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"The Trefa Banquet"

The menu of an eight-course meal set before 200 Cincinnati Jews almost 83 years ago, a meal that changed the direction of American Jewish life, is given in detail, from the opener of little neck clams down to the Martell cognac and the cafe noir, in an article in the February issue of Commentary magazine.

The author, Professor John J. Appel of Michigan State University, notes that the meal, known to American - Jewish historians as "the Trefa Banquet," was arranged on July 11, 1883 to honor the delegates to the eighth annual council meeting of the Union of American Hebrew Congregation, and the first graduating class of Hebrew Union College.

Professor Appel concludes that, contrary to previous belief, the trefa banquet was deliberately arranged, probably without the knowledge of Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, President of the Hebrew Union College and founder of American Reform Judaism, by some of his supporters among Cincinnati businessmen. The serving of clams, shrimp salad, frogs' legs and milchig desserts after the meat courses provoked "terrific excitement" among the diners, and "two rabbis rose from their seats and rushed from the room."

The controversy that arose in the months and years following, the author contin-

ues, set off a chain of events that "was finally to lead to a break between Reform and Conservative Judaism." Two years after the banquet, "a group of Eastern Reform rabbis met in Pittsburgh and successfully challenged Rabbi Wise's leadership; in 1887, the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York was established as a rival rabbinical training school to the Hebrew Union College; and in 1889, the Central Conference of American Rabbis -- an organization of conservative Reform rabbis -- was set up."

In explaining the banquet's background, Professor Appel points out that it was "a nearly perfect expression of the assimilationist tendencies among American Jews in the 19th century, especially among German Jews. So strong was the propensity of the members of the Banquet Committee to regard conformity to Gentile norms as an unquestioned virtue, that they deliberately chose to make an issue of serving trefa food in public. It must be admitted that their

choice showed a good deal of sociological awareness, for the adoption of the majority culture's food customs has always been one of the first and most significant means of a minority group's assimilation. Conversely, the retention of food preferences and prohibitions continues even today to provide a ready index for the degree of cultural pluralism that is to be found on the American scene."

The menu for the banquet included little neck clams, consomme royal, fillet de boeuf aux Champignons, soft shell crabs a l'Amerique, salade of shrimps, sweet breads a la Monglas, poulets a la Viennoise, grenouilles a la creme, vol au vents de Pigeons a la Tyrolienne, ice cream, ornamented cakes, fromages varies, and salads, hors d'oeuvres, vegetables and fruit. Wines served at the meal included sauternes, A montillado sherry, St. Julien, Diedescheimer, Roman Punch, and G.H. Mumm Extra Dry.

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