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# Twain's Admiration of Jews Conflicted His Article of 100 Years Ago Seems Less Flattering Today

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# Twain's admiration of Jews conflicted His article of 100 years ago seems less flattering today

March 22, 1998 | By KENNETH LASSON

It's been exactly a hundred years since Mark Twain first revealed himself as an unmitigated admirer of Jewish people. "A marvelous race, by long odds the most marvelous that the world has produced, I suppose," he wrote in "Concerning the Jews," published in March of 1898 by Harper's magazine.

With the benefit of 20th-century hindsight, some of Twain's ruminations about what he perceived as the Jews' instinctive talent for commercial enterprise would be viewed as volatile gross offenses against political correctness. Even back then he caught some flak: "Of all such advocates," editorialized the Jewish Chronicle in 1899, "we can but say, 'Heaven save us from our friends.'"

Twain himself considered the article his "gem of the ocean," which he said he took "a world of pleasure in writing & doctoring & fussing at." Was "Concerning the Jews" insight, or naivete? Courage, orchutzpah?

Some modern literary critics claim Twain was prejudiced like most others by the standard 19th-century stereotypes of Jews, and that it showed. Others are more charitable, taking into account the tenor and context of the pre-PC age in which it was written.

How different after all was Twain from H.L. Mencken, who (after the posthumous publication of his diaries) was attacked as an anti-Semite? As literary critic Joseph Epstein has pointed out, Mencken talked about Jews the way they talked about themselves: "But H.L. Mencken was no anti-Semite. For that he would have had to be, and obviously was not, meshuga."

Neither, of course, was Mark Twain.

But he was a fascinating study in contrasts. The son of slave owners, he created powerful anti-slavery literature. Denouncing greedy capitalists, he invested heavily in get-rich schemes. Writing about Jews, he was called one himself.

As early as 1879, Twain had observed that Jews "are peculiarly and conspicuously the world's intellectual aristocracy." They were "being legislated out of Russia," he wrote then, because of their "commercial abilities." Politically incorrect as such expressions might be viewed today, he was persuaded "that nine-tenths of the hostility ... comes from the average Christian's inability to compete successfully with the average Jew in business - either straight or the questionable sort."

But it was in his Harper's essay that Twain first pondered at length what he had obviously been mulling over for some time.

"Concerning the Jews" was most probably conceived during the latter part of 1897, when Twain was on a lecture tour in Austria, happily rubbing elbows and ideas with Sigmund Freud and Theodore Herzl. The Dreyfus Affair was in full swing and, like Emile Zola, Twain was a staunch defender of the young French army captain falsely convicted of treason. Most likely he was influenced as well by his friend Herzl, whose embryonic ideas about Zionism were fueled by the blatant anti-Semitism festering all over Europe.

Twain's friendships with Jews were condemned by the Austrian press, which may have assumed that anyone named Samuel had to be Jewish. To such rhetoric Twain replied in kind: "I hold in just as much reverence that little Jew baby that was born in Bethlehem nineteen centuries ago as if it had been a Christian baby."

The Harper's essay was in response to a letter Twain had received from a Jewish lawyer, an American, who questioned why there was anti-Semitism in Austria when "no Jew [there] was doing any mischief to anybody whatsoever." The lawyer saw Mark Twain as a mensch, a man of character, who might be able to explain the cause of such persecution. "Will a Jew [ever] be permitted to live honestly, decently, and peaceably like the rest of mankind?"

Twain's initial response was typical corned-beef-on-wry:

"A few years ago a Jew observed to me that there was no uncourteous reference to his people in my books, and asked how it happened. It happened because the disposition was lacking. All that I care to know is that a man is a human being - that is enough for me; he can't be any worse."

This was Sam Clemens talking:

"The Jew is not a disturber of the peace of any country. Even his enemies will concede that. He is not a loafer, he is not a sot, he is not noisy, he is not a brawler nor a rioter, he is not quarrelsome." The reason he was so "conspicuously rare" in crime reports was his solid family life, "knitted together by the strongest affections ... and reverence for the elders."

Nor was the Jew a burden on state charities, said Twain. "When he is well enough, he works; when he is incapacitated, his own people take care of him. And not in a poor and stingy way, but with a fine and large benevolence."

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Such uncommon praise, of course, is not what has given Jewish critics pause to speculate about Twain's common sense and intellectual honesty. They refer particularly to his observation in Harper's that the Jew has "a reputation for various small forms of cheating, and for practicing oppressive usury, and for burning himself out to get the insurance, and for arranging cunning contracts which leave him an exit but lock the other man in." And this:

"In the cotton states, after the war, the simple and ignorant Negroes made the crops for the white planter on shares. The Jews came down in force, set up shop on the plantation, supplied all the Negro's wants on credit, and at the end of the season was proprietor of the Negro's share of the present crop and of part of his share of the next one. Before long, the whites detested the Jew, and it is doubtful if the Negro loved him."

But Twain's comment on "the reputation" of Jews is not proof that he believed it. Such an inference must be weighed against his conviction that the average Jew is a "good and orderly" citizen, "quiet, peaceable, industrious, unaddicted to high crimes and brutal dispositions." These, urged Twain, were "the very quintessentials of good citizenship" and "the Christian can claim no superiority over the Jew in [such] matters."

Perhaps most hurtful was the passage in "Concerning the Jews" that questioned Jewish willingness to bear arms in defense of the country:

"[The Jew] is a frequent and faithful and capable officer in the civil service, but he is charged with an unpatriotic disinclination to stand by the flag as a soldier."

Twain recommended that Jews "get up volunteer regiments ... and when the drum beats, fall in and go to the front."

On this point Twain found himself utterly mistaken - and wrote a long and remarkable postscript entitled "The American Jew as Soldier," which appeared in subsequent publications of "Concerning the Jews." When he had originally drafted that piece, he said he was ignorant - "like the rest of the Christian world" - of the facts. But he had "since seen the official statistics," and discovered that Jews furnished both soldiers and high officers to the Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Mexican War. In the Civil War, they were represented in the armies and navies of both the North and South in the same percentage as the Christian population.

A hundred years ago this month, Twain concluded his Harper's essay with a telling analysis and an unanswered question:

"If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race [and] ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him.

"All other forces pass," observed Mark Twain a century ago, "but the Jews remain. What is the secret of their immortality?"

Kenneth Lasson is a professor of law at the University of Baltimore. His most recent article on political correctness appeared in the Tennessee Law Review.

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