

# This Month in American Jewish History

## “The American Jewess” begins publication - April 1, 1895

Published between April 1895 and August 1899, *The American Jewess* was the first English-language publication directed to American Jewish women. It covered an evocative range of topics, from demands for synagogue membership for women, to Zionism, to health and fashion tips, to the propriety of women riding bicycles. The publication's sense of possibility was captured in its title. Though strange and archaic to contemporary ears, the phrase “American Jewess,” in the 1890s, described a new type of Jewish woman, one who could fully embrace the possibilities of both the religious and national aspects of her identity. The *American Jewess* set out to explore the challenges and possibilities inherent in this new identity. At its height, the magazine claimed a circulation of 31,000.

Rosa Sonneschein, who created, oversaw, and edited volumes 1–7 of *The American Jewess*, came to the United States in the 1860s. Born in Prostějov, Moravia, Austria, on March 12, 1847, Rosa Sonneschein was the daughter of Fannie (Sternfeld) and Hirsch Bär Fassel, a respected scholar and moderate Reform Rabbi. Rosa grew up as the youngest daughter in an upper-middle-class home in Nagykanizsa, Hungary, and received an education at home and the local high school that was remarkably thorough for a nineteenth-century girl. In 1864, she married Solomon Hirsch Sonneschein, a young radical Reform Rabbi with a congregation in Warasdin, Croatia. In the next five years, the Sonnescheins moved to successive posts in Prague, New York City, and finally, in 1869, St. Louis, where they remained for about twenty years.

Rosa and Solomon Sonneschein had four children: Ben, born in Warasdin in 1865; Fanny (Loth), born in Prague in 1866; Leontine (Pomeroy), born in Prague in 1868; and Monroe, born in St. Louis in 1873. Fanny followed her mother to become active in women's literary clubs. Monroe contributed several poems, stories, and articles to the *American Jewess*.

During the years Rosa Sonneschein spent as a rebbetzin [rabbi's wife] in St. Louis, she was a public figure in the city's Jewish community. She helped lead the “Ladies' Meetings” and organized the choral society at the two St. Louis congregations Solomon Sonneschein served. Her position as a rebbetzin also enabled her to move beyond the Jewish community, participating in literary circles and the city's German cultural life. In 1879, she founded the Pioneers, a Jewish women's literary society. Modeled on similar Christian women's clubs, the Pioneers devoted themselves not to studying Jewish literature, but to cultivating general literary taste and knowledge. Perhaps encouraged by club experiences, Sonneschein began to publish stories in Jewish periodicals at least as early as the mid-1880s. Her standing in both the German and Jewish communities and her frequent European travels positioned Sonneschein well as a correspondent for the German-language press, and her reports on world expositions in Paris, St. Louis, and Chicago gained her some prominence.

Rosa and Solomon Sonneschein projected the image of a united couple, but quarreled frequently. They had intellectual disagreements, most notably over the wisdom of Zionism, but personal problems overshadowed these in plaguing their relationship. Mutual charges of infidelity and financial irresponsibility, exacerbated by their roles as public figures in the Jewish community and representatives of it to those outside, made the Sonnescheins' marriage untenable, and they separated in 1891. Rosa first broached the idea of divorce, but ultimately allowed Solomon to sue, wishing “to be rid of him, not ruin him.” Their divorce was finalized in April 1893. Sonneschein left her husband and moved to Chicago where she was able to attend the Jewish Women's Congress held at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. As she later wrote, “then and there we conceived the impression that the time had come to establish a literary organ for the American Jewess, an organ which shall connect the sisters dwelling throughout ... this blessed country, concentrate the work of scattered charitable institutions, and bring them to the notice of the various communities as an imposing and powerful unit.”

Sonneschein was the first American Jewish woman to offer a strong and consistent critique of gender inequities in worship and synagogue leadership. She demanded that Jewish women “thirsting for the word of God” be allowed to “drink directly from the fountain of Religion.” Her written contributions to *The American Jewess* are also noteworthy for their early advocacy of Zionism by an American Jew.

Deflected by setbacks in both business and health, Sonneschein yielded control of the publication to an unidentified group of publishers in the summer of 1898. Despite the new publishers' assertion that the magazine would benefit from no longer having to depend for all aspects of its creation upon a single individual, it was clearly Sonneschein's energy that gave life to the endeavor. Although Sonneschein continued to appear frequently as a correspondent, the journal suffered from the loss of her sharp editorial perspective and vision. Five more monthly and two “quarterly” issues appeared after Sonneschein's departure as editor; the last issue is dated August 1899.

Rosa Sonneschein recognized that the progress of American Jewish women needed to be preserved in writing. As she observed in the first issue of the *American Jewess*, “Not what has happened, but what is recorded makes history.”

Sources: *American Jewess*, vols. 1–9 (April 1895–August 1899); *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, pp. 1289–1291.; [www.hti.umich.edu/a/amjewess/](http://www.hti.umich.edu/a/amjewess/).

