

ABRAM S. ISAACS

BY LEWIS M. ISAACS

Abram S. Isaacs was born in New York City on August 30, 1851, the youngest son of the Rev. Samuel M. Isaacs, who was one of the first Jewish Rabbis in this country to preach in English. His eldest brother was the late Judge Myer S. Isaacs, largely identified with Jewish affairs during his long and active career. Isaac S. Isaacs, also a prominent lawyer and a life-long partner of Judge Isaacs, actively connected from its inception with the United Hebrew Charities of New York and other communal organizations, was another brother.

Dr. Isaacs received his education at the New York University, from which he was graduated, with highest honors, in 1871. Later he went abroad to complete his rabbinical studies at Breslau. Reared in a home where life and religion were inseparable, he was early imbued with that rare and fine appreciation of the underlying and essential tenets of his faith which so distinguished his sermons and writings in later years. Following in his father's footsteps he became a Rabbi and a teacher, filling for a number of years the pulpit at Barnett Memorial Temple at Paterson, New Jersey. For upwards of thirty-five years he occupied a chair at the New York University, first as Professor of Hebrew, then of Germanic languages, and later of Semitics; and at the time of his death he was the second oldest professor, in years of service, at the University. In 1878 he received from his Alma Mater the degree of Ph. D. *honoris causa*.

In addition to his work in the pulpit and University, Dr. Isaacs, from 1878, edited *The Jewish Messenger*, a weekly publication devoted to Jewish communal affairs, which had been founded in 1857 by his father and elder brothers, and wielded a genuine influence for good for almost fifty years. It became merged in *The American Hebrew* in 1903, at which time Dr. Isaacs withdrew from editorial work. During all these years he was a frequent contributor to the leading periodicals of the country, not only on phases of Judaism and Jewish problems, but also on topics of general literary interest. His first volume, *A Modern Hebrew Poet: The Life and Writings of Moses Chaim Luzzatto*, published in 1878, exhibited his extensive knowledge and power of expression.

Several books from his pen have been published by The Jewish Publication Society: *Step by Step* (1910), dealing with the life and time of Moses Mendelssohn; *The Young Champion* (1913), based on the life of Grace Aguilar; *Under the Sabbath Lamp*, a series of short stories on Jewish subjects (1919). At the time of his death a manuscript entitled *School Days in Our Home Town* and dealing in a charming way with episodes in his early life, during which his father conducted a Jewish school, was in the hands of the Society for publication. In addition, he published a volume of essays, *What is Judaism?* (Putnam, 1912), and *Stories from the Rabbis* (Bloch, 1894), which latter volume has passed through several editions. For both editions of the *Encyclopedia Americana* he edited the Semitic department. He was also a writer of simple and appealing verse. One of the best known of the hymns in the Union Hymnal ("A Noble Life, a Simple Faith") was from his pen.

In later years Dr. Isaacs added to his many other spheres of activity that of lecturer; and his simple, unaffected manner, combined with solid scholarship and interesting material, made him a prominent figure in this field. Among the subjects which he covered were "The Synagogue in Different Countries," "Holland and the Art of Joseph Israels," "The Child at School in Many Lands," "An Evening with Heine," and "The Art of Max Liebermann."

Dr. Isaacs died at Paterson, N. J., on December 22, 1920.

No more fitting tribute can be paid to Dr. Isaacs than the very beautiful letter written to his family, at the time of his demise, by the Rev. Dr. Samuel Schulman, on behalf of the Association of Reform Rabbis. The following is an extract therefrom: "He was not only the ideal priest and the active preacher of righteousness, but he maintained the noble tradition which his father, whose fragrant memory is a precious possession of the Jewish community of this city, bequeathed to him. For many years, he effectively influenced Judaism by his editorship of *The Jewish Messenger*. His predominant interests were intellectual, those of the scholar. He enriched our American Jewish literature by the books he wrote, which brought home the truths of our faith, with simplicity, but also with power, to the hearts of his readers. He combined loyalty to Judaism with broad culture, and he exemplified in his life this harmony of intensity of Jewish faith and catholicity of intellectual interests in the way he maintained his position in the academic world, by his professorship, for many years, in the New York University.

He rendered, as minister and as man, a fruitful service to American Judaism. And by his beautiful soul, he was its eloquent representative to the non-Jewish world. The heri-

tage of American Jewish life for the coming generation is enriched by the impress of his personality. He has left us a noble memorial of himself, as the faithful, modest, self-sacrificing Jewish scholar and gentleman. Bearing a distinguished family name, he has added lustre to it, by the high standards which he embodied in his own character and service."