

## From Our History

By Mark I. Wolfson

Matilda Cohen

This week we remember the Hashcabah of Matilda Cohen, a very active and prominent figure in Mikveh Israel history, who helped shape Jewish life in Philadelphia in the 19th century. She was born Matilda Samuel on New Years Day, 1820, one of 12 children of Lewis and Kate Samuel in Liverpool, England. She died January 4, 1888 (20 Tebet). She married Henry Cohen in April 1844 and shortly afterwards moved to Philadelphia.

Henry Cohen had come to Philadelphia earlier in 1837 and established a wholesale imported English and French stationary business on Chestnut Street below Fourth. He met and married Matilda when he returned to Liverpool to visit his family. They promptly returned to Philadelphia where they took up residence at the Washington Hotel on Chestnut Street above Seventh, but soon after moved up Chestnut Street, just above Broad Street. This was later the site of the Land Title Bank and Trust Company and is still today the site of the Land Title Building.

The heart of the residential district in the city was between Fourth and Sixth Streets, and the area this far west was just beginning to be developed. The center of Broad Street was the route of the freight tracks, and after a coal-car crash caused the shelving in the butler's pantry to collapse, breaking Matilda's beautiful set of Copeland china, the family moved even further west to Rittenhouse Square.

On settling in Philadelphia, they joined Mikveh Israel, where they both became active in the affairs of the congregation and the greater Jewish community. Mrs. Cohen became very good friends with Rebecca Gratz and together they gave their time, energy, and resources to several worthy causes. Mrs. Cohen, aside from being a brilliant conversationalist and an excellent public speaker, was also a very talented manager and executive. Her dignified presence made her sought-after by organizations within and outside the Jewish community.

Mrs. Cohen was for decades a manager of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society and served as its Secretary for 10 years. She worked for many years for the Jewish Foster Home and Orphan Asylum, and eventually served as its president. She was also a manager of the Ladies' Associate Board of the United Hebrew Charities and the Hebrew Sunday School Society. She also worked for Ward Charities, and other charitable organizations.

There was a large celebration organized in Philadelphia for the Centennial, and a Women's Committee for the Centennial Exposition was formed. Mrs. Cohen was invited to join the Executive Committee of Thirteen and became one of the most valued and active workers, displaying her executive ability and public spirit. A popular journal among ladies was *The New Century for Women*. Shortly after the close of the Centennial Exposition, the first women's club in Philadelphia was organized, called the New Century Club. Mrs. Cohen was a charter member, and afterwards served as a director, and then for several years the Vice-President until her death in 1888.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Matilda Cohen became a member of the Women's Branch of the Sanitary Fair Committee. Taking a leadership role, she led Pennsylvania's Jewish women sewing bandages and clothing, packing food, nursing soldiers and raising money for military supplies. Under her leadership, two hundred and fifty Jewish women joined the Ladies Hebrew Relief Association for the Sick and Wounded Soldiers.

In the midst of the war, in 1864, Matilda Cohen wrote a letter in response to General Benjamin Butler's published account of the capture of five Jews accused of smuggling across the military blockade. Butler had written that he was "from the force of circumstances, unacquainted with any other Israelites than those engaged in the contraband trade". In her remarkable and articulate response, Mrs. Cohen writes:

This is a satisfactory explanation as far as it goes but when I refer you to the history of my people, your intellectual mind will readily perceive the injustice you have done to us. I am a native of England, but America is the land of my adoption, having dwelt here 20 years, my sons and daughters glory in "being natives here and to the manner born". Mr. Cohen is among the earliest member of the Union League, taking a deep interest in the success of the national cause. I have established a Hebrew Women's Aid (see circular enclosed) which cooperates with the U.S. Sanitary Commission and has added many stores for the sick and wounded soldiers. I see a great and glorious future for this century if, at the close of this war it truly proves itself to be the "Land of the Free" to all races, and to all religions.

Henry and Matilda Cohen had nine children. Among them were Charles J. Cohen, who succeeded his father as President of Mikveh Israel in 1879, Mary Cohen who was a very famous and accomplished writer, and Katherine Cohen who was a well-known artist and sculptor.

