



A plaque mounted at the original site of Sinsheimer's saloon on New York's Lower East Side honors a historic milestone, B'nai B'rith's birth in 1843.

## How an Immigrant Saloon of 1840s New York Gave Birth to B'nai B'rith

By Kenneth D. Ackerman

Beer and brewing had marked German culture since pre-Roman times. For Germans, beer came with songs, customs, steins and weisen glasses. Beer brought people together, in halls, clubs and festivals, a tonic to cement friendships, traditions, families and communities.

In the early 1800s, spurred by political unrest at home, a large number of Germans decided to leave and come to America. In New York City, they settled into a cramped neighborhood on the city's then-northern fringe they

called *Kleindeutschland* or Little Germany, later the Lower East Side. Here, they found a beer-political culture waiting for them. By the 1830s, New York immigrant saloons flourished as centers of politics. Many future congressmen, aldermen and party bosses started as saloon keepers, using beer and whiskey to cement alliances.

So it should come as no surprise that beer and a saloon would play a key role in one such deal, the 1843 founding of a communal organization called the Jewish *Sohne des Bundes*, the Independent Order of the B'nai B'rith.

Jews had lived in New York since at least 1654, when a small group landed in Manhattan seeking refuge, descendants of Spanish Jews expelled in 1492 who'd lived in Brazil ever since. Fewer than 400 by as late as 1817, by 1840 their numbers had grown to about 10,000, primarily German. The city's population quadrupled between 1820 and 1860, topping 860,000 by the Civil War.

Immigration was reshaping America during this period, and in no place more than New York City. By mid-century, more than half its residents were foreign born. Irish formed the largest ethnic block, but Germans followed close behind, including the many German Jews. (The massive waves of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe would not start until the 1880s, after the assassination of Russian tsar Alexander II.)

These German Jewish newcomers settled mostly into a crowded four-block stretch between Rivington and Canal streets. Few spoke English; most shared their countrymen's taste for beer.

Around 1840, one of them, Aaron Sinsheimer, opened a saloon on the ground floor of the three-story brick building at 60 Essex Street, one of dozens of beer halls in the neighborhood. Sunday mornings drew a regular crowd to Sinsheimer's. We know their names: Henry Kling, Isaac Dittenhoefer, Henry Jones, Isaac Rosenbourg, and the others. These were observant Jews, members of the recently founded synagogue *Ansche Chesed* on Henry Street that catered to new German immigrants. But here, over beer and coffee, they talked about problems they faced in America: prejudice,

poverty, isolation, "the deplorable condition of Jews in this, our newly adopted country," as Rosenbourg put it.

### New York in 1843

The New York City they encountered in 1843 was a teeming, smelly, dirty place. Animals — pigs, cows, horses, chickens, rats — shared many mud streets with people and wagons. Money flowed into the city from the Erie Canal, opened in 1825, and trade flourished. But Jewish Kleindeutchland sat not far from the Five Points, already New York's most notorious slum. Summer brought diseases and stench. Street gangs like the Irish Dead Rabbits and the nativist Bowery Boys fought pitched battles and preyed on greenhorns. By the mid-1840s, New Yorkers grew so alarmed over crime they formed their first embryonic police force, the Night Watch.

Jewish immigrants in New York mostly enjoyed relief from Old World prejudice. In 1821, the New York State legislature in Albany had expanded voting rights dramatically, eliminating property requirements and offering suffrage to any white male over 21 with six months' residency who either paid taxes, served in the militia or worked on public roads. Black males could vote if they had property. Tammany Hall, already the preeminent club for New York Democrats, pushed to register masses of immigrants (often ignoring residency requirements). Irish, Germans and Jews were welcome.

The most prominent Jew in New York back then was 58 year-old Mordecai Noah, playwright, diplomat and politician.



Credit: Wikipedia Commons

With dreamy eyes and tousled hair, Mordecai Noah's likeness graces the frontispiece of one of several books he wrote.



Credit: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

A colored engraving depicting Lower Manhattan's bustling harbor, circa 1850.



President James Madison had appointed Noah as U.S. consul to Tunis in 1813 where Noah helped rescue a group of Americans held as white slaves. Back in New York, Noah had founded and edited four newspapers, written successful plays for the New York stage and became a leader in Tammany Hall. Noah shocked Jewish leaders in 1825 by purchasing land on an island in the Niagara River to build a Jewish refuge called “Ararat.” The scheme never got off the ground, but in 1844 he delivered a groundbreaking “Discourse on the Restoration of the Jews” that became an early precursor of 20th century Zionism.

Bigotry certainly existed, and Jews got their share. Even Noah. When Tammany once nominated Noah as its candidate for New York county sheriff, protests erupted that a Jew ought never be permitted to hang a Christian. Noah won the job regardless.

Mostly, though, “dirty Irish” and Catholic “Popery” bore the brunt of xenophobia in mid-1800s New York. Battles between Irish and nativist gangs were commonplace. Secret nativist societies claimed to “know nothing” about anti-immigrant violence; finally they adopted the name and a formal Know Nothing Party ran candidates throughout the 1850s, winning 23 percent of the popular vote for president in 1856. In Philadelphia, Lewis Charles Levin became the first American Jew elected to Congress running on an anti-Catholic platform for the Native American Party.

## The Problem

What was the “deplorable condition” of Jews that troubled the circle at Sinsheimer’s saloon those Sunday mornings in 1843? It wasn’t just poverty. These men, all German-born immigrants, had built respectable lives in their new home: a blacksmith, a mechanic, a goldsmith, one owned a barbershop, another sold real estate. Like their neighbors, most Jews were still unable to read English, but they’d established schools and stressed educating the young. Jews had a newspaper, the *Asmonean*, soon to be joined by the *Jewish Messenger*. (The *Forward* would have to wait until 1897.) They had synagogues, over 30 congregations by some counts, and the first properly ordained rabbi had arrived from Europe in 1840.

But what they lacked was a voice and any sense of unity. Divisions gnawed at the community, with talk of brawls, jealousies, hostile camps, fears that Jews might disappear as a distinct people in America. City directories would list some 50 Jewish clubs by 1849, but none spoke for more than a tiny faction.

Religion, the unifying glue, only divided New York Jews into warring camps. Early Portuguese settlers practiced



The men who met at Sinsheimer's: leader Henry Jones (top row, center) and the other founders of B'nai B'rith.

Sephardic worship; Germans Ashkenazic. Reflecting New World freedoms, Jews had begun experimenting with religious practice, prompting more arguments. A Philadelphia hazan named Isaac Leeser had started delivering Shabbat sermons in English and opened a Jewish Sunday school, ideas borrowed from Christians, and published an English translation of the Torah. Many German immigrants preferred “Reform”-style Judaism, already developed in Europe. Mordecai Noah, at an 1834 synagogue dedication, had shocked the audience by advocating English-language prayers and synagogue music. Other radical changes, such as men and women sitting together and dropping the second day of holidays like Passover and Sukkot, became so divisive as to prompt lawsuits.

Portuguese Jews looked down on German Jews, who despised *Ostjuden* (Eastern Europeans), who resented Hungarians, and so on. Individual *shetels* organized *landsmen* clubs and burial societies, but these charities excluded Jews from other towns or regions. Who would look out for Jewish people as a whole, for widows, orphans, the crippled and unemployed, at a time when government social safety net programs didn’t exist and church charities generally helped only their own?

## The Independent Order

Pondering these questions, the men at Sinsheimer’s found much to like in groups like the Freemasons and the Odd Fellows, popular, secular fraternities promoting charity, fellowship and mutual aid. At these clubs, Jews sat with Christians as neighbors. Several American founding fathers, including George Washington, had been Masons, though the group’s secrecy and rituals made it controversial. Feelings



Photo Credit: B'nai B'rith Archives, the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio

In the mid-nineteenth century, German Jews living in New York still relied on their native tongue, as indicated by the printed cards which admitted members and their female guests — note the lacy border — to an 1859 Washington Lodge event.

against Freemasons in particular had peaked after the unsolved 1826 disappearance of a critic named William Morgan from Batavia, New York, feared murdered. During the 1830s, anti-Masonic prejudice became a political movement, spawning a third political party — the country's first — which won 7.8 percent of the popular vote in the 1832 election.

At least four of the men from Sinsheimer's café-saloon were Masons or Odd Fellows, and they decided to use these organizations as models for their new fraternity. Though Jewish, the charter they wrote contained no mention of God, synagogue, Torah or Talmud. Rather, its motto was "Benevolence, Brotherly Love, and Harmony," its mission "uniting Israelites" to promote common interests, its first act to create a pension fund for widows. For its first lodge, it would rent space at the Masonic Home on Henry Street.

On October 13, 1843, they capped their work with a formal meeting at Sinsheimer's to vote on the creation of their new organization. The minutes for that meeting, in German, note that they collected five dollars apiece (equal to \$170.27 in 2018) to cover the costs. At Sinsheimer's, this doubtless included a round of beers. Though the building is



Photo Credit: B'nai B'rith Archives, the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio

Seal used for official documents issued by New York's Henry Jones Lodge, established in 1867.

gone, a plaque today marks the spot at 60 Essex Street. The Independent Order of B'nai B'rith, 175 years old, far outlasted the saloon and the neighborhood *Kleindeutschland* that gave it birth. Today, we can celebrate with a good cold lager. ☑

To read more about Mordecai Noah, see "Mordecai Noah: The World's First Zionist" by Jules Rabin and Eugene L. Meyer in the Fall 2015 issue of B'nai B'rith Magazine in our online archives: <https://bit.ly/2OyDYBX>





