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JACOB SINGER: A SYMPOSIUM

Jacob Singer (1883-1964): Bio-Bibliography of a Jewish-Latvian-Nebraskan Sociologist ¹

Michael R. Hill and Natalja Callahan

THE PROFESSIONAL LIFE of Jacob Singer was deeply entwined with religion and thus exemplifies the sociological life histories of many early sociologists in the United States and elsewhere. Numerous Protestant sociologists, such as Charles A. Ellwood (1988) and the religious men of the early Chicago School, e.g., Albion Small, Charles R. Henderson, George Vincent and Charles Zeublin (Deegan 1988: 71-104), interpenetrated the boundaries between sociology and religion as did several Catholic sociologists, including, for example, Eva J. Ross (Hill 1999) and the members of the Christus Rex Society in Ireland (Daly 2006). Adding to the religious diversity of this phenomenon, Jacob Singer explored sociology from his deeply committed perspective as a musically-talented Jewish rabbi.

Biography

Jacob Singer was born on May 5, 1883, in Kreutzberg, Latvia. Many events and details of his life are described in his first-person life history document, reproduced elsewhere in this issue of *Sociological Origins*.² He was the son of Joshua Heschel Singer, a rabbi, born in Russia in 1848. Jacob emigrated with his parents to the United States in 1892. He attended public schools in Buffalo, New York. He then entered Hebrew Union College in 1903 and matriculated in the University of Cincinnati, receiving the A.B. degree from the latter school in 1907 and the A.M. degree in 1908. He was subsequently ordained as a rabbi by Hebrew Union College in 1909 and served as rabbi for the Beth Israel Congregation of York, Pennsylvania, from 1909 to 1912. Simultaneously, he pursued graduate study at Johns Hopkins University from 1910 to 1912. Singer married Hortense Gundersheimer, in Baltimore, Maryland, on August 31, 1913. Together, they



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² See pp. 26-36, below.

had four children: Ellis David, Barbara Joan, Emily Dorothy (Kaplan), and Margaret G. (Leibik).

Singer's eleven year sojourn in Nebraska began in 1912 when he began service as rabbi for the B'nai Jeshurun Congregation, in Lincoln, Nebraska. This association lasted until 1923, during which time he also undertook courses at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore during 1916, served as a Chaplain in the U.S. Army, at Camp Funston and Fort Riley, Kansas, from 1917 to 1918, and began his doctoral studies in sociology at the University of Nebraska. Prior to 1918, the Singers resided at 1519 "C" Street in Lincoln, Nebraska, and thereafter at 2345 "B" Street.

Singer was continuously enrolled in graduate courses at Nebraska from 1913 to 1917. In addition to several supplemental courses in philosophy (wherein he studied with Edgar L. Hinman and Hartley Burr Alexander), Singer concentrated in sociology, completing General Sociology, The Family I & II, Seminar on American Politics & Government I & II, and Seminar on the Family under the tutelage of George Elliott Howard. From Hutton Webster, he took Primitive Religion I & II, Round Table in Social Anthropology I, II & III. And, from Lucile Eaves, he completed Criminal Sociology. His doctoral thesis on "Taboo in the Hebrew Scriptures" was accepted in June, 1925.



Jacob Singer — 1918

During the crucial period when his dissertation was finalized, he became a member of the American Sociological Society, from 1923 to 1927.

Singer's sociology professors at Nebraska comprised a distinguished quartet. George Elliott Howard had earlier founded the "institutional history" perspective and was president of the American Sociological Society in 1917. Hutton Webster, a former student of G.E. Howard and Edward A. Ross, then held the first chair of social anthropology in the United States and later remembered Singer, whose dissertation he directed, as a notable student (Webster 1952: 38). Lucile Eaves was the first female faculty member in the Nebraska sociology program, where she taught from 1910 to 1915 before becoming director of research for the Women's Educational and Industrial Union in Boston. Although Singer took no courses from Hattie Plum Williams, she was important administratively. Williams earned her Ph.D. at Nebraska under George Elliott Howard and later became chair of the sociology program in 1922, serving until 1928, during which time Singer completed and successfully defended his doctoral dissertation.

Coincident with his graduate training and his rabbinical appointment, Singer was also named Assistant Professor of History and Theory of Music in the School of Fine Arts at the University of Nebraska from 1916 to 1918. Singer's wife, Hortense, was named an Accredited Teacher of Applied Music (piano) in the School of Fine Arts in July, 1916. And, from 1918 to 1923, he was elevated to Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of History and Theory of Music in the School of Fine Arts. Singer's office at this time was in Room 301, Library Hall. His courses included: (THM 70) Ear Training; (THM 70 and 71) Elementary Harmony; (THM 175) Counterpoint; (THM 177, 178, 179, and 180) History of Music. Singer also participated in several civic enterprises, including service on the Lincoln, Nebraska, Social Welfare Board.

From Nebraska, Singer moved to Chicago, Illinois, where he served as Rabbi at Temple Mizpah, from October 15, 1923 to 1953. Temple Mizpah, during Singer's lifetime, was located at 1615 W. Morse Avenue, on the corner of Morse and Ashland Avenues. He was elected president of the Chicago Rabbinical Association from 1939 to 1941. Continuing his academic interests, he was appointed Lecturer on Hebrew Liturgical Music and Church Music in the School of Music at Northwestern University from 1931 to 1941. Singer's 1937-38 course for The Great Liturgies series in the School of Music was titled: (C15a) The Jewish Synagogue and Its Music. At Northwestern, he also became Director of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation from 1933 to 1934. In 1953, he was made Rabbi Emeritus at Temple Mizpah, a position he held until his death. Jacob Singer died on August 5, 1964, in Chicago, Illinois.

Major Themes

Singer's published work is marked fundamentally by his professional commitments as a religious leader. Only a few specifically prose liturgical writings, such as sermons, survive. Examples of the latter, presumably representative, are the

“Sermon for the Laying of the Cornerstone” (1923),³ “Einstein’s Religion” (1931), and a slim, privately-published volume, *A Sheaf of Writings* (1962). He was also interested in the pragmatic, educational aspects of rabbinical duties, reflected by writings on “Adult Education and Judaism: Outline and Syllabi of some suggested courses, including Methodology and Bibliography” (1928b) and “Audio-Visual Aids in Teaching the Bible” (1945).

More numerous are Singer’s musical compositions and writings about religious — and secular — music *per se*. Music was a constant thread throughout Singer’s life and he was deeply concerned with the role of music in the synagogue. He played an influential role as co-editor of — and a contributor to — the *Union Hymnal* (1932), published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Singer’s grasp of the institutional and cultural role of music, both secular and sacred, is astutely revealed in “The Aims of Music-Study in the University” (1918a),⁴ written while he was a faculty member in the School of Fine Arts at the University of Nebraska. Singer asserted:

The references to music scattered in the literatures of all peoples, the study of liturgies, of modality, polyphony and all musical forms are all of one piece in the general account of human progress. Every historical event of the first magnitude has its counterpart in the spirit manifested in art.

In specifically noting the societal importance of music, Singer echoed Harriet Martineau’s (1838/1989: 74) earlier point that “architectural remains, epitaphs, civic registers, national music,” and the like, provide significant insights for the sociological observer.

Singer’s major sociological work, and his most lengthy publication, is *Taboo in the Hebrew Scriptures* (1928). This project was formally announced in the list of dissertations then “in progress” in the News and Notes section of the *American Journal of Sociology* (March, 1916: 682), with the working title of “Religious Taboo in the Bible.” Singer’s *Taboo* echoes several themes developed in works published by his major professor, Hutton Webster, including *Rest Days* (1916, especially pp. 242-271), *Taboo: A Sociological Study* (1943), and *Magic: A Sociological Study* (1948). Webster held the first American chair of social anthropology. He was a member of the American Sociological Society and was both “anthropologist” and “sociologist” in much the same sense as was Émile Durkheim. Singer completed his dissertation in 1925, and it was published by Open Court in 1928. The work documents and explicates the survival and subsequent reinterpretation of primaevae taboos in received scriptural texts. Of this work, Webster (1952: 38) said, “Rabbi Jacob Singer’s thesis, *Taboo in the Hebrew Scriptures*, could only have been written by a liberal-minded Jew familiar with the Hebrew language.” Singer later opined that it would have been better titled, “From Taboo to Holiness in the Hebrew Scriptures.”

³ Reproduced below, pp. 41-44.

⁴ Reproduced below, pp. 37-40.

Representative excerpts from the dissertation are published elsewhere in this issue of *Sociological Origins*.⁵

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⁵ See below, pp. 45-55.

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- Records of Temple Mizpah (Range 11, Side B, Shelf 21, boxes 1-2, folders 1-14)

Box 1

- Folder 1: Rabbi Singer's Correspondence & Papers 1939-58
- Folder 2: Vital Statistics 1923-68
- Folder 3: Vital Statistics 1923-68
- Folder 4: Programs 1920-64
- Folder 5: Services 1947-53

Box 2

- Folder 6: Services 1947-53
- Folder 7: Dramatic Programs
- Folder 8: Liturgical Music
- Folder 9: Liturgical Music
- Folder 10: Notes for Rabbi Singer's Book [Note: The notecards for Singer's Book on Taboos were removed from this folder and stored on the "Oversize Shelf," but could not be located as of August 1999].
- Folder 11: Miscellany
- Folder 12: Bulletins 1967-70
- Folder 13: Bulletins 1973-77
- Folder 14: Letters Re Cantor Selig Lowenstamm's Compositions

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