

# LOOKING BACKWARD

(With Apologies to Edward Bellamy)

By Lois Hollander

IN looking back at the long history of *The Jewish Criterion*, one is struck by two paradoxical characteristics: change and sameness. For in its forty years of life, one sees on the one hand a change of staff, but a sameness of interest; a change of the times reflected in its pages, but a sameness of purpose; a change in scope of reading matter, but a sameness of recurrent issues and controversies arising. And after one has turned through the pages of *Criteria* as old as those of 1895 and as recent as those of 1934, one cannot escape the feeling that though we have come far, though modern methods have accelerated the tenor of life, though things are done on a tremendously enlarged scale—in other words, though the material world has been altered, controversies, ideals, interests, and human nature—all these appear today astonishingly like those of yesterday.

Nothing could make this more clear than to glance at the evolution that has been responsible for changing that little eight-page *Jewish Criterion* of 1895, which knew nothing but local news, since that was all it could gather, to the paper of today, which includes news from all over the world. This has been a slow but steady evolution that has involved men, places, and methods.

It was not till 1895 that the Pittsburgh Jewish community had its own weekly paper. Before that time it was served only by the *Hebrew Observer*, published in Cleveland, Ohio, by the Straus Brothers, on whose staff was a Pittsburgh correspondent—a young man by the name of Charles H. Joseph. It was this same man who wrote many years later that “for several years the Pittsburgh Jewish community thus received by reflection, so to speak, all the news of interest to themselves.” But as this community grew in both size and importance, the need of a paper of its own was felt, and in 1895 Samuel Steinfeld and Joseph Mayer established *The Jewish Criterion*, with its first office in the Ferguson Block; and they secured as its first editor, Rabbi Samuel Greenfield, assistant rabbi of Rodef Shalom. Charles Joseph became one of the paper's early steady contributors, already amassing the experience which enabled him to step into the place of editor, when Rabbi Greenfield left Pittsburgh to accept a post in Brooklyn, N. Y. Standing out fearlessly for what he believed right, championing the causes he believed would enrich the community, and writing forcefully and sincerely, this young editor added considerable strength to the growing publication, with which he was destined to remain until the spring of 1934.

And besides young Joseph, there were other additions to *The Criterion*'s staff: Dr. J. Leonard Levy of the Rodef Shalom Temple and Dr. Rudolf I. Coffee, of the Tree of Life Synagogue, as contributing editors, helped to raise the life of the Pittsburgh Jewish community to a higher level.

And finally, there was still another person who had become affiliated with this Pittsburgh periodical, since its start—David Alter. Born in Leoben, a town in what was then Austria-Hungary, and a graduate of the Charlottenberg Technische Hochschule, this boy, after receiving his M. E. degree as a mining engineer, in 1901 had come to the United States. But after a year of work in his profession, first in Philadelphia—the place he began his friendship with Dr. Levy—and later in West Virginia, he came to Pittsburgh. It was on the advice of Dr. Levy that David Alter declined

the offer of a teaching position, and instead took a post graduate course in civil engineering at the Western University of Pennsylvania.

But while he was attending school here he began to develop his first interest and association with *The Jewish Criterion*, which was later to be his one all-absorbing interest. For besides attending the University, and tutoring several people in French and German, David Alter still found time to solicit subscriptions for *The Criterion* on the side. And like so many of those proverbial “small beginnings,” this one too was to grow; for not only did he succeed in raising the subscription level remarkably and later in adding advertising soliciting to his work, but when in 1907 he graduated from the University and learned that *The Criterion* was going to be discontinued because of financial difficulties, this young man was eager to try to make something of it. So anxious was he that he abandoned his engineering career and took over the then rather rocky weekly. Though Charles Joseph continued as editor, and the two rabbis as contributing editors of *The Jewish Criterion*, by 1909, with the aid of Dr. Levy, it was David Alter alone who was its owner and publisher. Not only had he paid for his equipment, but he had also cancelled the old debts and dissolved the former corporation. And thus in new headquarters, in the Bijou Building—which is now the Lyceum Building—he was established at last at the head of the paper which he hoped to make a valuable instrument in the Jewish life of Pittsburgh.

It was no easy task David Alter had selected. There was no staff of fifteen people then as there is now; for though he had an editor and two contributing editors, he himself acted as advertising man, subscription solicitor, copy boy and bookkeeper! Moreover, there was no such thing as the present Jewish News Service, which, with its staff of fifty men, gathers world-wide news from the numerous Anglo-Jewish papers everywhere; hence, for the most part, what news there was, was largely local. There were not even many other similar papers, but the strongest of these, the *American Israel*, enjoyed the distinct advantage of the proximity of Hebrew Union College, which supplied it with a great deal of news and information. But in spite of all the difficulties facing it, *The Criterion* did grow till the day when its writers included those of international repute, such as Ludwig Lewisohn, and Arnold Zweig, and when it was to be the parent paper of other younger ones.

And if we are to tell you of other changes that took place, we must mention that there were new headquarters; for after the Bijou Building, there was the Oliver Building, and after twenty years there, the offices were moved to their present location in the Clark Building. So too, last spring, when his added duties in his important position with the Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph made it impossible for Charles Joseph to continue as editor of *The Criterion*, a young Pittsburgh lawyer, Milton Susman, began writing editorials in his place. But David Alter continues as owner and publisher—and it is this month that marks his silver anniversary as such.

Yes, there have been many changes—yet how many similarities we can show to you if you will but look over our shoulder as we place side by side the modern issues of *The Jewish Criterion* and their ancient ancestors of the late nineties and the years following. What were people interested in then? The same things they are now, we see, as we turn over the pages; in local news and foreign, whatever could be gleaned in the olden days; in advertisements; and, everlastingly, in social news. To be sure in 1914 we read that Channing Pollack's drama, “In the Bishop's Carriage,” is playing at the Grand Opera House, while in 1934 it is a play of Maxwell Anderson or of Noel Coward that is at the Nixon—but what of that? And what if today's social news tells you of a cabaret or a bridge, while in 1896 it was the announcement of a “whist” or a barn dance that we see announced? For the Concordia Club was probably “the place” mentioned then as now! And though our parents looked longingly at ads of Rauch and Lang Baker Electrics, while we scan the new streamline models of Chryslers, it is the wish that we might own the most up-to-date vehicle that has prompted us both. Times change—to be sure. But people? Never!

And so too, even when it comes to the bigger issues, it is rather startling to discover that men of different periods are repeatedly concerned with the same questions. Thus we find *The Criterion* pleading for the same causes in its infancy as we do now that it has attained maturity. In July, 1915, appeared indignant editorials and unhappy articles as a result of the lynching of Leo M. Frank in Georgia at the hands of an angry mob, which had taken the law into its own hands in dealing with the man convicted of brutally murdering Mary Phagan. Now in the past year again, we have read in *The Criterion*, the regrets of its writers over the lynchings that have taken place in the south.

And Peace—that cause which receives support in the editorial columns of 1934's *Criteria*, for which Mr. Alter is constantly working, and of which his wife, Sadie Alter, is an earnest and well-known advocate—Peace too was a much-discussed subject in the issues of the past. Surely the following excerpt taken from an editorial entitled, “No Reason For War,” which appeared on July 31, 1914, parallels today's events and arguments so closely as to appear as a strong warning:

“At this writing Austria and Serbia are already engaged in war for no other reason than to advance the territorial interests of the former country. The loosely hung peg of the assassination of the Archduke of Austria upon which Austria seeks to hang its excuse for plunging entire Europe into internecine strife is unworthy of this age and civilization.”

“The whole world stands today with bated breath, waiting for word from Russia or Germany that will spell either ruin, horror, and desolation, or Peace. And everywhere men and women are praying that it will be Peace.”

And again, especially in view of the facts brought out by the present Nye Munitions Investigation, how familiar the following sounds as Mr. Joseph continues in that same July 1914 editorial:

“The suggestion thrown out that the United States will benefit from a business standpoint if the European Powers become involved in a general conflict is thought unworthy of any right-minded person.”

“We hope that the day has passed when we shall place the money drawer above human life, though in truth the world has many evidences that human nature is not above such procedure.”

And finally, the one thought and subject that is unfortunately constantly forced before the Jewish people—anti-Semitism—appears with all too frequent regularity in past and present issues of *The Criterion*. Sometimes, it is in the form of a plea against the oppression of the Jews in Russia, as when they were forced to flee in 1914; later we come upon it as the threat in our own country when the Ku Klux Klan was growing to be a possible menace; and in the past few years, with the rise of Nazi Germany under Hitler, it again becomes the unpleasant subject for *Criterion* articles.

But Mr. Alter has realized that merely to comment is not enough; that one must act, whenever possible. Thus, taking advantage of his position as a publisher, he has performed valuable services in past crises as well as present ones. Turning back to the pages of the July 9, 1915, issue of *The Criterion*, we find that a letter was written by Joseph D. Snitzer, literary editor, addressed to the Ambassador of Great Britain, interceding for “the suffering Jews in Europe” and pleading for “justice and protection” for those in such a desperate situation as a result of the war. And during the Ku Klux Klan scare, when Dr. Barker of the Point Presbyterian Church had the Klan's leaders as his guests, David Alter, after attending the meeting, succeeded in showing Dr. Barker “the folly of inciting prejudice” through that group. And finally, during present anti-Semitic events, Mr. Alter has again revealed himself as alert and active; for it was through his efforts and those working with him that certain organized activities against the Jews were prevented.

But to point out how certain things have remained the same in the face of change during *The Criterion*'s existence, without mentioning one other outstanding trait that has persisted would be to paint an incomplete picture. For consistently and steadfastly throughout his career, David Alter's aims and ideals have remained unchanged. To do all in his power to aid the agencies seeking to help the unfortunate elements in the city, to cooperate fully with any venture that might enrich the community's life, to try to help bridge the gap between Jew and non-Jew—these are some of the motives that have guided his actions and the policies of his paper for twenty-five years. That there may have been times when he failed in some respects, that at times he committed errors and made mistakes—he, we are sure, would be the last to deny. But with more than a sincere attempt no man can be credited.