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Sallie Topkis Ginns - A Biography

A research paper submitted to Dr. Fletcher

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INTRODUCTION

Little of value has been written about women who have made significant contributions to the history of Wilmington, Delaware, Sallie Topkis Ginns was different from other women of her day, She believed that one owed a debt to the community in which one lived, Many immigrants were preoccupied just with the process of eking out an income in order to survive. They had time for little else, Sallie's mother shouldered the burden of a newly arrived immigrant family and still planned for the betterment of the community in which she lived. She served as a model for her children and they in turn served Wilmington.

As a Jewish wife and mother, Sallie assumed that her major role was to care for her family. To the best of her ability, she attempted to undertake those duties. Unwittingly, she served as a prototype for the next three generations because she believed that the family extended into the larger context of the community. She took seriously the values of prophetic Judaism, namely, to care for the needs of all of God's children.

Sallie Ginns lived to be 96 and died in the year in which America celebrated its Bicentennial. It is fitting to take note of a woman who lived for one half of our nation's history and note her achievements in working for the improvements in the quality of human life.

I. ORIGINS AND JOURNEY

The family of Sallie Topkis Ginns must have welcomed a daughter when she was born on May 9, 1880 in Odessa, Russia.¹ Her father, Jacob, was a coppersmith who owned a small factory and made large copper utensils for boats. Rose, her mother, took care of her children and her home, but, in addition, she had a stall in the marketplace where she sold small copper objects her husband made, Jacob's skills enabled the family to be more prosperous than most Jews who suffered severe economic repression.² Her two brothers, David and Louis, went to a private Jewish school where they studied Hebrew and History.

The year 1881 is an important date, because it is a turning point in Jewish history. Czar Alexander II who was assassinated by terrorists in 1881 had been more liberal than his predecessors to serfs and Jews.³ The regime of Alexander III brought accusations of ritual blood murder and resulted in economic repression, physical abuse and censorship against the Jewish community. The Topkis family was forced to live in a subcellar for five days to escape a bloody pogrom in Odessa. Their non-Jewish neighbors were very kind and rescued David and Louis. They brought them into their homes, dressed them as Christian children might, and even gave them Christian names in order to prevent them from being carried off as captives for the Russian Army. As a result of the Pogrom of 1881, thousands of Jews fled for their lives. It was a spontaneous movement. Everything that belonged to the Topkis family had been destroyed. They sold whatever goods that they could and departed from Russia with two thousand rubles. They had no passport and had to steal across the border at night. They did have the necessary

inner strength and fortitude for such an adventure, because Jews have been fleeing from persecution for centuries.

The least expensive and safest rout that most Jews selected for escape took them from southern Russia across the Austro-Hungarian border to the small town of Brody which was the gathering place of many Ukrainian Jews. The town seemed less anti-Semitic than other border communities.⁴ Jews waited here until they could get passage to America from a northern port.

Beside Jacob and Rose, the Topkis family now included David, Louis, Sallie and William. Because so many people were waiting for transportation, conditions were deplorable. Many families were not able to provide themselves with food and shelter and some slept in the streets. Mr. and Mrs. Topkis showed their talents as entrepreneurs and opened a restaurant in order to provide for their family and they also fed many refugees as possible. However, when Sallie and William developed measles, they were forced to close their business. The town of Brody had a normal population of fifteen thousand, but as many as twenty thousand refugees crowded into it. When the family obtained their ocean passage, they travelled by train to Hamburg, where they embarked for America. Although Sallie couldn't remember the journey, she did know that their point of entry was Castle Garden in New York City. Before the federal government assumed responsibility for the admission of immigrants at Ellis Island, it was a confusing and frightening experience for the newcomer to overcome the hazards of Castle Gardens.⁵

II. SURVIVAL IN A NEW LAND

Jews of German origin had established themselves in America by the time the mass immigration of East European Jews began. They felt themselves to be of a higher social class but, nevertheless, assumed responsibility for their brothers who streamed into the country. The Jews also possessed the qualities so indispensable for survival in a new land: foresight, sobriety, economy, discipline and loyalty.⁶ Fortunately, for the Topkis family, a group of German Jews met them at Castle Garden and directed them to Philadelphia. They were looking for skilled workers who would not be a burden on their community. They chose Jacob Topkis because he was a coppersmith and they sent him to Chester, Pennsylvania, to work in the Krapp Shipyards. The job did not last long: the gentiles would not work with him. Either because he was a Jew or a foreigner, they went on strike and refused to work. He returned to the committee which originally had met him in New York and asked for advice on employment. He was sent to Wilmington to work for a company manufacturing copper pipes, which were used in the sewers that were being installed in the city. The men in this plant also went on strike and refused to work with Jacob Topkis. Sallie conjectured that maybe he just worked too rapidly.

When he went back to Philadelphia to seek advice from the committee, it was suggested that he become a peddler. Peddling had behind it an old American tradition and had been a path to advancement for many immigrants.⁷ Jacob Topkis, with his two sons David and Louis, were outfitted with baskets carrying all kinds of notions such as shoe

strings, collar buttons, thread, tin and copperware. Around their neck and shoulders they carried lamp wick and would cut it according to the needs of their customers. At first they peddled around Wilmington but later expanded their territory. David, age fourteen, and Louis, age ten, sometimes took their wares further downstate. Jacob usually stayed around Wilmington and Delaware City. It was hard work carrying a heavy load on one's shoulders. Sallie remembered her father once leaving the house to sell tinware. It was tied all over his body and, since he was short and stocky, he looked like a man from some other planet. By pooling their entire earnings from peddling, the Topkis family was finally able to open a store of their own - a clothing store - on Front Street.

III. EARLY DAYS IN WILMINGTON

In 1880 the Wilmington City Directory 1806-1881 listed only twenty-seven Jewish families out of a population of 42,478. Whereas the general population had increased by 11,000 in a decade, the Jewish population had remained very small.⁸ In 1881, fifteen new families arrived in Wilmington and that was the beginning of a major influx. To help the poor and the newly arrive immigrant, the Jews held a Purim party annually. Purim commemorates the time when Jews were spared their destruction from Haman, a despot. Sallie vividly remembered the grand balls in Webster's Academy on the second floor of the grand Opera Company.

The Topkis family first lived in Wilmington on a tiny street called Bright's Alley between King and Market Street, next to Front Street. Most of the Jewish families lived in this neighborhood.⁹ The house in which they lived was a boxlike structure, three stories tall and with two rooms on each floor. Soon after their arrival, Charles was born: and their last son, Harry, was also born at this residence. The Topkis family, which now included five sons and a daughter, had to be cared for and fed, and Rose augmented its income by serving evening meals to twenty boarders. Because the house was so small, Rose could not offer lodging, but to was possible to provide meals for outsiders.

By the time the Topkis family settled in Wilmington, regular worship services had already been started. Sallie remembered worshipping on the second floor of 211 Market Street and attending Sunday School taught by Carrie and Ida Lieberman. Wilmington was different from most cities in that the Germans did not dominate the

Jewish population. Consequently, services were never completely modernized and retained the traditional form. Sallie's brothers David and Louis were involved in organizing the orthodox Adas Kodesh Synagogue. A cemetery had been established and the Moses Montiefore Society had been organized. Every Jewish community considered a cemetery a priority and the first burial ground was at Front and Union Street. The Moses Montiefore Society was the first attempt by the Jewish community to aid the ever increasing number of transients passing through and to help the sick who lived in Wilmington.

In 1887, David Topkis, the eldest son of Jacob and Rose Topkis was betrothed to Rae Tigre through the intermediary of a matchmaker, as was the custom among East European Jews. Sallie, who was seven at the time, remembered the wedding vividly. Rabbi Rezits officiated, and the entire story of the wedding was reported on the front page of the Morning News. Only two German families were listed among the guests. The headline read "The Marriage of Russian Poles." The story was featured not only because of the rising number of Jews from eastern Europe in Wilmington but also to describe the ceremony.¹⁰

IV. A FRESH START IN WILMINGTON

When David married, Mr. and Mrs. Topkis divided up all the clothing in their store and gave him enough to start his own business. Sallie remembered that David spent so much time making love to his wife in the back of the store that he did not tend to business matters and the business failed. The Topkis family decided to venture to New Castle, Delaware, in order to make a living. Here they rented a hotel called The Delaware House, and used part of it for living quarters. Sallie recalled that it had clothing of all price ranges. Some of the suits sold for as much as one hundred dollars.

Sallie served as the bookkeeper in the family store when she was only 12 years old. Today her work might be called on the job training. She never had a chance to finish high school. Many immigrant families made a great effort to keep their children in school, if possible. The Topkis family was very enterprising and needed everyone to help in those early days, just to make a living. A girl's education was considered less important than a boy's, but in the Topkis family, none of the older children had the opportunity to finish school.

For a while they seemed to have made a comfortable living in New Castle. The residents of the area could not travel to Wilmington easily, because there were only two trains a day. Unfortunately, in 1893 the country suffered from a depression and some of the mills in the surrounding area closed. The family could no longer make a living in their store and had to start peddling again. Will pushed a cart around the outlying area where many Poles and Slavs lived and sold all kinds of notions. In 1896 the Topkis family decided to move back to

Wilmington. The opened a store at 417 King Street. Their financial problems were over because the business became a success. When they sold the store later, it was called The Wilmington Dry Goods.

V. AN EASTERN EUROPEAN WOMAN IN AMERICA - ROSE TOPKIS

The primary concern of Jacob Topkis was to provide the basic necessities for his family. Rose, on the other hand, shared the support of her family and still had the vision to act upon some of the basic problems that faced Wilmington's Jewish community. She was an unusual woman in many ways. First of all, she was very wise and as soon as her friends and neighbors realized it, they started to ask her advice on many matters. Furthermore, she was highly disciplined, well-organized and competent. Like other immigrant women, she was very poor but worked hard and was unusually resourceful. She did not have time to think about subtle charms and delicacy as other Victorian women did, but she did have definite ideas about a woman's role. Her actions were responsible for the ultimate role played by other members of the Topkis family as creators of needed organizations and as philanthropists.

In 1897 Rose invited Jewish women to her home to organize themselves to care for the sick. There was no group or institution in existence at that time to help an ill mother, tend her baby, and cook and clean until the mother could resume her duties. By 1902 this group was in existence and each member pledged a part of their day to aid the sick. The name they selected was the Bichor Cholem Society¹¹ and it grew in scope through the years. It encompassed care for the sick as well as a home for the aged and widows without families. As a result of these activities, Rose Topkis was once described by Bernard Glockman as a "woman frail of stature and body by a giantess of mind possessing a heart overflowing with sympathy and kindness." She urged the women to make a significant contribution of time and money. They worked very

hard and the money they donated came from their meager means. They begged groceries and coal, meat and whatever else was needed.

Today the Milton and Hattie Kutz Home is the institution that evolved from the Bichor Cholem Home and cares for the Jewish aged and infirm. It was fitting that Sallie Ginns should have spent the last years of her life at that home.

Jewish Eastern European women she came to America not only had to acclimate to new ways of doing things in this country but had to bring with them all of their cultural baggage. One habit that persisted was that of kashrut (animals slaughtered according to Rabbinic law). Rose Topkis separated her milk and meat dishes and utensils and complained of the extra burden placed upon her because a shochet (one who killed according to the humane methods prescribed by the Torah) would not stay in Wilmington. For a while, Mr. Lee, a gentile, did his best to make part of his market kosher, but he kept mixing up the knives and used kosher knives on unkosher meat. As a result, Sallie remembered her mother had to change her dishes seven times before a Jewish butcher finally came to Wilmington and stayed. It is ironic that despite the hardship that Rose suffered to maintain her Jewish roots, none of her children carried on the orthodox tradition that she brought with her from Russia.

VI. TO COATESVILLE AND BACK TO WILMINGTON

Sallie married James Ginns in 1899 and for a time he had a fruit stand on the first floor of the old Daily Commercial newspaper office, at the southeast corner of Third and King Street. This is significant because the publisher was George W. Vernon who had a daughter, Mabel. The paths of Mabel and Sallie crossed later because Mabel became one of the national leaders of the National Women's Party and Sallie was treasurer of the Wilmington chapter for ten years.

The Ginns family lived a tranquil life in Coatesville for thirteen years. Jim's business grew into a large department store and he became very prosperous.¹² His family lived well in Russia before the pogroms and he exhibited the same money-making skills. He became rich and soon was a prominent citizen of Coatesville. Jim rode every afternoon and enjoyed mixing duty with pleasure. He did not like a routine day and would take his daughters on unusual outings frequently.¹³ If for instance, a circus was nearby, he would awaken Clara Belle and Reba and take them to watch the unloading of the animals at four o'clock in the morning. Sallie, on the other hand, took the girls for a walk every Saturday afternoon. It became a ritual and both Clara Belle and Reba remember how they looked at trees and the countryside to enjoy many pleasurable hours.¹⁴

While living in Coatesville, Mrs. Ginns saw the evils of excessive drinking first hand. There was a saloon two doors away from their department store. She recalled that men went there and spent all their money, so that the family was left penniless. Sallie said that they

were often asked to help families with shoes and clothing because men had squandered their pay on liquor.¹⁵ "Now don't put this in the paper," she told a reporter, "but even my husband had liquor in the house." Many members of a social club would come to their house and drink but when she stopped serving, they stopped coming.¹⁶ She was convinced that Prohibition would solve the problem. Prohibition was one of the socially acceptable outlets for women to unite. Sallie Ginns worked for Prohibition and was disappointed when she found that it did not solve the problem.

Sallie and Jim would have remained in Coatesville if they had not been asked to return to Wilmington to join the Topkis brother in the joint ownership of a motion picture business. Movies were new in the entertainment world and it was the right time to embark on this new career. Jim was needed to run the motion picture business, while Sallie's brothers took care of their other interests. They built a new theater on the site of a former church between 7th and 8th and Market Street. It was called the MAJESTIC and it was so successful that they bought many other theaters. Mr. Ginns ran the Lowes and also the Dockstader, which was a well known vaudeville house. In addition, during World War II, he operated the Playhouse.

This business netted a handsome profit and allowed the Ginns family to live very well. While most immigrants were still struggling to earn enough to subsist, the Topkis enterprises enabled them to become philanthropists. They supported every worthy cause.

VII. LIFE WITHIN THE GINNS FAMILY

Sallie Ginns believed as her mother had taught her that her first obligation was toward her husband and children, but, in addition, she felt an obligation to her fellowmen. Organization service was perfect because she could arrange her hours so that she could be home to care for her family obligations. As her husband's business became more prosperous, she was freed from financial worry. Even though she had plenty of household help, for some women, running a large household would have been sufficient, but for Sallie, it was not enough. Her boundless energy made it easier for her to speak out on all matters that she considered important. She was so well organized and so well disciplined that she was able to juggle many worthwhile activities and still remain a devoted family member. If she became too fatigued from a too hectic lifestyle, she merely took a short nap and her powers were restored.¹⁷

One of Sallie's aims was to provide her children with a well rounded Jewish education. Jim was less interested but cooperated. While in Coatesville, Sallie organized the first Sunday School which eventually evolved into a synagogue. She continued to send her daughters to religious school but they showed little interest. She wished to instill within them the love that she had for Judaism but they were the products of the nineteen-twenties, when it was not fashionable to be Jewish and many Jews were emulating Christians. They remained Jews but not as committed as their mother.

Clara Belle married A. Paul Lefton and the family lived in suburban Philadelphia. They became very prosperous. Sallie and Jim had

a fine relationship with them and their two sons.¹⁸ The death of one of their grandsons was a tragedy to them all. The marriage of Reba was less, successful and ended in divorce. When Reba remarried and moved to Dover, Delaware, her three children of her first marriage elected to remain with their grandparents. Jim and Sallie set out to raise another family and it worked out very well because Stephen, Jane and Wilma adored their grandparents. Sallie attempted to instill within them the same values that had been important in her life.

Sallie and Jim each had a different lifestyle but they were compatible. Jim loved to gamble and his family considered him a big sport.¹⁹ Although he enjoyed his work, he preferred to play. In addition, he had an infectious sense of humor. Sallie, on the other hand, knew that satisfaction in life came from serving. Fortunately, Jim paid her bills and allowed her the luxury of doing good deeds.

In her late sixties, Sallie Ginns developed a new hobby. She became an artist and tried to spend at least an hour every day at her easel. It became one of her favorite activities where she could lose herself for hours. She found that she was quite a colorist and preferred warm tones. As her work developed, she changed her style and used more abstract techniques. She gave gifts of her art work to friends and family which were valued.²⁰

Sallie cared for Jim lovingly as he became arthritic and later almost senile.²¹ Their relationship became more tender as he lost some of his gruffness.

During the last fifteen years of her life, most of her friends and even strangers called her "Aunt Sallie." It became a term of

endearment that she enjoyed. She was aware of the respect that this title denoted, and made everyone feel comfortable in her presence.

VIII. SUFFRAGE

Sallie Ginns had become interested in women's suffrage while living in Coatesville. As an activist, she joined The National Women's Party. This organization was founded by Alice Paul, a Quaker, who visited England and came under the influence of militant suffragettes.²² In Delaware Florence Bayard Hillis, a member of the aristocratic Bayard family, and Mabel Vernon formed a Delaware chapter of the National Women's Party which joined chapters throughout the country.

Sallie decided not to join a women's group called (NAWSA) National American Women's Suffrage Association, because this organization looked to the states to grant the vote to women. Sallie, who was not a pacifist, did not think that this would achieve the necessary results. Only six western states had granted voting privileges to women, but there was no interest in Delaware. Twice, in 1913 and, in 1915, an attempt was made in the Delaware Legislature to grant the vote to women. Only six votes could be mustered in the House and eight in the Senate to amend the Constitution.²³

Sallie's position was not a popular one in those days. Most of her female contemporaries did not believe in suffrage. Many of Delaware's most prominent women joined a group called Delaware Opposed to Women's Suffrage. They wrote to members of the Legislature urging them not to vote to amend the Constitution because they considered the vote a burden and not a reward.²⁴ They felt that the vote for women was an unnecessary duplication and an enormous increase in the cost of

government. When the Nineteenth Amendment was finally passed, many of the political jobs were offered to the very women who had worked against suffrage, instead of going to those who had labored for its passage. This rankled Sallie very much.

Sallie was treasurer of the National Women's Party for eight years and was very active within the organization. She frequently went to Washington to visit her Congressmen and picketed in both Wilmington and Washington. The first parade of the National Women's Party in Wilmington occurred in 1914.²⁵ All the ladies wore white; the marshals had colorful sashes. The college section wore caps and gowns. The Men's Equal Suffrage League marched along with them. Automobiles brought up the rear.

A story that Sallie liked to tell and somewhat of a chuckle concerned her husband Jim. One day Mrs. Hillis was arrested while picketing outside the White House. Delaware's newspapers carried the story with large headlines. Usually Jim never objected to any of Sallie's activities but this time he was furious when he read the story. "This is the end. You've got to promise me that you will not picket the White House." Soon afterwards she was called to Washington and this time her organization decided to picket the Capitol. She agreed to join the group because it was not the White House. When she returned to Wilmington and told her story to Jim, he replied, "You're impossible, I'm not going to tell you what to do any more." He had resigned himself to accept the kind of activities she engaged in and never again lost his temper with her.

As soon as the Nineteenth Amendment was passed, Sallie joined the Republican Party and remained loyal to it for the rest of her life. She never held an important position in the Party and became embittered that the most active suffragettes did not reap their full reward.

IX. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The Council of Jewish Women was a national organization in which Jewish women followed the pattern of their gentile counterparts and assumed greater social responsibility. Sallie Ginns attempted to bring Wilmington's Jewish women into this field, because she believed that women articulated and understood social problems better than men did. As a result of this feeling, she did not quietly accept the fact that men were always given the leadership roles in the community.

Friends of hers in New York who belonged to the Council of Jewish Women urged her to set up a local chapter and she did. In 1918 she and twenty-five charter members plunged into community service projects. The motto of the Council was "Where there is a woman, there is a way" and this fitted in very well with Sallie's plans.²⁶ First of all, for the duration of World War I, they worked closely with the Red Cross. Afterwards, the women became involved in two projects which Mrs. Ginns rated as the Council's most important work: to assist in the Americanization of foreign-born immigrants and their activities in their school-friend program.

An Americanization program was urged by Sallie Ginns in order to teach academic skills, such as reading and writing, immigrants. It was significant, because men as well as women showed an increasingly avid interest in education despite the fact that they were beyond school age.

Her Council work with the Americanization program was responsible for her appointment to the Delaware Americanization Council where she served as Vice-President. Sallie worked with Marguerite Burnett who was Director of Immigrant Education for the City and the State programs. As a result, literacy [sic] dropped 31% during the next decade.²⁷ Thousands of Jews and non-Jews were able to become citizens and to receive an education and assistance in overcoming the culture-shock they suffered after arriving in a new land.

For the School-Friend Program members of the Council of Jewish Women acted as a liaison between schools and Jewish children, in an effort to keep immigrant Jewish-children in school. The liaison work was also useful to smooth out friction between students, parents and teachers. There were thirty schools in Wilmington and Sallie appointed one woman to act as liaison between each school and the Council. If there was a problem, the liaison would be notified. Delicate communications then occurred. Since Sallie and other Council members knew all of the Jewish families, peer pressure would be placed upon any family that would not cooperate. One family had a son they considered dumb, but the teacher did not agree. She thought that all he needed was glasses. The parents did not want to spend the money for glasses, but Sallie shamed them by personally threatening to take the boy to a doctor and buy the glasses herself. The family was so embarrassed that they purchased the boy his glasses. In another case, a boy had gotten in bad company and it looked as though he might become delinquent. After visiting the family, Sallie contacted the Village School at Dobbs Ferry, New York and they agreed to keep him for two

years if a fee of \$1000 was paid as partial payment. Sallie saw to it that enough contributions were collected by the Council of Jewish Women to pay the necessary costs. Forty years later, she met the man whose life she had aided by her efforts. He had made the Army his career and he thanked her for her help in turning his life around. During the same period in which Sallie was active, A Family Court Judge stated that for the 40 years he served on the bench not a single Jewish child ever came before him as a delinquent.

The Council of Jewish-Women also started a kindergarten at the YMHA at 3rd and King Street. Some Jewish children were attending a Missionary School and the Council felt that it was wrong for Jewish children to attend a Christian school. Despite her best efforts, they were forced to abandon this project after a few years because of a shortage of funds. Sallie thought that the Kindergarten was necessary and should have been continued but could not swing it by herself. Her interest in Woods Haven School grew out of this concern for young people's needs. Woods Haven was the institution where wayward and delinquent girls were sent. She served on the Board for 24 years and considered it one of her most rewarding experiences. She was a proponent of education and fought for rehabilitation rather than punishment.

Sallie Ginns' work with the Red Cross was a never-ending love affair. Her work began in 1920 and from that date until 1947 she served with the production and supply services and in War Board Work.²⁸ In 1939 she was elected to the Board of the Red Cross and remained a board member until she died. Sallie was honored for her volunteer work by receiving the Lammont Dupont Memorial Award for 53 years of dedicated work as

a Red Cross Volunteer. It was true when Sallie said that she owed a debt to the community, she paid it with loyal and devoted, service.

X. SALLIE AS A JEW

When the family moved from New Castle to Wilmington, they became involved in community life. Her brothers met with other men at their home at 417 King Street to plan to fill the recreational void for Jewish youth in Wilmington. They needed a whole-some place in which to congregate. The founders called their new organization the Young Men's Hebrew Association and rented a room at Third and Market Street, so that they could hold regular meetings and engage in various activities for the boys. They moved to Fourth and Shipley Street for a short while and then Louis Topkis purchased the Odd Fellows Building and allowed the YMHA to use the second and third floor of his building. Sallie believed that he never charged them for the use of the building. However, she did know that her brother, William, paid the director's salary out of his own pocket and was very happy to do so.

Following the family tradition, in 1913 Sallie organized the Young Women's Hebrew Association because girls also had no outlet for their recreational needs. This also gave the girl's of the community an opportunity to meet together and have social activities to which boys were naturally invited. Clara Belle, Sallie's eldest daughter, recalled the instructions which her mother gave her prior to a dance at the YWHA.²⁹ She and her sister were to be polite to all of the boys and were not to refuse anyone's invitation to dance. Sallie taught her daughters strict rules of social behavior.

Sallie was also actively involved in synagogue work from the time that she became a part of the community. As a young girl, she became a member of the literary society of the Adas Kodesh which was an orthodox synagogue. This group met regularly to discuss books and enjoy a social hour. After many hours of discussion, they decided to separate the main Adas Kodesh body and form a more liberal organization. This new group had its first meeting at 504 Market Street in 1905, and, by 1906, purchased its own building at 911 Washington Street. The new religious body was named The Temple of Truth (Beth Emeth). Regular Sunday school classes were held in the basement and the first class was confirmed in 1910. In 1922, major theological differences developed among the congregants of The Temple of Truth and they ultimately split into two bodies. Those who wished a more conservative service formed a new synagogue along more traditional lines, leaving only forty members to carry the whole burden of the Temple. Shortly afterwards, the latter joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and formally became a Reform religious body. Temple Beth Emeth is still the only Reform body in Wilmington and Sallie remained loyal to it all of her life.

In the beginning the women of the Temple formed a Ladies Aid society and they helped the Jewish needy as well as the Temple. In 1923, they changed their name to the Sisterhood of Temple Beth Emeth. Sallie was President of the Sisterhood for many years.

Sallie's own religious education was for the most part taught to her by her mother. She did however attend a church Bible class while living in New Castle in order to learn Old Testament stories. Despite her lack of formal training, she worked very hard all of her life so

that all Jewish children could have the opportunity to receive a fine Jewish education. If possible, she always attended Sabbath services even when she was in her ninetieth year. Not only did she attend, but she also participated in every activity that the Temple held. Her inquiring mind and youthful spirit was a model for all the congregants. Although in Talmudic literature it is stated that a woman's education is not as important as that of a male, Sallie did not believe that this was fair or proper. As a consequence, she urged equal education for all.

Whenever Sallie saw a need lit the community, she was among the first to come forward and try to do something about it. By bringing all the Jewish women's groups together, common problems could be shared and duplication of funds could be avoided. She started The Federation of Jewish Women's Organizations with the purpose of representing all the Jewish women of Delaware. For twelve years this group cooperated with The Jewish Federation of Delaware until it was finally absorbed into it.

The Federation of Jewish Women Organizations was able to muster over two hundred women for the Jewish Federation to help them collect funds during their campaigns. They worked for the Red Cross during World War II, helped the U.S.O. and aided newcomers who came to the community. They conducted the first demographic survey in 1930, for the purpose of finding out where the different groups of Jewish people lived and in order to decide upon a more centrally located religious school for children. As a result of the study, they found that about two thousand Jews lived in the Wilmington area. In 1944, when another survey was

taken, they found that the Jewish population had grown to four thousand. At a time when when there was little or no federal or state aid to the poor, Jewish organizations such as the Federation of Jewish Organization provided the means of caring for the needs of the Jewish needy.

Toward the end of her life, Sallie felt that the Jewish community had become more cohesive. Even though Jews in the early days all knew one another and sometimes interacted as an extended family, there had been friction that had divided the community. The Jewish holocaust during which six million Jews were exterminated, had a great impact on the Jews in Wilmington and all over the world and made them feel much closer to one another. During World War II she felt that many Jews were Jews in name only and had wished to blend in with the Christian population. Furthermore, she felt that the creation of the state of Israel had a great impact on Jews and made them proud of their heritage. Her own brothers, Lou and William, were very active in Zionism long before it became a popular cause. William was actually one of the founders of The Zionist Organization of America, and was National treasurer when he died at an early age. As a result of her life-long interest in Zionism, she supported every project toward the creation of the Jewish state of Israel which, after it became a reality, she supported enthusiastically.

Sallie noted in a taped interview that of all the many years she spent rendering public service, no gentile ever invited her to his or her home for a purely social evening. Although anti-Semitism pervaded her society, she never allowed it to influence her choice of activities

not did she feel resentment toward Christians. As a result of this anti-Semitism, Sallie worked for the growth and perpetuation of many Jewish causes.

SUMMARY

Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Topkis escaped from Russia with their children and came to America to start a new life. Like other immigrants, they struggled to make a living. Mrs. Rose Topkis set an example for her children by showing them that it was their moral duty to upgrade society,

Sallie Ginns, her daughter, devoted her energies toward improving the status of women, humanitarian needs and Jewish improvement. It was her motto that each individual owed a responsibility to one's community. She attempted to solve the problems that plagued Wilmington, women and Jews in particular. Her actions and deeds have been an example to three generations.

Rabbi Herbert E. Drooz stated in his eulogy at her death , "Aunt Sallie painted her life spiritually on a vast canvas. It is difficult to think of an organization with sound purpose of justice, love and compassion that did not win her devoted supported. Her life was spiritual in its entirety and should serve as a model for this generation and for those that follow".

CONCLUSION

Sallie Ginns served as a paradigm for the Wilmington community. It is hoped that her goals will become the goals of future generations. It seems important that future generations realize that all the institutions and all the freedoms that we have, are ours because others worked very hard to gain them for us.

It is hoped that the collection of this data will make it easier for the historian of the future to make sense of the Jewish Community of Wilmington and to examine its role in relationship to one dedicated citizen.

Furthermore, the role of women has been scantily unfolded in previous times. Considering all the circumstances, it is necessary to note that there were those women who did speak out and those who did stand up for causes that were vital to their well being. While women struggle to achieve the Equal Rights Amendment today, it is helpful to understand that the struggle has been long but perseverance is necessary in order for any goal to be won.

¹ Interview with Sallie Topkis Ginns, Wilmington, Delaware, June 1970. 2 reels. Unless otherwise stated, all information comes from this interview.

² Howe, World of our Fathers, (New York and London, 1976), p. 9.

³ Ibid., p. 5.

⁴ Ibid., p. 28.

⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

⁶ Sklare, American Jews, (New York, 1971), p. 11.

⁷ Howe, p. 78.

⁸ Geffen, Delaware Jewry: The Formative Years, 1872-1889, (Wilmington, Delaware, 1975), p. 295.

⁹ Ibid., p. 289, footnote 64.

¹⁰ The other wedding that Sallie recalled was that of Louis Finger, the first Jewish Wilmington postman. He was married at the Leshem home at Front and Madison Street. This wedding was performed the same day as the famous Blizzard of 1888. As a girl of eight, the walk home was forever etched in her memory.

¹¹ The group travelled to Philadelphia to visit a Rabbi. He suggested the name because it meant care for the sick.

¹² Interview with Reba Sapowith, Wilmington, Delaware, 1976.

¹³ Interview with Clara Belle Lefton, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1976.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ News Journal, (Wilmington, Delaware, 1972) clipping found in Sallie Ginns file, Jewish Historical Society

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Interview with Clara Belle Lefton.

¹⁸ Interview with Rabbi Drooz, Wilmington, Delaware, October 1976.

¹⁹ Interview with Reba Sapowith.

²⁰ Interview with Rabbi Drooz.

²¹ bid.

²² Gornick, Alice Paul. Life Special Report. (New York, 1976) p. 54.

²³ Florence Bayard Hillis file, Historical Society of Delaware.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ File, Sallie Topkis Ginns, Jewish Historical Society, clipping

²⁷ 1922-23 Department of Immigration Education Report to Superintendent of Schools. Report to Wilmington Board of Education.

²⁸ Sallie Ginns File, Jewish Historical Society, Red Cross File, Red Cross Building, Wilmington, Delaware.

²⁹ Interview with Clara Belle Lefton.

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