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MARION L. MISCH — AN EXTRAORDINARY WOMAN

by ELEANOR F. HORVITZ

"She was a very proper lady, and highly respected."¹ "She was a very assertive girl, obviously single-minded, aggressive. She was a 'grande dame' to the public."² "An imposing lady — physically and psychologically."³ "She was a great pal and had such a soft lap!"⁴ "She is a public spirited woman, clear of vision, sincere in purpose, courageous and sympathetic."⁵

These few brief allusions to Marion L. Misch hardly describe this woman of enormous culture, intellect and leadership; this woman far ahead of her time; this Renaissance woman.

Marion L. Misch was born on May 13, 1869 in Newark, New Jersey. (Her obituary in the *Providence Journal* of January 19, 1941 lists her place of birth as Allentown, Pennsylvania). She was one of five children, a brother, Milton, sisters, Marguerite, Gertrude and Harriet, born to ex-Alderman Louis Benjamin and Rachel (Pulaski) Simon. Little is known about the parents who immigrated to this country.

Her nephew, Louis B. Simon, had one note of interest about his grandfather, Louis Benjamin Simon. "My grandfather immigrated from Germany when quite young and served in the Civil War as a drummer."

The family moved to Pittsfield, Massachusetts when Marion Misch was very young, and she grew up in that town. She was educated in the public school system and attended Normal School (teacher training college). Louis Simon was in the clothing business and it is conjectured by Marion Misch's family that she may have met her husband, Caesar, when he traveled to that town. He also was involved with the merchandising of clothing.

Of her life in Pittsfield there is little record. There is, however, the following story of how she organized the first Jewish Sabbath School in Pittsfield at age twelve.⁶ (Another source refers to her age as fourteen in this incident).⁷

"An interesting incident is told by Cowan in his memoirs. About 1881, Rabbi de Sola Mendes received a letter from a twelve year old girl in Pittsfield, asking for an outline for religious instruction that she would be able to follow, as there was no opportunity for acquiring a Jewish religious education in her town. Rabbi Mendes cooperated wholeheartedly, launching what amounted to an elementary correspondence course with one pupil. The child profited by the novel opportunity and herself conducted a religious school of 20

children before she was 15. She subsequently became a school teacher, and later as Mrs. Caesar Misch of Providence, one of the national leaders of Jewish womanhood.”

Evidently Rabbi Mendes kept in touch with Mrs. Misch throughout her marriage for a telegram from the Rabbi was found in a scrapbook which she kept on the occasion of her husband's death in 1908.

As Marion Simon she taught in the public schools of Pittsfield until her marriage on September 3, 1890 to Caesar Misch, a Brooklyn New York merchant. The couple lived in Brooklyn for about ten years. They moved to Providence when Caesar Misch established a department store, and Mrs. Misch entered at once upon her career in local affairs.⁸

An interesting personal note about the marriage was related by her oldest granddaughter, Dorothy. “She (Marion Misch) told the story that in the early days of her marriage she served Caesar potatoes fixed the same way two days in a row, and he told her, “Madam, there are 50 different ways to serve potatoes,’ and it never happened two days running the same way again.” Dorothy commented, “So there was definitely a discipline there, a demand there not for just the average — no excuses.”

There is a record in the *Providence City Directory* for 1899 of Mr. and Mrs. Caesar Misch, together with their coachman, James Rogan, living at 601 Elmwood Avenue. The directory of the previous year had listed a family named Bedell as occupying the home at that address.

“The house was big and light and airy with vast rooms and vast windows. It had a huge barn in the back. Daddy (Walter Misch) had a pony cart. It was long before people had motor cars. It must have been quite a sizeable house for today there are a block of stores and an apartment house on the site. But I never remembered the grounds as having been terribly huge. There was Scott the butler and the cook. I would assume there was somebody else.”⁹

“What I remember best about the huge house was the music room and the game room. There was an enormous collection like stuffed animal heads and one of my earliest recollections was playing on two rugs — one a polar bear and one a tiger skin rug. I remember my sister Dotty daring me to put my hand in the tiger's mouth. There was a huge collection of all kinds of memorabilia — little statues. One which caught my fancy was a procession of ivory elephants.”¹⁰

Marion and Caesar Misch had two children, Walter Percy, born in 1891 and Dorothy Louise born on May 25, 1896. Dorothy Louise died at age 22 on July 21, 1918. Walter was to outlive his mother by 16 years. He died on February 2, 1957. Walter married Ruth Capron Greene on May 31, 1916. She died on February 14, 1973. They had six children, the first child, Walter H., died 19 days after birth on February 1, 1917. There followed: Dorothy L. (July 15, 1921); Robert C. (October 27, 1923); W. Richard (April 12, 1927); Donald W. (January 1, 1929) and Marion R. (January 29, 1931). All the grandchildren were born long after their grandfather, Caesar's, death.

Available information for the period of Marion and Caesar's relatively brief marriage is concerned primarily with Caesar. His history is a fascinating one, and obviously he had a great influence on his wife, Marion.

CAESAR MISCH

Caesar Misch was born in Berlin, Germany on August 25, 1857. The son of a wealthy German merchant, he was educated in his native country and for a time held a commission as Second Lieutenant in the German Army. He came to America about 1888 and settled first in Newark, New Jersey where he engaged in his first business venture in this country, opening an installment clothing house. (He was reputed to be an innovator in offering installment purchasing). He soon transferred his business to Brooklyn, New York. In 1892 Providence appealed to him as having business possibilities capable of development and he opened a store in that city at 545 Westminster Street. Meeting with success, he conceived the idea of establishing auxiliary stores in neighboring cities. Pawtucket was the first of these, opened in 1895, followed by the Worcester store a year later, and then in quick succession by the stores in Lowell, Mass., Hartford, Conn., Holyoke, Mass., Manchester, New Hampshire, Brockton, Mass., Bridgeport, Conn. and New York City, the last being established about the year 1901.

He incorporated the business under the name of Caesar Misch, Inc., avoiding the name "company" in connection with his enterprises in deference to a deep-seated dislike of the idea. The corporation was capitalized for \$350,000. In September 1900, work was begun on the new six story Caesar Misch building at 398 Westminster Street, into which the Providence store, the headquarters of the entire business of the concern was moved on July 1, 1904.

The corporation owned the building and operated all the ten stores. By



LOUIS BENJAMIN SIMON FAMILY
(Pittsfield, Mass.)

Standing: Marion Simon Misch, her son, Walter P., Milton Simon, Helen Strauss Simon (Milton's wife), Herman Walder (husband of Gertrude Simon Walder).

Seated: Hattie Simon (with child), Mrs. Louis B. Simon (mother), Louis B. Simon (father), holding one of the Walder children; Marguerite Simon, Gertrude Simon Walder.