly offer on this occasion my tribute of regard and admiration for him whom I proudly call my teacher, and to whom I am indebted for the very best part of my innermost life. It may sound paradoxical, and yet it is true, that without knowing it, Samson Raphael Hirsch liberated me from the thralldom of blind authority worship and led me imperceptibly away from the old mode of thinking, or rather of not thinking, into the realms of free reason and research. His method of harmonizing modern culture, with ancient thought, however fanciful, fascinated me. His lofty idealism impressed me. He made me, the Yeshibah Bachur from Mayence and Altona, a modern man. The spirit of his teachings electrified me and became a life long influence to me. Samson Raphael Hirsch was imbued with the spirit of cultured humanity. In all his sermons and writings he deplored the narrowness of the Ghetto view, which estranged Jews from the world in which and for which they should live and work. His teachings were a bold attempt at a revival of Orthodoxy. He tried to galvanize its dry bones by the power of his fertile, resourceful and vigorous mind. . . . But no sooner is the scientific method of philological, historical, and psychological investigation applied to it, than the whole structure proves a fabric of cobwebs. This was my experience on entering the University, an enthusiastic follower of Hirsch. I soon found myself beset with doubts, which even my beloved teacher, to whom I poured out my whole heart, could no longer solve for me. The historical perception of things, which Hirsch lacked, had alienated Graetz, who became a follower of Ewald. My critical studies led me in the van of the new school, now known as the Kuenen-Wellhausen school — and I became a follower of Abraham Geiger . . . Romanticism misunderstands real life. We cannot live the dead past over again. Samson Raphael Hirsch had not the faintest idea of the historical growth of language and law, of custom and tradition, nor did he ever recognize the use or necessity of studying the various historical forces, or the strata of either Biblical, Talmudic or post-Talmudic Judaism. . . . For us the issue is between Samson Raphael Hirsch, the romanticist, the advocate of uncompromising stability, and Abraham Geiger, the Reform leader,

the inaugurator of historical research and of the progress of the inner life of Judaism."

His Frankfurt Gymnasium studies, and instruction under Samson Raphael Hirsch completed, Kaufmann Kohler, nevertheless, in 1864, felt irresistibly impelled to drink in modern scholarship at the Universities. He himself realized the risk and the costs, and, as he well said in his biography of David Einhorn: "The very intention of entering a University was, as I can testify from my own experience, thirty-five years later, regarded in the circles of orthodoxy in Fürth, as the first step towards apostasy. What the Proverbs say of the evil woman: 'None that go unto her return again', and 'Numerous are those slain by her' was in all seriousness, applied to university education."

Dr. Kohler is fond of relating the incident of his applying for the "B. H. Oppenheimer Stiftung" university scholarship, explaining to the trustee in charge of it that he, a pupil of Samson Raphael Hirsch, thirsted for a university training with the help of this scholarship, and how, amused at this opportunity of thwarting apparent destiny, this patron awarded the scholarship to him, telling him that the responsibility was his own! Eager to make the most of his opportunities Kaufmann Kohler studied for a year at the University of Munich (May 1864—1865), and then two and a half years at the University of Berlin, and finally for some months at the University of Erlangen, where he took his Doctor of Philosophy degree, November 13th, 1867, after the publication of his thesis "Der Segen Jakobs". Before leaving Frankfurt, he came under the influence of Abraham Geiger, and at the Universities, he was a pupil of Roediger, Dieterici, Droysen, Steinthal, Herman Strack and the elder Delitzsch. He also meantime continued his Hebrew studies at the Talmudic School under Dr. Landsberg, and received the diploma of Rabbi from Dr. Aub in Berlin in 1868, as also from his cousin Dr. Loewenmayer of Frankfurt on the Oder. Besides imbibing the historical point of view at the universities, which he emphasized as wholly lacking in Samson Raphael Hirsch's system, he fell under the influence of the Kuenen-Wellhausen school of Bible criticism, and the principles of evolution, as formulated by Darwin and his followers. Dr. Kohler's "Segen Jakobs" was one of the most radical works of Bible criticism published, and his views were so pronouncedly liberal that it soon became apparent that, despite his strong Jewish religious and historical frame of mind, no Jewish pulpit in Germany was likely to be tendered to him. Accordingly, at Geiger's advice, he continued his university studies with a view to preparing himself further for an academic career, and took post-graduate courses in 1868—1869 at

the University of Leipzig, particularly in Arabic and Persian, becoming also a frequent contributor to Geiger's "Zeitschrift". Through Geiger, he was brought in touch with the distinguished American Rabbis, David Einhorn and Max Lienthal, and in August, 1869, arrived on American soil to take charge of the pulpit of the Beth El Congregation of Detroit, from which, on recommendation of the three last-named, he had received a call a short time previously. The late Dr. B. Felsenthal, shortly before his death, published a personal letter ("Deborah" New Series, Vol. II, p. 215, July 1902), which he had received from Dr. Geiger under date of May 10th, 1869, in which, in announcing the acquisition of "eine ganz vorzügliche Kraft" for American Jewry in the person of Dr. Kohler, he added: "An ihm wird unsere Richtung einen ebenso kenntnisvollen, wissenschaftlich-vorwärtsstrebenden wie gesinnungstreuen und mutigen Vertreter gewinnen, der die erste Jugendfrische mit der vollen Mannesreife verbindet." Besides various essays contributed to Geiger's "Zeitschrift" and his Ph. D. thesis, Dr. Kohler published a German work on "Capital Punishment" before embarking for America, and also had contributed a few articles to the "Jewish Times" of New York.

Dr. Kohler's activities in Detroit were well summarized by Rabbi Franklin in the semi-centennial "History of Congregation Beth El, Detroit, Michigan", published in 1900 (pp. 34—36); he states that "his administration was in every sense effective and successful, and under his able guidance the congregation progressed with rapid strides. He was much beloved by all and to this day the members of the Temple Beth El regret that his work among them was for so short a period." During his ministry, the Tallith was put aside and the observance of the second day of the holidays was discarded. After two years' service Dr. Kohler accepted a call to the pulpit of Sinai Temple, Chicago, in October, 1871, but when the building of that congregation was destroyed in the Chicago fire of October, 1871, the Detroit congregation eagerly re-elected Dr. Kohler for a term of years, but the Chicago congregation determined to rebuild promptly and declined to release him. Soon after his arrival in America, Dr. Kohler became engaged to Johanna Einhorn, daughter of Rev. Dr. David Einhorn of New York, and they were married August 28th, 1870; his loyal, devoted, conscientious and self-sacrificing companion at once made his home life happy and free from cares, and ever continued to aid and encourage him in all his private and public duties. Soon after Dr. Kohler's arrival in Detroit the famous Philadelphia Rabbinical Reform Conference of November, 1869 took place, and Dr. Kohler was an active participant, though the youngest in age, and with a single excep-

tion," he has for years been the sole survivor of that gathering, which formulated Jewish Reform principles and included as leading spirits Drs. David Einhorn, Isaac M. Wise, Samuel Adler and Samuel Hirsch. At this conference, besides participating in the general discussion of a declaration of principles, proposed by Dr. Einhorn, Dr. Kohler submitted two declarations: one dealt with the actual and appropriate observance of the Sabbath, and the reading of prayers in the vernacular, with retention of Hebrew for only certain specified prayers, and the other with a proposed new translation of the Bible into German and English in the light of modern Jewish scholarship, and its inexpensive publication, and dissemination of the same, as also of a suitable Biblical reader for Sabbath Schools.

Dr. Kohler's services as minister of Sinai Congregation, Chicago, began in October 1871 and continued for eight years. The congregation was pronouncedly reform and had adopted the Einhorn prayer-book already in 1861, being the first Western congregation to do so. It was also the first American synagogue to hold Sunday services, these having been instituted by Dr. Kohler, to supplement the Saturday services, on January 15th, 1874. It is difficult to-day to realize the stir and the opposition which these and other innovations aroused in American Judaism at the time, and the courage and self-reliance their institution and maintenance involved; a glance at the Jewish papers of the day and the other polemical contemporary literature illustrates this, however. Dr. Kohler and his associates realized how essential it was for Judaism's own preservation and in order to maintain it as a power for good among its votaries, to cause it to adapt itself to new conditions, and to evolve a constructive, positive, living, faith out of the shattered remnants of the old, which was threatening to lose all hold upon its professors, even more by reason of purely superficial lip-service, still rendered to it in many quarters, than by the general frank disregard of its rites and ceremonies in practice. In the course of a masterly analysis of Dr. Kohler's pulpit services, contained in a discourse preached by Dr. Emil G. Hirsch (his brother-in-law, and successor in the Chicago pulpit) on "Sinai's Half Century" (Reform Advocate, May 6th, 1911), the latter called attention to the fact that Dr. Kohler's first Sunday lecture was entitled "The New Knowledge and the Old Faith", and he added: "No more succinct statement was ever formulated of our attitude and our aims. To Kohler we owe our enthusiasm for New Knowledge and our devotion withal to the old faith. How both may be reconciled he showed us then." Viewing our religion from the point of view of history and evolution

Dr. Kohler maintained and developed in our faith what is vital and important for us in our own day, and indicated what was ephemeral and outgrown, and contributed a mastery of the history of our religious evolution, to Einhorn's positive and constructive formulation of a living Jewish faith, seeking expression in our vernacular and in present-day terms. Nor is it a mere accident that Dr. Kohler was the first Rabbi, and probably the first minister of any denomination, to accept the Evolution theory, and reconcile the same with belief in God, that theory upon which almost all modern science rests. Unfortunately, the strong attachment of many of the older members of Sinai Congregation at that time to the German language and literature, demanded that the sermons should be preached chiefly in German, and this circumstance, first in Chicago and later for a considerable time also in New York, retarded for a while Dr. Kohler's progress as an English-speaking preacher (though he has long since mastered the spoken as well as written English), and in a measure for a time retarded full exercise of his influence over the younger people, to whom German was a foreign tongue. In addition to his pulpit work, Dr. Kohler was always a frequent contributor in Chicago to the Jewish press and to the scientific journals, notably to the "Jewish Times", the "Jewish Advance", Geiger's *Zeitschrift* and the *Journal of the German Oriental Society*. He was also an examiner and speaker at the first graduation from the Hebrew Union College, at the invitation of the great organizer and master who then presided over the college, Isaac M. Wise.

Upon the retirement of his father-in-law, the Rev. Dr. David Einhorn from the pulpit of Temple Beth El, New York, Dr. Kohler became his successor as minister of that congregation, in September, 1879, and continued to officiate there till he accepted the presidency of the Hebrew Union College as successor to Isaac M. Wise in 1903. As minister of Temple Beth El, he maintained for it its rank as one of the chief reform congregations of the United States. The need of preserving attachment and connection between the younger generation and the synagogue induced him, at different periods, to institute Sunday services, to supplement but never to replace the Saturday services, and the first of these series of lectures was instituted soon after his arrival in New York. These encountered opposition from some elements within the congregation, as as well as from many without, for the congregation had been formed under Dr. Einhorn by the fusion of an orthodox organization with his own radical reform Temple. Under Dr. Kohler's leadership, the congregation grew in numbers and influence, until the need for larger

quarters became felt, and the old synagogue building at 63rd Street and Lexington Avenue was abandoned for the magnificent new structure at Fifth Avenue and Seventy-sixth street in September, 1891. The increasing immigration from Eastern Europe, beginning in 1881, gave the orthodox an ever-growing numerical preponderance, and Dr. Kohler became the spokesman for Reform in a series of notable discourses delivered in answer to Rev. Dr. Alexander Kohut's assault on Reform in 1885, published thereafter under the title "Backwards or Forwards". After consulting with Dr. Isaac M. Wise and Dr. Samuel Hirsch, Dr. Kohler called together the "Pittsburgh Conference" of Nov. 1885, which adopted a declaration of principles for Reform Judaism, on the basis of a draft prepared by Dr. Kohler, which is still the most authoritative exposition of our principles (See Philipson's "The Reform Movement in Judaism", pp. 491—492 and citation). Dr. Kohler was one of the most active members of the Committee which prepared the "Union Prayer Book" on behalf of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and particularly the second volume, and thus secured or preserved in large degree what was best in Einhorn's German prayer-book for the great majority of the reform congregations of the land. He has been an active member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, since that organization was started in 1889 by Dr. Isaac M. Wise, and since 1903 its Honorary President. He was also, for many years, president of the New York Board of Jewish Ministers. The importance of Sabbath School instruction impressed him from an early day, and he developed the curriculum in the N. Y. Beth El Sabbath School to high standards of excellence, published a "Guide to Instruction in Judaism" in 1899, as also an elaborate essay on methods of teaching of Biblical History, was active for many years in the "Jewish Chautauqua" Movement, and is active in the Jewish Teacher's Institute organization. He also edited the "Sabbath Visitor" from 1881 to 1882, and was editor-in-chief of "The Jewish Reformer" in 1886. He has been an indefatigable contributor to the Jewish popular and scientific press, writing, especially, besides the periodicals already named, for the "Zeitgeist", "American Hebrew", "Menorah", "Reform Advocate", "Jewish Exponent", "Jewish Comment", "Jewish Messenger", "American Israelite", Unity, Hebraica, Jewish Quarterly Review, American Jews Annual, Quarterly Journal of Theology, Hebrew Union College Annual, Reports of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Judæan Year Book, and the "Liberales Judentum" Zeitschrift, "Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums", "Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland" and "Jüdisches Jahrbuch". He also published a very large number of

sermons, lectures and scientific and popular studies. Dr. Kohler was department editor throughout its publication of the "Jewish Encyclopedia", in charge of Jewish theology and philosophy, and did exhaustive pioneer work in systematizing and developing those important fields of research, and brought his wide knowledge and extensive reading to bear in the revision of many articles in other departments. He edited Dr. Einhorn's German Collected Sermons in 1880 and recently added a biographical essay to the new edition published in 1911 as "The David Einhorn Memorial Volume". He devoted a considerable amount of time to communal activities in New York City, outside of his pulpit work, organized a Young Ladies Charitable Aid Society in connection with his congregation, and took particular interest in developing religious instruction among the immigrants on the lower east-side of New York, and in the religious instruction of Jewish orphans. Shortly before his election to the Hebrew Union College presidency, in 1903, he accepted the invitation of his friend, Dr. Schechter, to deliver a course of lectures on "Jewish Apocryphal Literature" before the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, and he had previously read a paper, since published, on "The Psalms and their Place in the Liturgy" before Gratz College of Philadelphia.

Dr. Kohler has made close and original studies on "Beginnings of Christianity", apocryphal literature, history of the Essenes and in Jewish ethics, and has been particularly interested for many years in comparative religion, comparative folk lore, Jewish history and history in general, and has collected a large library, in aid of his studies and general reading.

After careful consideration, he was unanimously elected to succeed Dr. Isaac M. Wise as President of the Hebrew Union College on February 19th, 1903 and entered upon his new duties in Cincinnati in September and was formally installed on October 18th, 1903. Upon learning of his proposed withdrawal, his New York congregation asked him to reconsider, but complied with his request to release him, and elected him honorary minister for life, and presented a testimonial of appreciation and regard to him on his sixtieth birthday, May 10th, 1903, on which occasion and at a Judæan banquet in his honor on April 3, 1903 addresses on his varied activities were delivered by Dr. Hirsch, Dr. Schechter, Dr. Silverman, Dr. R. Grossman, Dr. Samuel Schulman, Prof. Richard Gottheil and by officers of the congregation and allied societies (See "Am. Hebrew", account). Dr. Kohler promptly took steps to extend the college courses and enlarge the curriculum, and has rendered the instruction more thorough, scientific, and varied. Besides his general and administrative duties as President of the College, he has filled

the chair of professor of homiletics, theology and Hellenistic Literature. A new College Building has just been erected and dedicated, and everything is being done to develop the work of training future teachers in Israel and imbue them with religious enthusiasm, so conscientiously and untiringly started by Isaac M. Wise. Dr. Kohler's courses at the College enabled him still further to systematize and perfect his studies in the field of Jewish theology, and he published in 1910 a comprehensive German pioneer work which he had been selected out of all living Jewish scholars to prepare by the "Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums", in its series "Grundriss der Gesamtwissenschaft des Judentums", entitled "Grundriss einer systematischen Theologie des Judentums auf geschichtlicher Grundlage". Enthusiastic reviews of this work have been published by distinguished Jewish and Christian scholars, including Dr. Samuel Schulman (Jew. Exponent, March 25th, 1910), Rev. Dr. H. G. Enelow (The Temple, March 11, 1910), Dr. Adolph Guttmacher (Jewish Comment, Feb. 18th, 1910), Dr. Max Landsberg (Reform Advocate, May 21, 1910), Prof. D. Neumark (Allg. Zeitung des Judenthums, Vol. 74 p. 608), Israel Abrahams (London "Jew. Chronicle", Dec. 1st, 1911), Dr. Carl Seligmann (in Liberales Judentum), Prof. Wm. A. Brown of the Union Theological Seminary (Am. Journ. of Theology 1911, Vol. 15 p. 128) and Prof. Bousset (in Theol. Literatur-Zeitung, April 13th, 1912).

A number of years ago, under the auspices of the Jewish Publication Society of America, a new Jewish translation of the Bible by American Jewish scholars was attempted and Dr. Kohler undertook the translation of the book of "Psalms" and served as a member of the Committee of Editors, of which Rev. Dr. Marcus Jastrow was Chairman. The only book of the Bible published in this series was Dr. Kohler's translation of the "Psalms", as revised by the Committee. During recent years a more systematic and ambitious effort to prepare and publish a Jewish translation of the Bible was undertaken, jointly, by the Jewish Publication Society and the Central Conference of American Rabbis; and Dr. Kohler has been serving as a member of this joint revision committee which consists, besides, of Dr. Cyrus Adler, Dr. Solomon Schechter, Dr. Joseph Jacobs, Dr. David Philipson, Dr. Samuel Schulman and Dr. Max Margolis. Besides his College work, Dr. Kohler's scientific and literary activities continue to be very comprehensive.

Dr. and Mrs. Kohler have four children, Max J., Edgar J., Rose and Lili.