

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

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***Note:** Most of this story is set on the west side of Camden Station in the area around Pulaski Street; only a part of it takes place in our neighborhood. But it's a unique tale which captures an aspect of South Baltimore immigrant life at the turn of the twentieth century on both sides of the railroad station.*

Marie Roypen and Her Two Husbands

by David Safier

ON A SUNDAY EVENING IN 1902, family and friends gathered in a Jewish synagogue in Southwest Baltimore to celebrate the wedding of two young Eastern European immigrants, Marie Roypen and Samuel Oren. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary as the couple proceeded down the aisle toward Rabbi Goodman, until a young man, Joseph Goldberg, walked over to the bride to be. He placed a silver half dollar in Marie's gloved hand, put a ring on her finger and declared that she was now his wife.

A confused hush fell over the congregation. In the silence, Marie whispered to Samuel that she could not marry him because the coin, the ring and Joseph's words made her Joseph's wife.

Marie was correct according to Jewish law. The coin or the ring along with Joseph's words were all that were needed for the couple to be married. Which presented a quandary for Rabbi Goodman. Should he go ahead with the planned wedding or delay it until he could figure out if Joseph's declaration made Marie his wife? After a long discussion with Marie's parents and Samuel's friends in front of the expectant congregation, the rabbi agreed to perform the ceremony, with the understanding that a tribunal of local rabbis would gather later to decide who was Marie's husband, Samuel Oren or Joseph Goldberg.

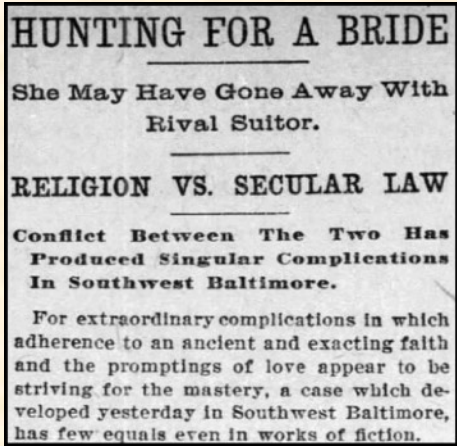
Someone at The Baltimore Sun must have had connections inside the city's Jewish community, because the next morning a reporter went to the Roypen home where Marie and Samuel were staying to learn more about the wedding the night before. The couple didn't want to be interviewed. Marie's father spoke to the reporter instead, assuring him that everything was fine; Marie was satisfied with her marriage to Samuel, her father said, and the tribunal of rabbis were sure to agree that Marie was indeed Samuel's wife.

Later that day Marie disappeared, no one knew where. Joseph Goldberg went missing as well. Samuel searched everywhere he could think to look for the woman he thought he had married, then rushed to the local police station and demanded Joseph be arrested for stealing his wife.

The first article about the wedding appeared in the Tuesday edition of The Baltimore Sun, two days after the wedding. The reporter who penned the story must have known he had stumbled onto something that would capture readers' imaginations. It was a real-life version of one of those classic tales you find in the pages of romance novels where a young woman decides to run away with the man she loves rather than marry the man her parents chose for her.

The opening paragraph promised readers a dramatic tale:

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“For extraordinary complications, in which adherence to an ancient and exacting faith and the promptings of love appear to be striving for mastery, the case which developed yesterday in Southwest Baltimore, has few equals in works of fiction.”

The reporter also must have known he would be writing about the story in the days and weeks ahead. So many questions remained unanswered. Did Marie and Joseph run away together as Samuel thought? If so, had

they planned Joseph’s interruption of the marriage ceremony and their getaway in advance? Did they leave the city? If so, would they return? And who would the rabbis decide was Marie’s husband, Samuel or Joseph?

What the reporter could not have guessed was that The Sun would still be covering the twists and turns of the story a year later, or that it would be picked up by newspapers across the country.



ON THE SAME DAY The Sun published its article in Baltimore, the story also appeared in Washington, D.C., and Alexandria, Virginia, though the out-of-town papers embellished the facts to create a more sensationalized version for their readers. Their reporters must have decided the 50 mile distance from the scene of the marriage granted them

journalistic license to fictionalize the more straightforward account in The Sun.

According to the article in the Baltimore Sun, Joseph “deftly placed a half-dollar in [Marie’s] gloved hand and a ring on the tip of one of her fingers,” after which he “pronounced in Hebrew the formula of claiming her as his helpmeet.” Apparently that was too pedestrian for the D.C. and Alexandria papers. When Joseph approached Marie as she walked down the aisle, the out-of-town reporters wrote, “[she] screamed and threw out her hand as though to protect herself. Goldberg seized it, slipped the newly-minted silver half-dollar into her glove and then placed a ring on the tip of her finger.” And while The Sun reported that Marie turned to Samuel and “whispered in what sounded like awed accents that she could not then marry him because she had been made the wife of another involuntarily,” the D.C. and Alexandria version said, “Mr. Oren threw himself face downward in the aisle and cried,” after which “the weeping bride . . . touched the prostrate Oren, and as he raised his tear-stained face, she cried out, ‘I cannot marry you, Sam. In the sight of God and man I am Joseph Goldberg’s wife.’”

The melodramatic scenes created in the out-of-town papers made for great copy, if less than honest reporting.

Within days, the story appeared in newspapers around the country, from Boston, Massachusetts, to Knoxville, Tennessee, to Salt Lake City, Utah, to Tucson, Arizona, to Portland, Oregon. More than twenty articles can be found on newspapers.com, and there were likely others not in the website’s archives. Not surprisingly, most of the out-of-town papers chose to go with

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the sensationalized version from the D.C. and Alexandria papers rather than the more accurate home town version.



THE SUN CARRIED ARTICLES

about the marriage on its back page in each of the next three issues, including a three-column story with photos of the members of the marital triangle under the headline, MARIE ROYPEN AND HER TWO HUSBANDS. None of the stories dug into the back stories of Marie, Samuel

and Joseph, probably because readers at the turn of the twentieth century would have been more familiar with the city’s recent immigrants than we are today. Now, over a century later, we can benefit from a bit of background about their lives and their communities.

The setting is South Baltimore west of the city’s Inner Harbor. Most Eastern European Jewish immigrants who arrived in Baltimore beginning in the 1860s lived in the eastern part of town, but enough of them settled in South Baltimore to have four synagogues in the area, two on the west side of the Camden Yards railroad station and two on the east. The marriage took place in the Moses Montefiore synagogue west of the station at 535 Smallwood Street, near Pulaski Street.

Marie Roypen and her family arrived in Baltimore from Russia in 1890 when she was eight, the oldest of four children. She lived with her family and a boarder a few blocks from the synagogue in one of the small row houses typical of lower income Baltimore neighborhoods: a brick structure about 15 feet wide and two stories high, connected to identical houses on either side. Marie’s father David, who was listed at different times as a butcher and a grocer, spoke Yiddish in his day-to-day life, as did many members of the community.

Samuel Oren was born in Russia in 1878 and set foot on American shores in 1899, just three years before he walked down the aisle with Marie. He was a barber whose permanent residence was Philadelphia, but he had been in Baltimore for a year, living in a room about two miles from Marie’s home on the other side of the railroad station, in a barber shop at 635 South Charles Street near Hill Street. Most likely that was where he plied his trade.

Unlike Marie and Samuel, Joseph Goldberg was born in Baltimore. He spoke better English than most of the immigrant community and was more assimilated, facts used against him by some of Samuel’s supporters who said Joseph was too American and not sufficiently Jewish for their liking. He was a tailor who lived with his parents and some boarders in a row house a few blocks from Marie’s home.

THE WHEREABOUTS OF THE MISSING COUPLE was still a mystery in the days following their disappearance, so articles in The Sun retold the story of the wedding and added whatever new details reporters could uncover. Readers learned Samuel claimed Marie stole \$50

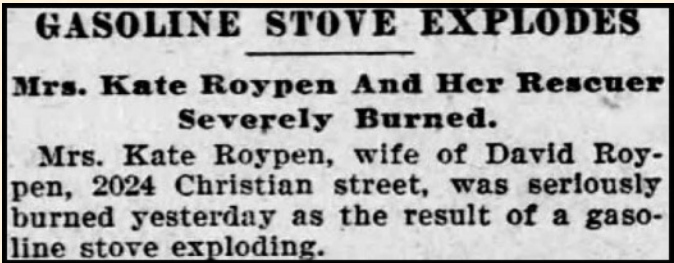
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from him, the equivalent of about \$1,500 today, though Marie’s sister call Samuel a liar. The \$50 was Marie’s own money, her sister said; she doubted Samuel had \$50 to his name.

One of the articles contained the opinion of a learned Philadelphia rabbi on the question of who was Marie’s husband, which showed how difficult it was to come up with a clear answer on the subject from a Jewish perspective. At first the rabbi said Marie was Samuel’s wife, but when he was told she had chosen to run off with Joseph, he changed his mind. According to the article, the rabbi “smote his forehead. He paced the room excitedly. At length he resumed his seat and said: “That is different. She is Mrs. Goldberg.”

The last article published before Marie and Joseph’s whereabouts were known featured a dramatic episode from long before the day of the wedding. Marie’s mother had suffered severe burns nine months earlier, the article said, “and the daughter permitted skin to be cut from her arm and put on that of her mother.” According to a neighbor, after the wounds healed, Marie told her mother she would not marry Samuel. “I gave my skin for you,” Marie said. “I would give my head for Joe.”

The anecdote is almost too perfect, the kind of thing an enterprising reporter



might be tempted to invent to spice up a story. But in fact we know the first part of the story is true because The Sun ran a story the previous January with the headline, “GASOLINE STOVE EXPLODES: Mrs. Kate Roypen and Her

Rescuer Severely Burned.” According to the article, “Mrs. Roypen’s clothing caught fire and her arms were burned from the shoulders down, and her legs from the hips down to the knees.” She and the boarder were taken to a nearby hospital. The paper didn’t follow up on the story, so we don’t know for sure that Marie gave skin grafts to her mother, nor do we know if the quote attributed to Marie was accurate. What we do know is the journalism gods were smiling on the Baltimore Sun reporters (if not on the Roypen family), giving them the gift of the previously reported burn story. The gods continued to smile on the paper for months to come as it continued to write about the complications arising from the marriage.



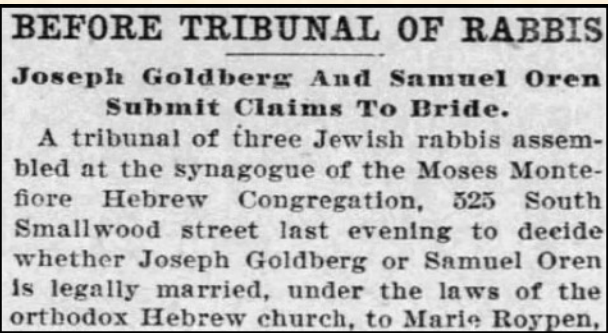
A WEEK AFTER THE DISPUTED WEDDING, the Sun reported the missing couple had returned to Baltimore. They took up residence in Joseph’s home where they were welcomed by his family. Marie was so angry with her family, she didn’t let them know she had returned. They learned she was in town three days later.

Marie and Joseph were eager to tell their story to the paper. Marie’s parents had forced her to marry Samuel against her will, they told the reporter. The night before the wedding, she and Joseph developed the strategy which would make Joseph her husband in the eyes of the Jewish faith. Just as they planned, Joseph interrupted Marie as she walked down the aisle, placed a coin in her hand, put a

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ring on her finger, uttered the words that made her his wife under Jewish law, then left the synagogue. The next morning when Marie and Samuel went for a walk, Marie told Samuel she needed to go to her dressmaker and asked him to visit a nearby cousin until she was finished. As soon as Samuel left, Marie met Joseph at a prearranged rendezvous point. They took a train to New York and from there boarded a steamer to Boston. The couple did a bit of traveling, but they spent most of what they called their honeymoon in Quincy, Massachusetts. “We had a most delightful time,” Joseph told the reporter, “and have returned after deciding to make this city our permanent home.”

In an article the next day, Marie stated that she had not seen her parents or Samuel since she returned. “And I ain’t bothered about them either,” she said. “My parents don’t care about me or they wouldn’t have wanted me to marry that man. As for Oren, he can’t do anything to us now. If he wants to get a divorce from me, I’ll help him.” All she wanted from her parents were the clothes she had left at home. “There were a lot of them there,” she said.



More than two weeks passed before the story made the paper again. A tribunal of three rabbis held the first of three hearings to decide who was Marie’s husband according to Jewish law. The hearings, which were conducted in Yiddish, were open to the public. The room was filled with witnesses and spectators. Samuel, Marie and Joseph were all questioned, as were

Marie’s father, Rabbi Goodman and several others.

According to some witnesses, Joseph didn’t say the necessary words at the wedding to make Marie his wife; other witnesses claimed he did. Marie maintained she did not kiss Samuel at the end of the ceremony. When Samuel disagreed and said they kissed, Marie tried to slap him in the face but was restrained.

Rabbi Goodman should have been the most disinterested and reliable of witnesses, but he proved to be an advocate for Samuel, willing to bend the truth, then bend it again to make his point. Before the hearing Goodman told a reporter he was certain Joseph said nothing to Marie when he interrupted the couple on the way to the altar. In the same interview he said, “Several persons claim to have heard Mr. Goldberg pronounce the words [but] he had used the term applying to the use of the ring in the ceremony, when, in fact, he used a coin,” ignoring the fact that Joseph had given Marie a ring and a coin. Later the rabbi said that Goldberg may have said the proper words, but he said them in English, not in Hebrew, which meant they weren’t valid.

After pondering and discussing the case for three sessions, the rabbinical tribunal decided the issues were so problematic they needed more time before they could render their final decision.

By now, a month had passed since the wedding. Samuel found himself enjoying all the attention he was receiving, and he wanted to hold onto the spotlight as long as he could. He organized a large meeting of his friends and sympathizers where he could play the part of the aggrieved husband for the assembled audience and the press.

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press agent.

The gathering was a love fest for Samuel. Multiple speakers, including Rabbi Goodman, made the case for why Samuel, not Joseph, was Marie’s husband.

It was six weeks after the wedding when the three rabbis arrived at their final decision -- which was that they could not arrive at a decision. The theological conundrum was beyond their abilities to resolve. They passed it on to a conference of 16 rabbis from New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia who agreed to look into the matter.

AT THIS POINT THE SUN HAD RUN OUT OF REASONS to continue covering the story on a regular basis. The drama of the Oren-Roypen-Goldberg saga seemed to be played out. The identity of Marie’s true husband according to Jewish law remained a mystery. Marie was living quietly with Joseph. Samuel’s meeting with supporters had come and gone. The decision of the 16 rabbis from cities across the east coast was likely weeks or months away. Unless something new came up, there would be little to report until the final act when the rabbis rendered their decision and declared who was Marie’s true husband.

Then Henry Adler entered the picture and added a touch of drama and comic relief to the story.



Samuel distributed a flier throughout the community advertising the meeting. According to the reporter who attended, the meeting attracted an overflow crowd of more than 150 people — men and women, young and old, even a screaming baby — who packed a little room in the Republican Club at 2 West Hill Street near Charles Street “like sardines in a box.” (Coincidentally, a synagogue, Rolfe Tzedek, was built on Hill Street seven years later, just a few houses away from the meeting place.) One of the attendees described himself to the reporter as Samuel’s general manager and

Henry Adler, a 20 year old medical student, said he had written a play, “Marie Roypen and Her Two Husbands,” which would be presented on the stage in two versions, one in Yiddish and one in German. He described it as a “farce in four acts.” Adler told The Sun, “The play will take sides with no one,” but it was hard to believe the author would remain neutral. Adler had spoken at the meeting Samuel called a week earlier, and Samuel had moved in with Adler in a room behind a different barber shop from the one where Samuel had worked.

Adler claimed the play had been accepted by a manager in Philadelphia who had lined up four prominent New York actors to play the lead roles. Apparently he was telling the truth, because three weeks later, three professional, out-of-town actors who had studied their parts

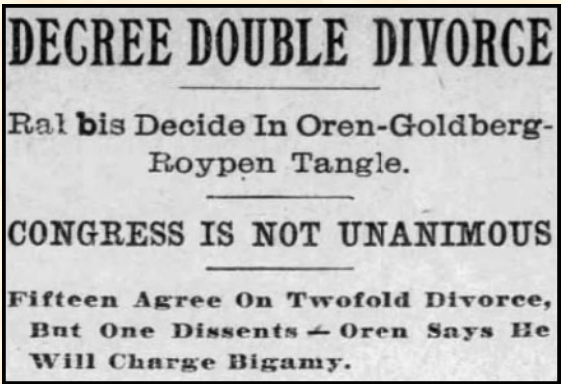
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gathered in Adler’s apartment, “a little 10-by-12 room in the rear of Avild Maschenberg’s barber shop,” for a rehearsal.

Since only three actors were present and, according to Adler, the play required 18 cast members, Adler and the barber read the unassigned roles. The play, according to the reporter who attended the rehearsal, “is more in the nature of a comic opera and abounds with light, catchy airs, as well as several numbers from some of Verdi’s masterpieces.” The reporter rendered the rehearsal with an appropriate level of amusement. Samuel, the jilted groom, was in the room enthusiastically singing along with the cast. The barber’s three children ranging in age from six months to three years joined in the singing as well, though they were made to leave the room when they giggled at Adler’s overacting. The reporter questioned whether the actress chosen to play Marie was right for the part. The real-life Marie, he wrote, was “rather small of stature and a decided brunette. Miss Katz apparently weighs about 200 pounds, is almost a blonde and nearly six feet tall.”

The play was slanted heavily in Samuel’s favor. In one scene set in a graveyard, several women appeared “who deplore the act of Marie Roypen in giving herself to two husbands and point to the tombs of those who had lived under similar circumstances.” In another scene where Marie was waiting for Joseph so they could run away together, she was “horrified at the vision of an angel with a great knife in his hand, who, amid the roar of thunder and flashes of lightning, warns the young woman of the step which she is about to take.”

Adler informed the reporter that “Marie Roypen and Her Two Husbands” would be performed in Baltimore in five weeks, after which it would tour the country. It seems that never came to pass. The play was never mentioned in the pages of the Sun again, and the only possible mention of Adler was in an article seven months later about a Henry Adler, a medical student, who was fined \$25 for assaulting an old woman, then assaulting his brother for testifying against him. It could be a coincidence -- there could have been two medical students named Henry Adler in Baltimore -- but more likely than not, it was the same man.



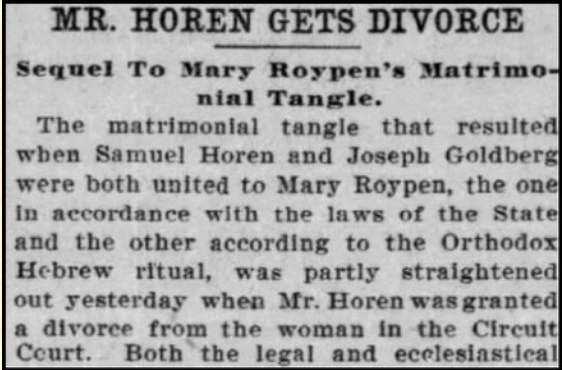
IN JANUARY, THREE MONTHS AFTER the disputed wedding in the Moses Montefiore synagogue, the 16 rabbis appointed to decide the identity of Marie’s husband announced their decision. All but one of them agreed that Marie should be granted a divorce from both men. That should have put an end to the controversy, except for one problem. For the rabbis’ decision to be binding it had to be unanimous. The 15-1 decision

carried no weight.

Immediately following the rabbis’ declaration, Samuel maintained he would not divorce Mary and would charge her with bigamy instead. If he had carried through on his threat, the paper certainly would have covered it, so we can assume from the journalistic silence that Samuel did nothing.

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In July, six months after the rabbis' non-binding decision and nine months after



the wedding, The Sun ran a story saying Samuel had decided to seek a divorce from Marie on the grounds of abandonment and unfaithfulness. The divorce was granted in October, 1903, a year after the wedding. (As an aside, if you look at the clip from the article, you'll notice Samuel's last name is spelled "Horen," not "Oren," and instead of "Marie," the young woman is referred to as "Mary.")

In fact, those are their correct names. For some unknown reason, The Sun had gotten both their names wrong through a year of reporting the story.)

Most of the papers around the country that covered the story when it first broke had lost interest after Marie and Joseph returned to Baltimore from their week-long honeymoon. Only the D.C. and Alexandria papers published an occasional article after the first few weeks. But the divorce created a renewed burst of national attention. At least 30 papers around the country picked up the conclusion of the story.

THAT WAS THE LAST THE PUBLIC HEARD about the story of Marie Roypen and her two husbands. Mary, Samuel and Joseph slipped into journalistic obscurity as soon as they became ordinary, unremarkable citizens. However, census records along with a few possible sightings in The Sun give us some idea of the three people's lives after the divorce was finalized.

Samuel returned to Philadelphia and married in November, a month after the divorce. He had seven children. Samuel continued to work as a barber.

Joseph and Mary Goldberg remained married and had three children. Joseph continued to work as a tailor. A decade later, a couple with the same names earned a few brief mentions in The Sun. They were living in the East Baltimore Jewish community where Mary owned a jewelry store and Joseph had grown overly fond of drink. More than likely it was the same Joseph and Mary Goldberg, but their names are common enough, it may have been a different couple.

The only member of the drama who led a newsworthy life after the divorce was Rabbi Tobias Goodman who officiated at the wedding. At the end of 1903, a year after the wedding, Goodman created a Jewish farming community named Yaazor outside of Ellicott City, Maryland, funded by a Jewish philanthropist who helped set up similar communities around the U.S. In the 1970s, a former Yaazor community member described the place as "a kind of Fiddler on the Roof shtetl [village] in America." Yaazor survived for a number of years, then faded out of existence in the 1930s, in part because none of the people living there had any prior farming experience. That is the last we hear of Rabbi Goodman, though his son Al gained a bit of celebrity as a popular conductor and musical director in the world of New York musical theater and later in radio and television, working with the likes of Al Jolson, Bob Hope and Donald O'Connor.

MORE THAN A CENTURY HAS PASSED since 1902 when Samuel Horen and Mary Roypen walked down the aisle in the Moses Montefiore synagogue in South Baltimore. By the 1950s most of the Jewish community had left the area. The houses where Mary and Joseph grew

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up have been torn down and are now empty lots surrounded by row houses on either side, some occupied, others boarded up. In the 1960s the Moses Montefiore congregation, having lost most of its members, merged with another congregation in the Pikesville area north of Baltimore. The old synagogue is still standing in a dilapidated state with a sign over the door indicating it is now the CityBeat Church. Another synagogue building a few blocks away is completely boarded up. They are the only physical signs of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants whose lives in the U.S. began in this neighborhood.