

PROFILE OF SIMON TUSKA
SPIRITUAL LEADER
CONGREGATION CHILDREN OF ISRAEL 1860 – 1870

Simon Tuska was born in Weszperin, Hungary, in 1835, the youngest of five sons born to Rabbi Mordecai and Rebecca Tuska. The four elder sons immigrated to the United States and were later followed by their parents and youngest son Simon. They settled in Rochester, New York, where Rabbi Mordecai had been invited to become spiritual leader of Congregation B'rith Kodesh of that city.

Simon attended Rochester public schools and was awarded a scholarship to Rochester Institute. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree. During the years 1856-1858 he was a teacher at the Collegiate Institute in Brockport, New York. He was the author of "A Stranger in the Synagogue," a work dealing with the rites and ceremonies of Jewish worship. This work appealed to Jews and Christians alike.

In 1858 Simon Tuska attended the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau, Prussia, the leading institution of its kind in the world, where he studied Hebrew Theology. In 1860 he returned to the United States qualified as a Rabbi although he had left Breslau without Rabbinical ordination. During his tenure in Memphis he was referred to as Rabbi and as Reverend Tuska, although officially he was not a rabbi. During his formative years he had been influenced by the religious philosophy of Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, the champion of Reform Judaism. Rabbi Wise's advocates were mainly German-American Jews.

When Memphis Congregation Children of Israel (now Temple Israel) advertised for a spiritual leader, Simon Tuska was one of four candidates who applied for the position. Tuska was unanimously elected. The vote was probably influenced by the support of Rabbi Wise. Tuska's salary was \$800.00 per annum. Some modification to the ritual of Children of Israel had already been made before Tuska's arrival and made his plans for reform easier. During his tenure the congregation installed a musical organ and a choir. He introduced a Thanksgiving Fast Day and patriotic services. During the first five years of his ministry he made great progress in the transition from an Orthodox Synagogue to a Reform Temple.

Like many other Reform congregations in the United States, Memphis services had been conducted in German. Tuska digressed from this policy and began preaching alternate weeks in English and then German. He guided the congregation toward a modification of traditional ritual by deleting components of the service he believed were antiquated and introducing features he felt were more relevant to nineteenth century America. In 1863, Shavuot was celebrated at Congregation Children of Israel with its first Confirmation class. While the Civil War was in progress, departing Confederate soldiers were given the blessing of the congregation, and Union troops also sometimes attended the Temple services.

Simon Tuska came to Memphis and Children of Israel in 1860 at the age of 25 and remained until his premature death on December 30, 1870. His funeral was held on January 2, 1871. He was interred at the congregation's cemetery on Bass Street. His grave was later moved to the new Temple cemetery off Hernando Road.

His survivors included his wife Jeanette Nussbaum Tuska. He had two children, a son Benjamin and a daughter who died in childhood. Mrs. Tuska and Benjamin later moved to New York.

Bibliography: Temple Israel Archives

ADDENDUM TO THE ABOVE

Since writing the above we have received additional information from an outside source that gives conflicting information from what we have noted above.

FROM THE UNITED STATES FEDERAL CENSUS OF 1870, WHICH DETAILS THE FOLLOWING:

Simon Tuska was born on or about 1827 (not 1835)

Birth Place: Bavaria/Bayern not Weszperin, Hungary

Wife listed as Jane not Jeanette

Children: Ben aged 3 and Hattie aged 1

His age at death at 43

Funeral held January 4 not January 2