

**Elias Abraham Rosenberg,
King Kalakaua's Soothsayer**

Jacob Adler

Among mysteries relating to the Jews in Hawaii, Chaplain Mulholland mentions one that

concerns Elijah [Elias?] Abraham Rosenberg, who became a friend of King Kalakaua. Although the rabbinical lists do not contain his name, he called himself a rabbi and had a magnificent Scroll of the Law (Sefer Torah) and an elaborately carved silver pointer used in reading the Scroll. He presented these to King Kalakaua, and after his stay in the Islands he disappears from history. The Scroll has been lost, but the pointer was presented to Temple Enanu-El [Honolulu] and is now used in the services.¹

Who was Elias Abraham Rosenberg? And what was his relationship to King Kalakaua? This paper aims to throw some light on these mysteries and to raise some more questions.

The historian Alexander (with some of his biases showing) wrote of heathenism, hulas, and the hideous sound of the conch shell at the celebration of Kalakaua's fiftieth birthday on November 16, 1886. Then he added: "A fortune teller by the name of Rosenberg acquired great influence with the King."² This would lead one to suspect that Rosenberg was in the islands in the fall of 1886 or soon after that. How did he gain influence with the king? Alexander does not tell us.

Walter Murray Gibson, Kalakaua's premier, wrote in his diary for March 22, 1887: "The King very confidential—about Rosenberg's mesmerizings &c."³ Gibson whets our appetite but says nothing more about the mysterious Mr. Rosenberg.

Lorrin A. Thurston wrote:

I am informed by Curtis P. Iaukea, royal chamberlain when the Hale Naua was formed, that a man (his name has slipped my memory) came to Honolulu about that time, whose mind was filled with "data" such as the [Antone] Rosa reports contain, and that he became very intimate with the King. They spent hours at a time in conversing, for many days in succession. From this source, doubtless, Kalakaua secured his "data."⁴

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On January 19, 1887, "Elias Abraham Rosenberg, late of San Francisco," had an audience with the king at Iolani Palace.⁵ Toward the end of the month he got an appointment as appraiser of customs at Honolulu.⁶ The following item soon appeared in the *Advertiser*: "A document inscribed 'From Her Majesty Queen Victoria to Abraham Rosenberg,' etc. has been lost."⁷ Possibly he planted the item himself to impress people.

Many items about Rosenberg, or "Holy Moses" as he came to be known, began to appear in the *Hawaiian Gazette* column written by "Flaneur" (the Loafer). Flaneur was probably A. T. Atkinson, the *Gazette* editor. His oft-mentioned informant, "Bliffkins" or "Bliff," probably was E. W. Purvis, one-time assistant chamberlain to the king. Flaneur's column is satirical and smart-alecky, and must be treated with skepticism and discounted for exaggeration. But much of what he says is verifiably true.

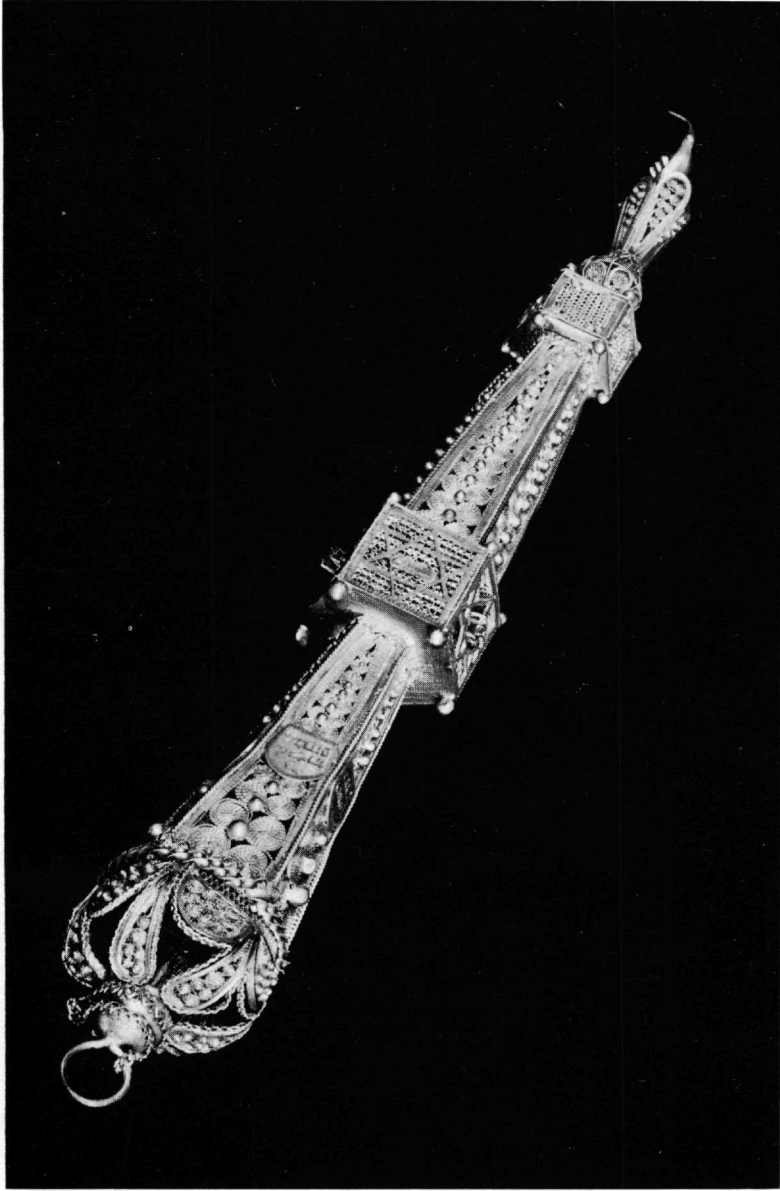
Flaneur reported in February, 1887, that "Holy Moses" could cast a horoscope to perfection and had already done so for some of the most powerful persons in the kingdom. "That is the reason he gets a 'fat billet' [at customs] when there are so many hungry devils hanging around." The columnist also said that a leading *kahuna* was *huhū loa* (very angry) because the king had "picked up a scraggy looking *malihini* [newcomer], who professed to be able to foretell everything."⁸

In mid-February one newspaper noted in a straight news item that Rosenberg had lost his job as appraiser of customs.⁹ Flaneur elaborated on this by saying that John M. Kapena, collector general of customs, returned to work after a period of illness, and on seeing Rosenberg cried out: "Holy Moses, where did that chap come from?" Kapena fired him to secure himself from the dreaded "praying to death."¹⁰

But Rosenberg continued to hang around the customs house, and Kapena seemed to have lost his power. Flaneur reported that "Holy Moses" was now chief of *kahunas*, and casting a good many horoscopes for Gibson and Kalakaua.¹¹ The deputy collector of customs wrote him toward the end of March: "*By request of His Majesty* [italics added] we take this opportunity of notifying you that you are at liberty to resume your former occupation of Appraiser of Customs."¹²

Flaneur wrote in April that Rosenberg was teaching the king Hebrew. The king had fixed up a room for him and had provided it with small stores. Moses was getting his roots firmly planted and irrigating them well. He was becoming a power behind the throne and it was not good to step on his coat-tails. At the customs house the boys were now treating him with respect, calling him *Mr. Rosenberg*, not "Moses" or "Rosy." His horoscope for Kalakaua, said Flaneur, was one of the most propitious he had ever cast, and the king would "triumph over his enemies and see them under the sod."¹³

No doubt to Rosenberg's relief, Kapena resigned as head of customs at the beginning of May. Rosenberg wore a stiff shirt at the swearing in of the new collector-general, Archibald S. Cleghorn. Flaneur said that the heaviest work the soothsayer was doing around the customs house was to draw his pay.¹⁴ The columnist also gives us an idea of Rosenberg's appearance: "The



The Kalakaua silver pointer, given (together with a scroll) to the king about 1887 by Elias A. Rosenberg. The scepter-shaped pointer or yad (Hebrew for "hand") is used in reading the Scroll of the Law (Sefer Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament). The pointer is at Temple Emanu-El, Honolulu. The scroll has been lost.

old chap is looking uncommonly well; had his whiskers neatly tarred down, and had assumed the appearance of a spring chicken, but his walk gives the old man dead away."¹⁵

Flaneur also told of a visit to the soothsayer at the end of May:

We found him nicely fixed up in the Kilokilo [astrology] rooms . . . and a snug little place he has. . . . It was fitted up in grand style and in its details is not unlike some of those Eastern harems you read of. . . . We then adjourned to Holy Moses' little sanctum, where the heaviest work of the nation is forecast, horoscopes cast, fortunes told, visitors mesmerized, etc. . . . He then showed the Grand Duke's [Kalakaua's] completed horoscope, showing that there might be trouble in the camp. . . . Here Moses complained of a dryness and we all adjourned to the sideboard.¹⁶

It took no great foresight on Rosenberg's part to predict trouble for the king. Newspapers had charged the Kalakaua-Gibson regime with corruption and extravagance. They charged Kalakaua with being mixed up in an opium-licensing scandal, and with substituting personal for constitutional rule. Rumors were rife of gun-running by revolutionists and of subversion within the armed forces. Well before all of this culminated in the revolution at the end of June, 1887, Rosenberg got ready to clear out.

He received on June 1, presumably from the king (although the king's part in any presentation ceremony is not described), a silver cup and a gold medal. Inscribed on the cup was, "His Majesty Kalakaua I to Abraham Rosenberg." The gold medal bore on one side the same inscription. On the other side was the king's profile. On the rim of the medal was a small crown to which was attached a blue ribbon. The *Gazette* wanted to know what Rosenberg had done to earn such royal favors "outside of telling fortunes . . . and drawing his salary at the Custom House, it is said, as Appraiser."¹⁷

Just why did Rosenberg leave? Flaneur suggested that things were getting too hot for him in Honolulu and that he wanted to go back in the lottery business in San Francisco.¹⁸ A news item assigned failing health as the reason. At any rate, he left on June 7 for San Francisco by the steamer *Australia*, steerage class. As he hobbled toward the steamer one of the Honolulu minstrel boys tried to decorate him with leis.¹⁹ He arrived in San Francisco on June 14, and one month later, at the age of 78, died at the German Hospital.²⁰ When the news reached Honolulu, it got only brief and derisive mention: "Abraham Rosenberg, better known as 'Holy Moses,' has turned his toes to the daisies."²¹

What in Rosenberg's background explains his influence over Kalakaua? His purported loss of a document belonging to Queen Victoria might suggest English origins. In San Francisco, an *E. Rosenberg* shows up in 1881 and 1882 as a peddler. Apparently the same person (that is, a person at the same address) shows up as *Abraham Rosenberg* in 1884.²² His having been in the lottery business has already been mentioned.²³ A San Francisco paper reported in April, 1887:

A curio by the name of Rosenberg, who is too well known in our neighborhood to need much introduction, is cavorting around Honolulu and has succeeded in ingratiating himself in the King's favor. At last accounts he was . . . predicting all manner of

disturbance in the line of earthquakes, fires, etc. . . . A good-sized boot should be effectively applied to the more delicate portion of his anatomy, and instead of the custom house, a berth should be given him in some distant land.²⁴

The keys to Rosenberg's influence with Kalakaua may lie in the scroll and silver pointer mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The 1960 Temple Emanu-El dedicatory pamphlet describes him as "a self-styled rabbi" and goes on: "A man of some learning, he soon became a friend and confidant of King Kalakaua. This he did by reading the king's horoscope and telling him Bible stories."²⁵

The present writer has seen no evidence that Rosenberg called himself a rabbi. Flaneur did mention, as already noted, that he was teaching the king Hebrew. One must go beyond this. Imagine Rosenberg with his magnificent silver pointer and his magnificent scroll—hand lettered in black ink on parchment—chanting in Hebrew to the king. Anyone who has heard such chanting must be struck by the remarkable similarity to Hawaiian chanting.

So the king, facing deep political troubles, torn between the foreign culture and the native Hawaiian culture, loving ceremony and ritual, had found his deliverer. Here was "Holy Moses" Rosenberg, a man who made magic and read the stars. He could chant Bible stories in Hebrew, and withal he did not object now and then to a nip from the bottle.

The magician went away. Three weeks later Kalakaua found himself facing a revolution. He was forced to yield a new constitution that cost him much of his power. Even Rosenberg's magic could not have helped the beleaguered king.²⁶

NOTES

- ¹ John F. Mulholland, *Hawaii's Religions* (Rutland, Vt., 1970), p. 243. Lela Goodell of the HMCS Library called this paragraph to my attention.
- ² W. D. Alexander, *History of the Later Years of the Hawaiian Monarchy . . .* (Honolulu, 1896), p. 16.
- ³ Diary from private source. It was this reference that got me started on trying to find out who Rosenberg was.
- ⁴ L. A. Thurston, *Memoirs of the Hawaiian Revolution* (Honolulu, 1936), p. 32. There can be little question that the man whose name has slipped Thurston's memory is Rosenberg.
Antone Rosa held many offices in the Kalakaua regime, including that of attorney general.
The Hale Naua was a secret royal society established in late 1886 with Kalakaua as president. One purpose was to revive interest in ancient Hawaiian tradition. Gossipy Honoluluans passed around many scandalous rumors about the society. See R. S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom, 1874-1893* (Honolulu, 1967), p. 345. The records of the society in AH do not show that Rosenberg had any connection with it.
Compare also the following by the *Gazette* columnist Flaneur: "Bliff [E. W. Purvis?] tells me that the Grand Duke [Kalakaua] has prepared a very exhaustive lecture on Ancient History, going back . . . beyond King Solomon's time. . . . I [A. T. Atkinson?] asked Bliff how [Kalakaua] had headed off King Solomon and gone beyond him? 'Oh,' says Bliff, 'that's easy enough. All he has to do is consult Holy Moses [Rosenberg]'" HG, June 28, 1887.
- ⁵ DB, Jan. 22, 1887.
- ⁶ PCA, Jan. 28, 1887; HG, Feb. 1, 1887.
- ⁷ PCA, Feb. 1, 1887.
- ⁸ HG, Feb. 15, 1887.
- ⁹ DB, Feb. 16, 1887.
- ¹⁰ HG, Feb. 22, 1887. John M. Kapena (1843-1887), one of Hawaii's greatest orators, held many offices in the Kalakaua regime. At this time in his short and tragic life he was suffering from alcoholism, bankruptcy, and the death of his wife.
- ¹¹ HG, March 1, 22, 1887.
- ¹² G. E. Boardman to Rosenberg, March 29, 1887. Coll. Gen. of Customs LB, 1885-88, AH.
- ¹³ HG, April 5, 12, 26, 1887.
- ¹⁴ HG, May 10, 1887. Among payments to Rosenberg were the following: Feb. 16, 1887, "C. H. Guard—amt pd appraiser, \$12.00"; and payments of \$100 each at the end of March, April, and May, labeled "C. H. Guard, amt pd A. Rosenberg," Custom House Cash Bk, 1884-89. AH. This seems to show that he worked as a customs house guard besides doing appraisals.
- ¹⁵ HG, May 24, 1887.
- ¹⁶ HG, May 31, 1887.
- ¹⁷ HG, June 7, 1887; DB, June 3, 1887. The Journal of the King's Chamberlain, 1887-88, AH, also shows a payment of \$260 to Rosenberg on June 1. What was it for? For his passage home? For horoscopes cast for Kalakaua? For the Scroll of Law and silver pointer? We do not know. The same journal shows a payment of \$100 on account to H. F. "Winchman" [Wichman], jeweler, on June 11. This is at least consistent with the hypothesis that the king *had* bought for Rosenberg the cup and medal mentioned in the newspapers.
- ¹⁸ HG, June 7, 1887.

- ¹⁹ DB, June 7, 1887; HG, June 7, 1887. The Honolulu minstrels were an amateur group that had often poked fun at "Rosy" in musicals at the Hawaiian Opera House.
- ²⁰ Death notices, but no obituary, in *S. F. Chronicle*, July 12, 1887; *S. F. Examiner*, July 13, 1887; *Daily Alta California*, July 13, 1887; *S. F. Weekly Bulletin*, July 13, 1887. Date of death is not given.
- ²¹ PCA, Aug. 1, 1887; HG, Aug. 2, 1887.
- ²² Letter, M. K. Swingle, California Historical Society, to Jacob Adler, April 25, 1970. This letter cites Langley's San Francisco directories.
- ²³ Flaneur once reported that Rosenberg told him he had "not had such a good time since before he escaped going to San Quentin for selling lottery tickets in Frisco." HG, May 24, 1887.
- ²⁴ DB, May 10, 1887, citing *Jewish Progress*, S. F., April 22, 1887.
- ²⁵ *Ceremonies of Dedication for Temple Emanu-El* (Honolulu, 1960).
- ²⁶ The pointer and scroll, along with other artifacts of King Kalakaua, eventually came into the possession of the Kawanānakoā family (descendants of Kaumualii, king of Kauai), through Queen Kapiolani. During the 1930's and 1940's—the times are uncertain—the family graciously lent the scroll from time to time to the Honolulu Jewish community for fall Holy Day services.
- Through her grandmother, Princess Abigail Campbell Kawanānakoā (1882-1945), the pointer came into the possession of Abigail Kekaulike Kawanānakoā. Through a friend of hers, it came into the possession of Rabbi Roy A. Rosenberg of Temple Emanu-El. (He is not related to Elias A. Rosenberg.) At dedicatory services of the temple on May 29, 1960, Rabbi Rosenberg also dedicated the pointer to the temple.
- Some intriguing questions remain:
- a. When and under what circumstances did Rosenberg give the pointer and scroll to Kalakaua?
 - b. When and how did the scroll disappear? (The Temple Emanu-El dedicatory pamphlet puts the disappearance in the 1930's. It was probably later, around 1945 or 1946.)
 - c. The most intriguing question of all: *Where is the scroll now?* (Author to reader: help!)