



Congregation Ahawath Chesed, now Central Synagogue, 1872.



CENTRAL
SYNAGOGUE
IN ITS
CHANGING
NEIGHBORHOOD

BY
ANDREW S. DOLKART

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Foreword

Central Synagogue has its roots in the formative years of our country and our city. From the 1830's on, it has been giving spiritual leadership and comfort to its membership, and it has also been a landmark institution in the overall functioning of the community. What decisions were made in determining the place of Central Synagogue in both the religious and secular community, and how these decisions were arrived at, can teach us a great deal about how our community and our people functioned and developed. Every generation stands on the shoulders of previous generations. The more we learn from our history, the better able we are to cope with the present and plan for the future. For these reasons, and at the urging of our brother, Rabbi Peter Rubinstein, we have chosen to endow the Rubinstein Family Archival Fund. The purpose of this fund is to provide research in the Central Synagogue Archives by appropriate scholars resulting in lectures and papers on the congregation's history. This monograph is a result of that fund.

Robin and Larry Rubinstein



Introduction

On April 19, 1872, Congregation Ahawath Chesed's new synagogue on the southwest corner of Lexington Avenue and East 55th Street was consecrated in an impressive ceremony attended by nearly three thousand people. Although reports in the Jewish press and in New York City's secular newspapers bemoaned the length of the proceedings, which "taxed the patience of the audience," there was no criticism of the striking building that the congregation had erected in the rapidly developing Midtown neighborhood.¹ Ahawath Chesed's move from a small building on the Lower East Side to a grand sanctuary in a prosperous neighborhood uptown was not a singular event in New York's Jewish community during the late 1860s and early 1870s. Many congregations moved north from the Lower East Side: Temple Emanu-El dedicated an elaborate synagogue on Fifth Avenue and East 43rd Street in 1868, Shaaray Tefila consecrated a domed sanctuary on West 44th Street in 1869, and Anshe Chesed moved into an impressive building on Lexington Avenue and East 62nd Street in 1873. These synagogues, and those erected in the nineteenth century by other congregations in the Midtown area, were among the most impressive ecclesiastical buildings in New York City. Yet, only that of Ahawath Chesed, now known as Central Synagogue, survives. Why did this congregation abandon the Lower East Side to erect a synagogue in a new uptown neighborhood? How does its synagogue relate to the development and redevelopment of its Midtown neighborhood? Why, among all the Reform temples of the nineteenth century and all the synagogues built in Midtown, does Central Synagogue's building alone survive? These are the questions that will be explored in this essay.



Early History of Ahawath Chesed

The founding of Congregation Ahawath Chesed (Love of Mercy) in 1846 is directly linked to the settlement of large numbers of German-speaking immigrants in New York City beginning in the 1840s.² Crop failures and political unrest drove hundreds of thousands of people from the German-speaking states of Central Europe, many of whom chose to settle in New York. By 1880, New York's German community numbered more than 370,000, about one-third of the city's total population. They clustered in the tenth and seventeenth wards on the Lower East Side, an area that later became famous as the center of Eastern European Jewish settlement. Indeed, so many Germans moved to the Lower East Side, it was dubbed "Kleindeutschland," (Little Germany). This new immigrant group included a substantial number of Jews, living alongside their more numerous Roman Catholic and Lutheran compatriots.

The social and economic life of this nineteenth-century German-speaking immigrant community, which included the founders of Central Synagogue, provides an interesting study in both assimilation and separatism. As a group, the German immigrants were highly successful in America. They became citizens, voted, fought in the Civil War, prospered in business and other pursuits, and participated in American life. Yet, even later American-born generations continued to use the German language (something that was not true of all immigrant groups to America), segregating themselves from native-born, primarily Protestant society by attending religious institutions, such as Ahawath Chesed, where German was spoken, establishing their own social clubs (including the German-Jewish Harmonie Club), investing their money at German banks, purchasing insurance from the Germania Life Insurance Company, etc.