

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part ---)

Israel Rokeach (1841 – 1933): Founder of I. Rokeach & Sons

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **History of Brooklyn Jewry** by Samuel P. Abelow, Scheba Publishing Company, Brooklyn, NY, 1937. This book may be downloaded at no cost from

http://books.google.com/books/about/History_of_Brooklyn_Jewry.html?id=ttUOAAAAIAAJ

Introduction

Most kosher consumers are familiar with the Rokeach brand of kosher foods. What they may not realize, however, is that this brand has been around since 1890, when Israel Rokeach came to America and founded a kosher soap factory. This small soap enterprise eventually grew into a large company known throughout the world as I. Rokeach and Sons. The company at one time marketed a large array of kosher food products. In 2006 R.A.B. Food Group, which had earlier purchased Manischewitz, purchased substantially all of the assets and assumed certain specified liabilities of the privately held Rokeach. The Rokeach brands include, among others, Rokeach and Mishpacha. Manischewitz continues to market a variety of products under the Rokeach and Mishpacha labels.

This article will trace the life of Israel Rokeach, the man who built I. Rokeach and Sons into what was at one time a major kosher food producer.

Sketch of the Life of Israel Rokeach

[Israel] “Rokeach was born August 1, 1841, in Wilkowitz, Russia. His father was Rabbi A. L. Rokeach, a great scholar and direct descendant of Rabbi Eliezer Rokeach, chief rabbi of Holland, who was a descendant of Rabbi Eliezer of Garmeiza, one of the noted commentators of the Talmud. Israel’s mother was Miriam Rokeach (nee Ritefsky). Young Rokeach received a splendid Jewish training. In addition to studying with eminent rabbis, he also studied with his own father, and then with Rabbi Zusche Wasserzug, the rabbi of Werbelov. Rokeach’s wife, Hannah Breindel Cohen, was the daughter of Reb. Aaron Cohen, who claimed descent from Reb Saul Wahl, the ‘King Over Night,’ a legendary figure famous in Jewish history in Poland.¹

“As a young man, Rokeach went to Kovno, the capital of what is now Lithuania, where he established a factory for the manufacture of perfume and soap. There he won the

friendship of the finest Jewish families and was held in high esteem by the Kovner gaon, Reb. Isaac Elchanan. In Kovno, he devised his first two inventions - the manufacture of kosher soap and a method of imprinting the word kosher to penetrate through each cake of soap. The historical 'hechsher' on this soap by Rabbi Isaac Elchanan was also a high tribute to Israel Rokeach himself."

Shortly after arriving in America in 1890, Israel Rokeach founded a factory for the manufacture of kosher soap in New York. This small soap enterprise, in the course of over forty years, grew into a large company known throughout the world as I. Rokeach and Sons. It manufactured and marketed a variety of kosher products. On December 29, 1929 the company opened a new million dollar building featuring the latest improvements in the manufacture of soap and for the protection of the health of the workers. The factory was located on Wythe Avenue.

Practically to his last days, the patriarchal founder was at his office almost daily and took an active interest in all matters connected with the business. However, in addition to his business endeavors Rokeach devoted much of his time and energy in helping to organize the early Jewish communal institutions located on the Lower East Side. In fact, most of his time was spent receiving rabbis, communal workers and representatives of institutions who called on him for charitable missions.

The name of Israel Rokeach became inscribed in the hearts of Jews throughout the world, because of his generous contributions to charity and deep interest in all matters concerning Judaism. He was very involved with the Mizrahi Organization and also had a special building fund that supported the efforts to establish Jewish settlements in Palestine. Eventually this fund led to the establishment of three communities in Eretz Yisroel - Givat Rokeach, Kfar Marmareck and Mokor Chaim. Furthermore, over the years Rokeach contributed \$50,000 to the Jewish National Fund, a huge sum in those days.

Rokeach lived on only a third of his share of the earnings he received from his business. The rest he donated to charity. His largest charitable contributions were made yearly before Rosh Hashanah.

"On April 29th, 1930, a banquet was given at the Brooklyn Jewish Center in honor of Israel Rokeach's forty years of communal work in America. The most prominent Jews of all classes participated, including Rabbi Abraham Shapiro of Kovno, who was on a visit to the United States and who greeted his distinguished townsman in his own name and in the name of Lithuanian Jewry. Among the hundreds of Jewish leaders who sent greetings on this occasion were Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Chief Rabbi of Palestine (died, 1935), Dr. Chaim Weizmann and M. M. Usishkin [a Russian Zionist leader]."

As mentioned above, Israel Rokeach was instrumental in the founding of many important Jewish institutions and organizations. In 1914 he joined the effort to found a kosher hospital in Brooklyn. There were a number of obstacles that had to be overcome before the Beth Moses Hospital, which was located at the corner of Stuyvesant and Hart Streets,

became a reality. The October 29, 1920 issue of the **American Hebrew** reported the following regarding the dedication ceremony that took place on October 24, 1920;

Rabbi I. I. Leventhal of the Jewish Center of Brooklyn emphasized the importance of Kosher and a Jewish environment to the immigrant Jew, who in his early stages of his acquaintance with America, finds himself in hospital care. Beth Moses Hospital has two kitchens which will assure the serving of strictly Kosher food.

The hospital has complete, modern equipment for treatment and research. A majority of its 165 beds are in free wards. It has eighteen private rooms and small wards for which moderate fees will be charged. A large dispensary will further increase the hospital's usefulness.

The cornerstone was laid in October 1918 and the work of construction has just been completed. The institution will be opened for the reception of patients in early November. The new hospital is a five-story fireproof brick structure. It has four operating rooms and a portion of its topmost story, which affords fullest light and ventilation, is given over to children's and infants rooms. The X-ray unit and research laboratories are well equipped to enable the hospital staff to aid the progress of medical science.

Israel Rokeach served as treasurer of Beth Moses Hospital. In 1947 Beth Moses Hospital merged with the United Zion Hospital with the result that the Maimonides Medical Center was established.

“Israel Rokeach died Friday, August 11, 1933. The funeral took place on Sunday, August 13th. The mourners numbered over 5,000 persons. Cables, telegrams and letters of condolence were received from Jewish communities and individuals of many countries. The body was later taken to Palestine, where Israel Rokeach came to his eternal rest in a grave which he had provided for in his lifetime, on the historic Mount of Olives cemetery. There he lies, together with the remains of his wife, Hannah Breindel Rokeach, who died in New York on February 5, 1906.”

¹ See **Poland – Jewish king for one day** at <http://strangeside.com/poland-jewish-king-for-one-day/>