

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Reverend Abraham de Sola (1825 – 1882)

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Note: All quotes are from the **History and Biographical Gazetteer of Montreal to the Year 1892**, by John Douglas Borthwick, John Lovell & Son, Montréal (Québec), 1892, pages 465 – 469. The book may be downloaded at no charge at <http://books.google.com/>

Introduction

The name de Sola appears prominently in the annals of Spanish Jewish history.¹ The de Solas may have settled in Andalusia (in southern Spain) as early as the sixth century.

They held various offices under the Saracenic Caliphs at Toledo and Cordova, and afterwards when they removed to Navarre they were received with like favor by the Gothic Princes. From their estate in this province, their surname had its origin. A particularly distinguished member of the family was Don Bartolomeu de Sola, who, in reward for his services, was ennobled, and, after being a Minister of State, held for a while the position of Viceroy of Navarre.

During the 14th Century another de Sola distinguished himself fighting under the Infante of Aragon, and figured conspicuously in the Spanish Wars of that period. During the succeeding centuries the family continued to hold an illustrious place, owing to the large number of eminent scholars, physicians and statesmen it produced.

The de Solas, as well as all Jews living in Spain, were negatively affected by the persecution of the Catholic Church during the 14th and 15th centuries. When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, most of the family fled to Holland, although a branch of the family settled in Portugal. These family members were forcibly converted to Catholicism in 1497 and yet managed to live as secret Jews (Marranos). In 1749 managed to leave Portugal which, strangely enough, persecuted secret Jews and yet did not let them immigrate. They settled in England where they could finally practice Judaism openly.

Early Years in England

Abraham de Sola, a descendent of the de Solas who had settled in England, were born on September 18, 1825.

His father, David Aaron de Sola, was Senior Minister of the Portuguese Jews of London and was eminent as a Hebrew author, having produced among many other works an elegant translation of the Jewish Forms of Prayer, also, in conjunction with Dr. Raphall, an edition of Genesis, very valuable to Biblical students on account of its commentaries and copious notes, and the first English translation of Eighteen Treatises of the *Mishna*. His mother was the daughter of Dr. Raphael Meldola, Chief Rabbi of the Spanish-Jewish congregations of Britain. The Meldolas had given eminent Chief Rabbis to Europe for twelve generations.

Abraham de Sola received careful tuition [instruction] in all the usual branches of a liberal education. He became early engrossed in the study of Oriental languages and literature and of theology, and continued to devote his attention to those subjects until he acquired that profound knowledge of them which subsequently won him so prominent a place among scholars.

Montreal and Beyond

In 1846 Reverend de Sola was offered the position of spiritual leader of Congregation Shearith Israel, the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue in Montreal, Canada. He arrived in that city in early 1847 at the age of 21. In 1852 he married Esther Joseph, whose father was one of the earliest Jewish settlers in Montreal.

His able pulpit discourses soon attracted attention. Dr. de Sola's abilities, however, were not destined to be confined exclusively to his official duties. Before leaving London he had been associated in the editorial work of a Hebrew journal, *The Voice of Jacob*, and soon after his arrival in Canada he delivered a course of lectures on Jewish history before the Mercantile Literary Association. In 1848, he published his "Notes on the Jews of Persia Under Mohammed Shah, and also "A History of the Jews of Persia." Within the same year there appeared his important work on "Scripture Zoology." Soon afterwards he published his "Lectures on the Mosaic Cosmogony [origin of the universe]." This was followed by his "Cosmography [Description of the Universe] of [R. Abraham] Peritsol,"² a work displaying such erudition that it gained a wide circulation in Europe, and was reprinted there in several languages. His next work, "A Commentary upon Samuel Hannagid's Introduction to the Talmud" was a book which deservedly attracted much attention, owing to the light which it threw upon an interesting portion of rabbinical literature, and to its depth of Talmudic knowledge. In 1853 he published, conjointly with the Rev. J. J. Lyons of New York a work on the Jewish Calendar System, chiefly valuable on account of its excellent prefatory treatise upon the Jewish system of calculating time.

De Sola's mastery of Semitic languages attracted the attention of scholars at McGill University. In 1853, after having served as a lecturer for several years, he was appointed Professor of Hebrew and Oriental Literature at this institution, a position he held until his

death. In 1858, in recognition of his extraordinary scholastic accomplishments, McGill conferred upon him the degree of LL.D.

However, Reverend de Sola's interests were not limited to Semitics and rabbinics. In 1861 he published "The Sanatory Institutions of the Hebrews."

The work was published in two parts and was an exhaustive exposition of the hygienic laws of the Hebrews, as exhibited in both Scriptural and rabbinical writings, [and] critically examined [them] in the light of modern scientific knowledge. It was a production which evinced how deeply the author had penetrated into scientific as well as rabbinical paths of learning.

In 1860 he was asked by the editor of *The British American Journal*, a publication devoted to physical and medical science, to write a series of articles entitled "The Employment of Anæsthetics in Connection with Jewish Law."

Dr. de Sola's wide range of studies had made him very popular both as a public lecturer and as a contributor to various literary papers. The themes of some of these were afterwards much amplified by him, and republished in their elaborated and completed form. At comparatively short intervals he gave to the public his works on "Scripture Botany," "Sinaitic Inscriptions," "Hebrew Numismatics," "The Ancient Hebrews as Promoters of the Arts and Sciences," "The Rise and Progress of the Great Hebrew Colleges," and "Philological Studies in Hebrew and the Aramaic Languages." Turning his attention again to Jewish History, he, in 1869, wrote his interesting "Life of Shabethai Tsevi, the False Messiah." The following year he completed his "History of the Jews of Poland," and in 1871 he published his "History of the Jews of France."

Reverend de Sola maintained an almost frenetic pace of academic activity in addition to his pastoral duties at Congregation Shearith Israel. He accepted the Chair of Hebrew at the Montreal Presbyterian College and later an appointment as a Lecturer in Spanish Literature at McGill.

Dr. de Sola frequently lectured in the United States. In 1872 he was invited by the administration of President Ulysses S. Grant to deliver the opening prayer of the United States Congress. This was the first time that someone who was not a citizen of the United States nor a Christian was given this honor. It was also particularly significant given that relations between Britain and the US had lately been particularly strained. The choice of Dr. de Sola, who was a resident of Canada and a citizen of the British Empire, marked a move by the US at rapprochement with England. In fact, Mr. Gladstone, then premier of England, as well as Sir Edward Thornton, the British ambassador to Washington, extended the thanks of the British government to Reverend de Sola.

His incessant involvement in a myriad of activities eventually took its toll on his health. He was forced to take a year off from his activities and spent that year in Europe recuperating from his failing health. Dr. de Sola was visiting his sister in New York when

he passed away on June 5, 1882. His body was brought to Montreal where he was interred.

This man, who had accomplished so much in so many disciplines, clearly left a void which no one else could fill.



¹ For biographical sketches of 34 prominent members of this family, please see <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?letter=S&artid=889#2882>

² In 1849 **The Occident** published a series of essays by Dr. de Sola titled **Hebrew Authors and Their Opponents**. (See <http://www.jewish-history.com/occident/volume6/feb1849/authors.html>) His article, **The Cosmography of R. Abraham Peritsol**, appeared in April 1849 in Volume VII, no.1. (See <http://www.jewish-history.com/occident/volume7/apr1849/authors.html>)