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DID HAYM SALOMON REALLY FINANCE THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION?

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Posted May 30 2007

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(Note: All quotes are from Early American Jewish History, The Jews of Pennsylvania and the South, 1655-1790, by Jacob Rader Marcus, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1953, Chapter 8, pages 132-165.)

The Legend

One of the most fascinating figures in American Jewish history is Haym Salomon (1740-1785).

"Salomon, as this legend has it, was a Polish Jewish immigrant who had fled his native land after the partition of 1772. A friend of Pulaski and Kosciusko, he turned, like them, to these hospitable shores. He landed in New York, became a patriot forthwith, and along with others was commissioned by Washington to destroy the warehouse; and the ships of the city after its occupation by the British in 1776.

"In this underground activity he worked closely with General Alexander McDougall, the New York political radical. He was finally caught, thrown into prison, sentenced to death by General Clinton, but managed to free himself by a bribe of a large sum of gold, and fled on August 11, 1778, to Philadelphia."

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In 1778, France formed an alliance with the fledgling United States. When the Dutch became allies of France in 1779, both began to lend money to the American government. It was Haym Salomon, so the story goes, "who was charged with the negotiation of the entire amount of those munificent grants of pecuniary supplies from the governments of France and Holland.

"As the French troops began to pour in, he handled all the funds for the support and maintenance of their sea and land forces, 150,000,000 livres, on which he received the regular

mercantile commission. All the money he made through these transactions he invested in the Revolutionary cause.

"But these large financial dealings - so the tale continues - by no means exhausted his contribution to the struggle for American liberty and independence. Frequently he supplied funds to members of Congress, who without his aid could not have remained in office, for they were reduced to their last dollar. Among those whom he so helped were James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Randolph, Joseph Reed, Arthur St. Clair, James Wilson, and a number of others.

"Haym Salomon, continues the legend, was the real financial hero of the Revolution: 'the man that stood behind Morris and actually produced the actual sums with which the Revolution moved on.' He advanced to the government - in one form or another - about \$800,000 of his own money, but when he died, leaving a young widow and helpless children, nothing was left for them. Thus far the story is a curious hodgepodge of fact and fiction."

The Real Story

The veracity of this tale of financial patriotism and sacrifice on the part of Haym Salomon has been debated by many. The root of the controversy goes back to 1827, when Haym Moses Salomon, the youngest son of Haym Salomon, wrote to James Madison about his father's affairs in an attempt to recover the large sums which he claimed his father had advanced the U.S. government during the Revolution.

"In spite of the claims made by his family a century ago, and despite the fact that at

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various times committees of Congress recognized validity in their demands, members of the family have never received one cent. In 1893 the Salomons were willing to waive all rights to financial reimbursement, if only a medal were struck recognizing the services of their distinguished ancestor. Still nothing was done, even though a Congressional committee viewed the suggestion favorably.

"When the Federation of Polish Jews of America sought, on the basis of the family tradition, to erect a monument to his memory in New York, it met with strenuous opposition and a denial of the truth of the Salomon story. Indignantly the proponents countered: 'America failed to repay the money he advanced, and now men seek to rob him of his posthumous fame.'

"Max J. Kohler, of German Jewish descent and an able student of American history, was among those who opposed the monument. The project to honor Salomon, he maintained, was motivated not so much by the wish to enshrine the memory of the man, as by the desire of the Polish Jewish federation to emphasize the fact that Polish Jews had come to these shores long before the Russian pogroms of 1881."

The facts, as Kohler clearly demonstrated in his pamphlet "Haym Salomon, the Patriot Broker of the Revolution,"^[1] are that Salomon did *not* lend or give the government huge sums of money. This is because he never had such sums of money to give away. By his own admission, he arrived in Philadelphia in 1778 without any money. It is documented that it was not until 1782 that he was financially "back on his feet and able to send money to his impoverished family in Eastern Europe.

"It would have been impossible for him to have made such fabulous sums in four years; had he done so, he would have been the richest man in America, and there is no real evidence to prove that he ever possessed substantial wealth.

"Salomon himself, moreover, never made the claim that the government owed him huge sums. It was the son who did so, many decades after the father's death."

It is a fact that Salomon paid the government, through Robert Morris (1734-1806), who specialized in financial matters for the Continental Congress, large sums of money. However, "these sums were for drafts and bills which were sent by the French, Dutch, Spanish, and others to the United States and turned over to Morris for negotiation and sale. Salomon sold these bills, deposited the money initially to his own account in the bank, and then turned it over to Morris and the government. He was an agent; the money only passed through his hands. It was all government money, not his own. Later generations, either deliberately or unwittingly, chose to believe that his own money was handed over, because the records showed that it was originally deposited in his name."

In 1941 a monument was finally erected to the memory of Salomon, not in New York as originally planned, but in Chicago. Given the description above of what Haym Salomon actually did, one might wonder why there is a monument to him. If we understand Salomon to be a symbol of the participation of the American Jew in the struggle for independence, then it is most certainly justified.

"Salomon did a craftsman's job for Robert Morris. He was without a doubt the most competent bill broker in America during the Revolution. There is every reason to believe that his work met with the unreserved approval of the French, the Dutch, and the Spanish. Of course he received his commissions, but Robert Morris was also paid.

"He made himself personally liable, through his own signature, for many of the drafts and bills of exchange which he handled on behalf of the government. And when these bills were not honored, he accepted liability without protest. This may have ruined him. Practically all of his estate was assigned to his chief creditor: the Bank of North America, Morris's bank.

"At the risk of his own life - in New York, from 1776 to 1778 - he helped French and American prisoners to escape; he induced Hessians to desert; he went to prison for his patriotism when he could well have made his peace and fortune with the English in New York; he fled from his home and left behind him wife and infant; he floated securities to the amount of \$200,000; he helped keep Madison and others in Congress by lending them money without charge; he fought for political and religious liberty in Pennsylvania; and he gave liberally, munificently, that his fellow-Jews might worship the God of their fathers in dignity and devotion in a synagogue of their own.

"He was Colonial America at its best. As a symbol and as a man he merits not only the respect and the affection of this generation, but also the monument which his admirers built to do him honor."

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[1] Haym Salomon, The Patriot Broker of the Revolution: His Real Achievements and Their Exaggeration: An Open Letter to Congressman Celler, by Max James Kohler, 1931.

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