A SHORT HISTORY OF CONGREGATION POALE ZEDECK

1881 through 1920
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PART I

Congregation Poale Zedeck is a thriving Orthodox synagogue community located in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood. The congregation once known as the "Hungarian Shul" has been in existence for over 130 years. Beginning as a minyan of Hungarian immigrants in downtown Pittsburgh, the congregation eventually became the first modern Orthodox synagogue in the city. The basic principles of Poale Zedeck remain the same today as they did when the congregation was founded: devotion to G-d through prayer, continual study of Torah and the developing an ethical lifestyle based on Halacha.

Although there has been a Jewish presence in the area that became Pittsburgh at least as early as 1760, there was no organized Jewish community before the 1840's. The first congregation in Pittsburgh grew out of a cemetery society and by 1848 the first Pittsburgh synagogue was chartered. While the majority of these pioneer Jews had emigrated from Germany, this first congregation also included members from Lithuania, Holland, and Poland. By 1875, there were four established synagogues in Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom which was Reform; Congregation Emanuel, a small "Reformed" temple, which had broken away from Rodef Shalom and was located in Allegheny City (later known as the North Side); Tree of Life Congregation, which was more traditional; and B'nai Israel (not to be confused with a later congregation in East Liberty) which was Orthodox and known as "The Russian Shul" (although the majority of the members actually came from Lithuania). In addition to these formally established synagogues, there were at least three minyans where services were held in private homes and conducted according to the Eastern European style (nusach) of prayer.

The earliest known explicit mention of Hungarian Jews in America dates from New York City in 1713, but it is difficult to identify Hungarian Jews in Pittsburgh before 1880. The main reason is nomenclature. Since Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Jews were usually identified (and identified themselves) as Austrians rather than Hungarians or Magyars. The Hungarian Jews who arrived in the United States before 1880 generally spoke German or Yiddish rather than Hungarian (although many were also fluent in Hungarian, and even used it as their first language at home). One of the few known Hungarian Jews in Pittsburgh was Victor (also known as William) Keller, a liquor dealer who lived in the East End and had probably arrived in the area during the Civil War. Keller was an observant Jew and later one of the founders of Poale Zedeck.

Many Hungarian Jewish immigrants settled in nearby McKeesport and Braddock, where they also established synagogues; but most of these arrivals decided to live and work in Pittsburgh. The Hungarian Jews in Pittsburgh generally seem to have been proud of their heritage, as demonstrated by preserving the Hungarian language and could even boast that the city's

honorary Austro-Hungarian Consul was Max Schamberg, an active member of the Pittsburgh Jewish community.

By the close of the 1870's, many Hungarian Jewish families lived in the Jewish immigrant neighborhood in downtown Pittsburgh on Second and Third Avenues near Market and Ferry streets. Many of these Hungarian Jewish immigrants worked as peddlers, garment workers, and in the then thriving cigar (stogies) industry. But in spite of living in the same neighborhood, these early Hungarian Jews did not form a separate community until the establishment of Congregation Poale Zedeck, which soon became known as the Hungarian shul.

Pittsburgh's Jewish community grew steadily all through the 1870's, and by the late 1880's Eastern European Jewish (and non-Jewish) immigrants began to arrive in masses. By now, most of these newly arrived Jewish immigrants had moved from downtown to the nearby Hill District, a beehive of synagogues, kosher butcher shops, and Hebrew schools. The Jewish immigrants, most of whom arrived impoverished, quickly formed mutual aid societies (*landsmanschaften*) each with its own cemetery. The societies were usually based on the immigrants' place of origin. There were flourishing Polish, Galitzien, Rumanian, Lithuanian and Russian mutual aid societies in Pittsburgh's Jewish neighborhood (often mistakenly called a ghetto). By 1900, there were at least 15 Jewish mutual aid societies, with most located in the Hill District. The societies expanded their activities to include burial privileges with their own Chevra Kaddisha and cemetery, Hebrew schools, interest free loans, aid to newly arrived immigrants, social activities and especially regular religious services where worshippers could find the customs and traditions of the "old country". Most of Pittsburgh's early synagogues grew out of these mutual aid societies, including Congregation Poale Zedeck. The congregation and the mutual aid society were actually one entity.

Eastern European Jewish immigration to the United States vastly increased in the 1880's. There were several causes that motivated Jews to emigrate, including economic but the primary reason was anti-Semitism. While Hungarian Jews never experienced the ongoing and vicious pogroms of Russia and Poland, late 19th century Hungary was far from free of violence and discrimination. In 1882, a young Christian girl drowned near the village of Tisza-Eszar. Quickly the local Jews were arrested and charged with her murder. The Jews were accused of wanting Christian blood to make matzot for Passover. The publicity of this incident provoked immediate outrage among the lower classes of Slovak and Hungarian peasants. Jews were beaten on the streets and in the market places, chased from their homes, synagogues were desecrated and burned, and mass boycotts of Jewish merchants were proclaimed. Many of the wealthier Jews, moved to larger cities. More than a few of these assimilated families converted to Christianity and even changed their names to appear more Magyar. In spite of the efforts of Emperor Franz Joseph and others, the anti-Semitic campaigns continued and prompted the emigration of masses of Hungarian Jews to America. Also noteworthy is that 19th century Hungary did not share the same boundaries as the modern country of Hungary. Most of the Hungarian Jews who immigrated to Pittsburgh came from the Unterland, an area of Austria-Hungary composed of Eastern Slovakia, Carpatho-Ukraine (also known as Ruthenia), and the Hungarian foothills of the Carpathian mountains. Most of these immigrants came from small villages where they were

petty merchants, peddlers or even common laborers. Most (at least the males) were literate and often had entrepreneurial experience, which greatly aided their gradual economic success in the United States.

Meanwhile, the members of the newly formed Poale Zedeck congregation, locally referred to as the "Hungarian shul", progressed economically. Within one generation the immigrant peddler eventually bought a horse and wagon, found a business partner, then became the owner of a shop where he (and she) became an employer and sometimes even a manufacturer. The American Dream had arrived.

There is a question as to the actual "Hungarianess" of the original Poale Zedeck. As cited above, the borders of present day Hungary and the place of origin of many of these early congregants differ. While there are various minhagim or ritual differences between East European Jews, the essentials of traditional Ashkenazic liturgy are basically uniform. It is also highly unlikely that sermons were delivered to the congregation in Hungarian, although the *Jewish Criterion*, Pittsburgh's Jewish communal newspaper reported in the 1890's that the congregation maintained a small library with a number of books in Hungarian. There is a tradition that the initial meetings were conducted in Hungarian, and the original constitution was composed in Hungarian, but there is no surviving documentation. However none of the existing Poale Zedeck ("PZ") publications (yearbooks, etc.) are in the Hungarian language. The congregation's constitution specifically mentions that records being kept in Yiddish (or German). To our knowledge, the occasional sermon in the synagogue was delivered in Yiddish, not Hungarian. We have no information of PZ's relationship with local non-Jewish Hungarian churches, but it was probably minimal. We do know however that many of these Poale Zedeck members continued to speak Hungarian both in the home and quite often with their non-Jewish Hungarian customers. We also know that the early PZ members remained devoted to their beloved Emperor Franz Joseph long after they settled in Pittsburgh, and even held a special memorial service upon his demise. But the question of the depth of "Hungarian-ness" of PZ remains unsolved. Presently few Poale Zedeck members have Hungarian roots and the congregation follows the standard American modern Orthodox minhag (as reflected in the Art Scroll siddur).

While the Hungarian Jews who arrived in Pittsburgh were generally not as poor as their brethren from Russia or Poland they also found the same need for their own mutual aid society. In 1881, there were 2000 Jews in Pittsburgh (as opposed to the 400 Jews in the city in 1860). That same year, forty families, the majority (but not all) of Hungarian Jewish origin, gathered together in a rented second floor hall of a building on Grant Avenue in downtown Pittsburgh to form "Austro-Hungarian Congregation Poale Zedeck". The founding members included Phillip Fried, Frank Brunwasser, Benjamin Horr, Moritz Dunn, Emmanuel Geller, Josef Greenberger, Samio Weiss, Herman Schwartz, Ignatz Horr, Max Friedman, Max Mandel, Viktor Keller, Moritz Trattner, Martin Haupt and David Goodfriend. David Fried was elected president and Frank Brunwasser was elected as recording secretary. Many years later, Frank Brunwasser, in an oral interview, said that he was elected secretary since he was one of the few who could speak and write good English! The Poale Zedeck charter of incorporation specifically mentions

maintaining a Hebrew school for children (cheder) as one of the key purposes of the synagogue. In 1918, the Jewish Criterion published an alternate version of the founding of Poale Zedeck. The author of the article claimed that on November 6th, 1881 several Hungarian Jews met at the home of Mr. Keller, who resided at the time on Market Street. The group decided to rent a hall on Grant Street. This hall would later become the home for the congregation for the next ten years. It is interesting to note that both the established synagogues of Rodef Shalom and Tree of Life were located just a few blocks away from the infant congregation of Poale Zedeck. The year 1881 is still considered the official founding of Congregation Poale Zedeck. The founding of Pittsburgh's Poale Zedeck came only eight years after the establishment of the first Hungarian synagogue in the United States, Oheb Zedek, in New York City.

The name "Poale Zedeck" is Hebrew for workers of (or for) righteousness. We do not have any documentation for the origin of the name, but there is a tradition that the congregation selected that name in honor of the synagogue of some members' home synagogue in Hungary. There may have been a controversy over the name since the first article of the original constitution specifically states that no suggestions to change the name will be considered. Article 2 of the constitution states "that all deliberations of this congregation should be in the German language (i.e. Yiddish). The only employee of the congregation was the sexton (shammes) who was required to attend all prayer services and keep the building as "clean as possible". In addition, the shammas had to collect donations, which he then had to hand over to the synagogue president. Last, this very busy employee was responsible for arranging "tahara" (cleansing of the deceased prior to burial). The rules of membership were quite strict and emphasized that members delinquent in paying dues lost any voting privileges.

It is important to note that not all of the founding members were recently arrived immigrants. Several of these founding families had already lived in Pittsburgh for several years where they held religious services in their homes and already conducted their own religious school prior to the formal organization in 1881.

This modest "congregation" soon outgrew their space in a rented hall and purchased a small house on Federal Street in the Hill District where by now most of the members lived. The Federal Street synagogue held daily, Shabbat, and holiday services, plus maintained a regular Hebrew school or cheder. In 1883, the new congregation decided to purchase a lot in Sheradan, PA for a cemetery. In 1884, the "Hungarian Sick and Relief Association" (which informally had co-existed with the congregation from its beginning) obtained an official charter. The importance of these mutual aid societies should not be minimized. Before Social Security and health insurance, these societies could mean the difference between a home and homelessness, medical care and death, being fed and going hungry. Membership in the Association required a five dollar initiation fee plus weekly dues of ten cents. The purpose of the Association was to care for the sick and disabled members and their families. The charter specified that no person was entitled to benefits if they had been "drunks, partaken in criminal behavior or indecent behavior, led an "immoral course of life" or "had attempted to commit suicide". The society also excluded gamblers, retarded or unbalanced individuals and habitual

defaulters of debts. It is interesting to note that the congregation's original constitution was very vague about the personal observance of prospective members. It only required that they profess the Jewish religion and be of good moral character. But it did require that all services be conducted strictly according to Orthodox rites, specifically the Minhag Ashkenaz. Anyone who attempted to introduce Reform customs would be expelled. The president of the congregation could determine who would lead prayers, and no one could claim that honor without his permission. Even receiving aliyot (Torah honors) had to be approved in advance by the president. The president was also responsible for personally visiting any sick member and deciding which members were eligible to receive financial assistance.

From its beginning, the Association conducted regular religious services (daily, Sabbath and holidays, which were led by learned members who had usually received the traditional cheder and yeshiva education in Europe. It was only in the 1890's that the congregation could afford to hire a professional chazzan (cantor) on special occasions to lead prayer services. This was the usual practice among small Orthodox congregations. The only requirements for these itinerant cantors is that they seem to have knowledge of the liturgy and a somewhat decent voice.

Originally Congregation Poale Zedeck, which was officially known as the "Austro-Hungarian Congregation Poale Zedeck", continued to conduct its prayer services in private homes or in temporary rented halls. The words "Austro-Hungarian" were only dropped in 1929 when Austria and Hungary were now separate nations. In 1890, with the increase of membership to near 100 family units (through newly arrived immigrants as well as the natural growth of the families) the congregation finally could afford to purchase a small house on Federal Street in the Hill District. This small synagogue building was consecrated in 1891 and housed the Poale Zedeck Hebrew school as well. But soon, even this Federal Street synagogue was too small; and in 1899, under the presidency of Samuel Hausman, the congregation purchased a larger building on 127-129 Crawford Street (later named Fernando Street), in a building that previously had been a Russian synagogue. For the next 40 years Poale Zedeck was also known as the "Crawford Street shul". The original Crawford Street synagogue burned down in 1916 and was rebuilt and rededicated in 1917 at a cost which required the congregation to take out a new mortgage. This created a major financial problem since there were already discussions about moving the congregation from the Hill. By 1916, many Hill District residents were moving to better areas of Pittsburgh, especially in the East End. The Hill District was very overcrowded, smog ridden, had poor housing, lacked many basic sanitation services and generally was considered a less desirable place to raise a family than other city neighborhoods. These general unsanitary conditions in the Hill District often produced severe health problems including a high rate of tuberculosis. Reports appeared in the general press about the higher death rate in the Hill and the need for better working conditions, especially in the tobacco industry.

While Poale Zedeck may not have been Pittsburgh's largest or most socially prestigious synagogue, the congregation counted among its early members several very prosperous merchants, and one of the Pittsburgh's most influential politicians. This politician, Adolph Edlis, was born in Hungary to a scholarly Orthodox family and arrived in the United States in 1875. Eventually, he settled in Pittsburgh where he became a prominent businessman. Edlis

gradually became known as the voice of Pittsburgh's immigrant Jewish population, and the city's politicians took notice. He designed Pennsylvania's Edlis Act, which was the model for the federal Mann Act. Adolph Edlis eventually became the city's first Jewish official, and later the first Eastern European Jew elected to the State Legislature.

While the founders of Poale Zedeck were immigrants and conducted prayers according to the traditional orthodox Ashkenazic rite, the congregation soon accommodated itself from its beginnings to American life. For example, the congregation celebrated George Washington's birthday as early as 1898 with a ball held in a local hotel. The ball would have included mixed dancing, something quite unusual in the East European shtiebels at the time. Although the women members had held their own events and conducted their own activities from the very founding of the congregation, it was only In 1911 that a sisterhood (or "Ladies Society") was formally founded with Mrs. Joseph Klein as its first president. The concept of a sisterhood probably owes more to the model of ladies guilds found in American churches than to Eastern European Jewish communal models. The sisterhood was more than a social organization. Besides raising money for the synagogue's Hebrew School and building fund, they also committed themselves to helping the poor by distributing food and clothing. The Ladies Society even held dancing lessons for the youth. Beginning during WWI and up until the 1940's, the PZ sisterhood held an annual "Strawberry Festival" luncheon to raise funds both for the congregation and to help Jewish war victims in Europe. By the early 20th Century, many of the congregation's younger members were either born in America or had come over as small children, with English serving as their first language. Although it was reported in the local Jewish newspaper that young Simon Hausman delivered his "confirmation" (i.e. bar mitzvah) in Yiddish to the "surprise and delight" of the congregation, by 1910 the synagogue used more English in its bulletins and pulpit announcements. The synagogue's cantor was now referred to as the "Reverend Bloom" and besides chanting prayers he was in charge of the Hebrew School. In June of 1912, the Jewish Criterion announced that a commencement ceremony will be held on the following Sunday where 50 boys of the Austro-Hungarian Congregation will receive their "diploma of confirmation." The same announcement reported that the same day the annual examination of the school's students will be held as well. Rabbi Kochin, who served as the guest rabbi hired for the occasion, gave "interesting" remarks. In October of the same year, the Congregation's sisterhood held a dance accompanied by the "well known" (and non-Jewish) Nirella's Orchestra. Congregational dances would become a frequent fund raising event for Poale Zedeck. Besides supporting early Zionist events, the congregation also contributed to Pittsburgh's Jewish charity institutions such as the House of Shelter both with cash and in-kind donations (clothing, food, coal etc.). It is interesting to note that the congregation had no problems sharing public programs with Pittsburgh's non-Orthodox synagogues.

The congregation continued to grow, and by 1917 the congregation's Chevra Kaddisha (Burial Society) consisted of 150 members. Although some Orthodox synagogues in Pittsburgh (and rabbis) had mixed feelings about Zionism, which they thought was too secular, Congregation Poale Zedeck always supported local Zionist activities. In 1904, the synagogue held memorial services for Theodore Herzl. Several members of the Congregation were active in the Pittsburgh Zionist Council, which was affiliated with the American Federation of Zionists. The

Ladies Society often held benefits for Palestine and most Poale Zedeck members had a tin charity (pushkehs) at home for donations for the Holy Land.

By the end of World War I, many Jews were now living in Oakland, East Liberty, and especially Squirrel Hill, a spacious area with broad (but usually unpaved) tree lined avenues, parks, and large, well maintained homes often occupied by very wealthy German Jewish families. According to the PZ roster in the Pittsburgh Jewish Yearbook of 1917, at least half of the congregation was living in Squirrel Hill, Oakland, the East End, and even in Homestead, Etna, and Carnegie. While there already was a large (conservative) synagogue in Squirrel Hill, as yet there was no Orthodox synagogue in spite of the many Orthodox Jews in the area. Several Poale Zedek members had already moved to Squirrel Hill forcing these congregants to make one of three choices: a very long walk to the Hill, to ride to the prayer services (thus desecrating the Sabbath) or joining another (non-Orthodox) synagogue. This produced added pressure on the PZ leadership to decide to move from the Hill. By 1919, Poale Zedeck had grown to over 170 families and conducted a Hebrew school with 50 pupils. The decision was finally made to build a brand new and spacious synagogue in Squirrel Hill, but to maintain the small older shul as a branch for the remaining residents in the Hill District. In 1926, a large plot of land at the corner of Shady Avenue and Phillips Street was purchased. In 1928, the architectural firm of Philip Friedman and Alexander Sharove received the commission to design the "new" Poale Zedeck synagogue. Both Friedman and Sharove had previously worked with the famous architect, Henry Hornbostel in the building of the Bnai Israel synagogue in East End. Hornbostel, who also designed Carnegie Tech, had designed the nationally famous Rodef Shalom Temple building. His famous domed Beaux Arts style is clearly evident in Sharove and Friedman's design for Poale Zedeck. Sharove had designed other synagogues including the nearby Beth Shalom and was considered a national authority on American synagogue architecture. It is interesting to note that these architects of the Squirrel Hill Poale Zedeck did not use the contemporary European Neo-Moorish models for the synagogue. Rather, they copied a local synagogue's features. Sharove and Friedman decided to replicate features of Pittsburgh's largest and most prominent synagogue, the Reform Temple Rodef Shalom. While the interiors of Temple Rodef Shalom and Poale Zedeck are quite different; in the building's front it is immediately apparent that the exteriors of both buildings are similar, especially with the use of terra cotta brickwork and handmade clay tiles. The similarity of the two synagogues' front entrances has led some to think that Hornbostel was the architect, but this is a mistake - Poale Zedeck was designed by local Jewish architects. But the choice of selecting Sharove was probably made because he was also the architect for the nearby Beth Shalom synagogue a few blocks away.

On a sunny Sunday afternoon, June 29th, 1928, the cornerstone of the "new" Poale Zedeck (as the Jewish Criterion referred to the building), was laid in an elaborate ceremony. The dedication included a parade led by the "Marshall" Joseph Mallinger. Besides the rabbi and officers of the congregation, the guests included several members of the Pittsburgh City Council, local judges, local rabbis (both Orthodox and Conservative) and several guest speakers. The congregation's long serving president; Adolph Greenberger delivered an address on the synagogue's history. Unfortunately the occasion was marred by heavy rains and a decision was quickly made to

postpone the entire ceremony to the following Sunday. Poale Zedeck became the first Orthodox synagogue in Squirrel Hill and the first modern Orthodox synagogue in the city. The congregation eventually would employ a rabbi with an American university degree who delivered sermons in English every Sabbath.

Even with growing prosperity and increased membership the congregation had no permanent ordained rabbi. Services were still led by members or a professional cantor hired for the High Holidays. This arrangement was common for synagogues at the time These "yontif" prayer leaders were erroneously listed in publications as the synagogue's rabbis, as in the American Jewish Yearbook on 1919, which listed a Rabbi Kochin as the "Austrian-Hungarian" synagogue's leader. Rabbi Kochin however was not the synagogue's rabbi (he actually was the rabbi of Tephereth Israel, another Hill District synagogue), but on occasion would lead Poale Zedeck's prayer services.

Ordained orthodox rabbis capable of leading American orthodox synagogues were difficult to find. Salaries were low and usually these immigrant rabbis could not speak sufficient English or adapt to the American Jewish environment. There were no American Orthodox rabbinic seminaries until the 1920's. Even Pittsburgh's large and much wealthier Reform temple had difficulty in finding an English speaking rabbi. Sometimes a Pittsburgh rabbi served several Orthodox congregations, with each institution contributing a portion of the rabbi's salary. It was also not unusual for an Orthodox synagogue to hire a cantor, rather than a rabbi as its clergyman. By the early 1900's, Poale Zedeck's cantor, "Reverend Pollock" represented the congregation in the larger Jewish community events, where he chanted the blessings over the candles at annual Chanukah programs at the Zionist Institute. Poale Zedeck's first full time religious functionary was Julius Bloom, a professional cantor and mohel who served the congregation from 1909 to 1926, when he resigned to become the cantor at the Conservative B'nai Israel synagogue in East Liberty. Cantor Bloom was well known for being a highly talented musician and often took part in communal events especially for Pittsburgh's Zionist related events. During the First World War, Cantor Bloom frequently conducted services for Jewish soldiers at nearby military camps.

In 1923 Poale Zedeck finally hired its first full time, Rabbi Sol Friedman.