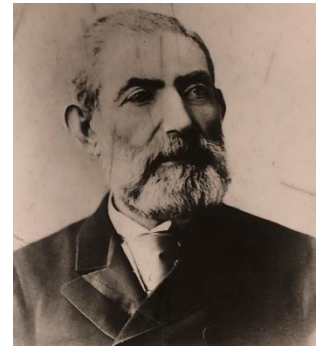


Elias Wolf
President: 1871-1877

Although known for many accomplishments, Elias Wolf, president from 1871-77, is known at Rodeph Shalom as the scion of a family that for over a century has made its mark on the congregation and community.



Born in 1820 in western Germany, Elias emigrated to Philadelphia in 1837 with his brother Abraham. The brothers tried their hands at clothing stores in North Carolina and Ohio before Elias returned to Philadelphia, where he was first a clothing merchant and manufacturer and then, in the paper goods business with four of his five sons. The family eventually branched out into various financial and manufacturing enterprises, making Elias a wealthy man. He turned the businesses over to his sons and focused his efforts on the German Jewish community, helping to found the Jewish Publication Society and taking on the presidency of Rodeph Shalom, which was in the process of settling in at its new home on Broad Street and becoming the leading synagogue in Philadelphia.

Wolf's tenure as president was tied primarily to the religious leadership of Rabbi Jastrow. The congregation has grown in size—and was, finally, prosperous—and the main challenge was to keep assimilating. Less traditional German immigrants tied to their Judaism. In 1873, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (the predecessor to the Union of Reform Judaism) was born, and although Rodeph Shalom did not immediately become aligned with it, it began to take its first steps away from orthodoxy. For example, the Reader (or cantor), who had always faced the ark started to face the congregation, and an organ began to be used during services. Women were no longer relegated to the balcony—although they did stay separated downstairs.

Elias Wolf and Rabbi Jastrow also placed new emphasis on the religious school, which, at the beginning of Wolf's term, had only one teacher for eighty children. Within a few years, additional teachers were hired as the school swelled, and the congregation started to plan for a separate building (built in 1888 at Broad and Jefferson) to house the growing need.

Elias's children and grandchildren played a major role in the life of Rodeph Shalom. Indeed, in 1919, 80 years after Elias arrived in America, the Rodeph Shalom directory listed 26 Wolf families as members—and that did not include the many Wolf women who were active, but with different last names. Elias and his wife Amalia are inscribed at Rodeph Shalom in a permanent physical way: their names grace the stained glass windows in the right side of the sanctuary nearest the *bimah*.

Written by Fred Strober