

**SKETCHES OF  
JEWISH LIFE  
AND HISTORY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649706075

Sketches of Jewish Life and History by Henry Gersoni

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

[www.triestepublishing.com](http://www.triestepublishing.com)

**HENRY GERSONI**

**SKETCHES OF  
JEWISH LIFE  
AND HISTORY**



SKETCHES

OF

JEWISH LIFE AND HISTORY,

BY

HENRY GERSONI.

I seek no riches and no fame;  
To be but useful is my aim.

---

NEW YORK :

HEBREW ORPHAN ASYLUM PRINTING ESTABLISHMENT,

70th Street, near 3d Ave.

1873.

✓

## PREFACE.

---

In this little volume I offer to the reader a few "Sketches of Jewish Life and History."

The first two stories contain illustrations of Jewish life in Lithuania, giving an insight into the character and domestic circumstances of a large class of people very little known in this country. As a native of Lithuania, who has also seen something of the world, I may be pardoned perhaps for feeling myself somewhat qualified to describe scenes of this character. The reader will find, I hope, that I have treated my subject impartially and without prejudice. I have purposely used expressions here and there that are peculiar to the German-Jewish dialect, especially such

as are interesting on account of tradition and custom. For the general reader I have given the necessary explanations either paranthetically or in marginal notes.

“ Rabbi Elchanan, a legend of Mayence,” is very popular with the Israelites all over the world. There are some historical truths, I think, at the base of this story. A son of Rabbi Gerschon, surnamed “ the Light of the Exiles,” the predecessor of Rabbi Simeon of Mayence, was abducted by the Romish Clergy, and a prominent clergyman actually did embrace Judaism a few years afterward. The legend of Rabbi Elchanan evidently makes of these two persons one, and takes the time most convenient for its purpose. In the plan and personages of this story I have followed somewhat the renowned German novelist Leopold Compert ; but I have changed entirely the expression of sentiments and principles.

The historical sketch of “ The Fall of Bethar and the Martyrs,” I published in the *Jewish Times* two years ago ; but as I have been assured by my friends that it was then read with great interest, and that a few historical suggestions given deserved the notice of scholars, it is, with slight alterations and corrections, reprinted in this book.

PREFACE.

v

The last story of this volume, "The Converted Noblemen," is an elaborate description of an historical incident of the middle of the eighteenth century. The Jewish community of my native city, Wilna, commemorates every year the martyrdom of the Noble Convert Potozky on the second day of the Feast of Weeks, and has in its manuscript prayer-book an especial prayer for that purpose. The "Pear-tree" on the grave of that convert is pointed out to the Jewish youth even at the present day. The family of Potozky's friend Zriemby, has produced many learned Israelites since the conversion of their noble ancestor, and exists yet in Holland, where it is held in great respect.

The reception that the public may accord me in the present instance will, if sufficiently encouraging, prompt me to proceed with the preparation of a work of more importance and greater interest.

THE AUTHOR.

NEW YORK, March 25th, 1873.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS.

---

### CHARACTERISTIC SKETCHES :

	PAGE.
THE SINGER'S REVENGE . . . . .	9
APPENDIX—MUTUAL DEATH INSURANCE CO. . . . .	45
METAMORPHOSE OF A LITHUANIAN BOY :	
PART FIRST, AS TOLD BY HIMSELF. . . . .	51
PART SECOND, AS GATHERED FROM RELIABLE SOURCES. . . . .	85
BABBI ELOHANAN, A LEGEND OF MAYENCE. . . . .	123

### HISTORICAL SKETCHES :

THE FALL OF BETHAR AND THE MARTYRS . . . . .	173
THE CONVERTED NOBLEMEN . . . . .	187

## THE SINGER'S REVENGE.

### I.

#### THE MISER AND HIS SURNAME.

 LIAKOM, surnamed "*The Fly*," was a well-known citizen of Oshmiana in Lithuania. He was known to be a rich man, and had acquired the unenviable reputation of being the greatest miser in the community. He not only invariably refused to help an unfortunate brother; but even lavished abuses on such as dared to apply to him for assistance.

A renowned preacher once came to the city of Oshmiana and delivered a most edifying and instructive lecture in the synagogue. The following day he called on the richest members of the community requesting some reward for his trouble. They received him with great respect and opened their purses liberally. He called also on Eliakom, but the miser slammed the door in his face as soon as he heard the object of his visit. This was more than the learned man could well endure, and the consequence was an announcement that "the renowned preacher of Kelm has consented to stay another week in Oshmiana, and he is going to deliver a second lecture next Sabbath afternoon."

The community was delighted with the intelligence and at the appointed time, the synagogue was crowded.

Nor were the good people disappointed in their expectation; the lecturer excelled himself on that occasion. His text was Is. vii, 18, in which verse Egypt is likened unto a fly and Assyria unto a bee. He preached on the sins which caused the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem, and metaphorically compared the two valiant nations with two different courses of action. Assyria, which is likened unto a bee, illustrates the actions of those who, if they sometimes do any good, do not perform the action with proper discretion, or balance it by accompanying evil. Like the bee which prepares honey and wax for the benefit of human-kind, but pursues its work with unbecoming noise and sometimes even stings the man before he is permitted to enjoy what was prepared for him. Mizraim, which is compared to a fly, illustrates the actions of such men as extract from the community whatever benefit they can, but render it no service in return. Like the fly which bites man and drinks his blood; but is of no service to the world. The behavior of the bee is frequently very reprehensible. Man often says to it: "I want neither thy honey nor thy sting." But the fly is beyond a doubt the more obnoxious of the two. Such are the two great enemies of Israel. Assyria, the bee; that is good actions accompanied by some evil, and Egypt, the fly, that is evil without any accompanying good at all. Beware of the last, of Mizraim the fly!

To this effect the man of lore continued illustrating his ideas with innumerable passages from the Talmud. The audience were delighted with both preacher and sermon,