

## Preface

At a conference of the American Academy for Jewish Research some twenty years ago, I delivered a paper on the reaction of American Jewry to anti-Semitism in Bismarck's Germany. During the question period, the elderly widow of an illustrious Jewish scholar, who had grown up in fin-de-siècle Germany, posed a three-word query. Unconcerned with my learned explanations she asked in a thick accent: "Vere vas Schiff?" She, a younger contemporary of Schiff's, well remembered that in times of crisis American Jews looked first to Jacob Schiff (1847–1920), the head of the powerful banking firm of Kuhn, Loeb & Company, for an appropriate response.

Succeeding generations rapidly forgot. Today, for example, virtually no one can locate the street on New York's Lower East Side that was named Schiff Parkway after the banker's death. Modern scholars too showed little interest in the man. In 1988 the editors of the journal *American Jewish History* conducted a survey of American Jewish historians to ascertain their choices for the two greatest American Jewish leaders, one of the nineteenth and one of the twentieth century. Roughly of the same age as the banker's great-grandchildren, not one of the respondents voted for Schiff.<sup>1</sup> Even they, experts in the historical development of American Jews, ignored the man so important to Jews of his era.

That Schiff was forgotten or ignored in no way diminishes his significance or the significance of his achievements. Indeed, the wide range of his activities is so impressive that it alone may have daunted would-be biographers. This study, which aims in part to rescue Schiff from undeserved oblivion, makes no claim to all-inclusiveness. Its prime focus is on the public Schiff, the way in which he became and behaved as the foremost American Jewish leader of his day. Since American Jewish institutions have become increasingly alert to problems of communal leadership, an analysis of Schiff's objectives and methods can be of more than historical interest.

There is no fixed, satisfactory model against which one can measure what makes an American Jewish leader and what accounts for his success. Various interpretations have been offered, each recognizing a different configuration of factors like personality, ancestral traditions of the group, and the needs of the minority in relation to the demands of the larger society.<sup>2</sup>

None, however, readily fits Schiff. His leadership, suggestive in style of the contemporary individualistic captains of industry, differed qualitatively from that of his Jewish predecessors, contemporaries, and successors. His wealth and his status in the America of 1875–1920 set him apart, but equally distinctive was his voluntary involvement nationally and internationally in the totality of Jewish interests.

An understanding of Schiff's leadership must also factor in other considerations. For example, how was he rated as a leader by those he led? How successful was he in arousing an awareness of Jewish interests on the part of the Jewish community, the government, and American society in general? To what extent did emotional and psychological nuances of his approach—on the one side, a pride in Judaism and its cultural heritage, a genuine compassion for the needy, a hypersensitivity to the Jewish image, and a vision of a secure and united American Jewish community; and on the other, a hot temper and arrogant demeanor—govern his public behavior? Did his failures, and indeed many of his ideas did not bring about desired results, compromise his leadership?

Issues that engaged Schiff sprang from the condition of the Jewish community as he perceived it, both in the United States and in Europe, and from problems that arose when the minority group appeared out of step with American society. A constant concern, whether by itself or in tandem with a larger question, was discrimination against Jews. Although Schiff's behavior was reactive to such stimuli, the solutions he proposed were often innovative. Their application reflected the assets of wealth, a broad network of well-placed friends and acquaintances, and the executive talents he had skillfully honed in the business world. Rigidity on basic values notwithstanding, he was able to compromise on specific issues and then justify the compromise for the sake of his larger communal agenda. Where necessary he sought the advice of associates and friends on strategy; on many occasions he acted independently. Overall, he had the ability to interpret long-range economic and social trends, and the answers he came up with were often indicators of the rapid changes taking place in both the American and the Jewish communities.

How readily American Jewry accepted or rejected the dictates of Schiff, the exponent of elitist leadership, is revealed in most matters that engaged the Jewish community. As new immigrants from eastern Europe matured and acculturated, they increasingly challenged the unrepresentative rule of the established Germans. The rank and file, however, felt a genuine affection for the banker or were at least respectful and admiring. Since he readily identified with them and was accessible to them, a revolt against him specifically was usually averted. Nevertheless, the questions of who determined priorities, decided on appropriate responses, and executed strategy persisted. Meanwhile, Schiff consciously labored to keep the new arrivals

in line, resorting to colorful public speeches, participation in immigrant organizations, and an adroitness in handling one-on-one situations. The irony was that he and his circle, men who demanded rapid and total Americanization of the Jewish immigrants, defended their own oligarchic and hence un-American control against cries for democratically chosen leaders.

Using the points mentioned above as its guidelines, this study examines Schiff the leader, the man who was at one and the same time the defender of Jews, the philanthropist par excellence, and the lobbyist for Russian Jewry. It traces his activities in the broad areas of charity, relief for Jewish immigrants and for Jews in Russia, Zionism, and institutions for the dissemination of Judaism and Jewish culture. His business career is discussed sketchily, and only the highlights of Kuhn, Loeb's operations are included. The purpose of that chapter is primarily to show how Schiff used his prominent position in the banking world and the profits he reaped—popular respect and influential contacts as well as money—on behalf of his fellow Jews. It also points up the businesslike traits that colored his approach to communal problems.

Schiff's leadership in all its dimensions was *sui generis*. In no other communal figure did the same constellation of personality and assets ever appear. Besides, the American and Jewish settings in which he labored changed dramatically after his death. The state and federal governments became increasingly involved in public welfare, America and American Jews recoiled from foreign commitments, and the managerial revolution in social institutions replaced individual leaders with impersonal organizations and professional bureaucrats. Together, the new trends made the wide scope of Schiff's interests and his hands-on style of leadership out of date. Although institutions that he launched during the formative years of the modern Jewish community lived on, Schiff and his multifaceted career were possible only in pre-World War I America.

After Schiff's death, Cyrus Adler was commissioned by the family to write a biography of his friend. The result, a two-volume work entitled *Jacob H. Schiff: His Life and Letters*, is an adulatory and uncritical account. Although historians, including myself, have dealt with many subjects that are treated here, and although some have consulted the Schiff papers for articles written about specific episodes in the banker's career, no analytical biography exists.

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