

# Charles Levine and the first American Jewish Pilot

By Jerry Klinger

**He reached into the heavens and fell to the earth**

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**Levine - Performed by Joseph Feldman and his orchestra, June 13, 1927**

(Musical introduction - refrain from the Hatikvah)

*Rejoice Jews, Rejoice all...*

*Because we have a right to brag...*

*The news has just came in from Berlin...*

*A Jewish son has just arrived...*

*The greatest hero of airplanes...*

*The greatest ocean he did fly...*

*Oye, fly, fly, fly, Levine...*

*So all should see the difference...*

*How much farther flies a Jew...*

*Fly, fly, fly Levine...<sup>1</sup>*

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*My father said he looked into the blue sky, upward to God, before he dropped his bomb load over Berlin. Banking hard to home, he watched the B-25 nearest to him; piloted by his friend, Lt. Irving Cohen, explode into a fiery red mass.*

**William Rabinowitz – Boynton Beach**

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Light was just breaking in the eastern sky as the plane, patriotically named the Columbia, lifted off the runway straight into the rising sun. It was 6:05 am at Roosevelt Field, Long Island, Saturday, June 4, 1927. Aboard was the pilot, Clarence Chamberlin and a last minute recklessly courageous passenger. Slowly pulling its heavy weight, the propeller clawing at the air, the plane

ascended. The passenger's wife screeched in horror. She had come to the field to watch the historic event with her husband, who owned the Columbia. To her sheer terror they took off. He told her they were just going to taxi around the field, to let him get a feel for the aircraft. The passenger owner had written his will. He left his fortune to his wife and his two daughters – one of which was an infant of less than a year. The young wife watched sickened, thinking she would be a widow in a matter of hours. Her husband, his pilot, together with his aircraft soon would be lost beneath the cold empty waves of the North Atlantic, forever. She angrily cried aloud, if she had known that her husband intended to fly with Chamberlin, she would have burned the plane first.

Adventure, challenge, courage, imagination gripped the country. It was the new age of possible. It was the new age of reaching upward to God. It was the age of Aviation.

Two week earlier, May 20, Charles A. Lindberg had lifted off from the same airfield on his historic solo mission across the Atlantic.

The Columbia was a better-designed and more powerful aircraft than Lindberg's Spirit of St. Louis. It was designed by Giuseppe Ballanca with help from the Wright Brothers' firm. It had been ready; sitting for weeks in a hangar near the Spirit of St. Louis, grounded by a lawsuit the owner of the Columbia was embroiled in. It one of many scrapes with the law that he would scourge his life with. The injunction kept the Columbia grounded. The Sheriff's attachment was lifted just hours before Lindberg took off into the iffy weather; that morning was too late to prepare the Columbia to beat Lindberg. The following day the Columbia's owner announced that his plane would not just surpass, upstage, Lindberg's record but would do so with a passenger.

The owner of the Columbia, a hard paced, aggressive businessman of barely 30 had made millions in the scrap metal business at the end of the World War. His parents were immigrants from Vilna. He was the successful American dream, even having married a local beauty queen. He was more than just an American dream. He was the symbol of all that freedom could bring his people from the old World. His name was Charles A. Levine. Levine's initials were the same as Lindberg's C A L. Levine was not Lindberg. Levine was something Lindberg despised. Levine was a Jew, an American Jew, born in North Adams, Massachusetts in 1897 and was raised in Brooklyn, New York.

Off the coast of Newfoundland, the S.S. Mauritania steamed toward America. The Columbia dipped down and circled the ship. From its deck, his neck craned skyward, Charles A. Lindberg could only stare. The Columbia pulled skyward and flew into the east and history. Raising the coast of Cornwall, England the Columbia continued on. Crossing the English Channel they flew to Europe intent on making it to Germany and winning the \$15,000 prize for the first New York to Berlin flight. An argument started by Levine with Chamberlin over which direction was Berlin wasted precious fuel. They landed 115 miles short in Eisleben, Germany, out of gas. A refill of petrol and they took off again only to foul the engine on the wrong fuel. They crashed landed again. The next day, June 6, on *Shavuot*, they arrived in Berlin. An estimated 100,000 people awaited the Argonauts of the Air, cheering wildly, excitedly, for the Christian and the Jew.

Levine and Chamberlain were celebrated as heroes by the media, by the world. Royalty, society and women threw themselves at Levine and he responded. The President of Germany, Paul Von Hindenburg personally welcomed them. The American Ambassador to Germany met the fliers and presented a congratulatory cable from the President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge. The laudatory cable was addressed to Clarence Chamberlin alone.

In the ensuing weeks, Charles A. Levine was granted a private audience by the Pope, in the Vatican. It was the first private audience granted to an American ever in the throne room. The indefatigable Levine was speechless as the Pope blessed him. Levine met and amicably discussed flying with the prime minister of Italy, the founder of Italian Fascism, Benito Mussolini.

The Jews in America and Europe went wild with adulation for one of their own. Jewish breasts swelled with pride as one song title proclaimed, "Hurrah *far unzer held* Levine." It was a deep-seated need to be proud, to affirm. It was one of their own who did good. The opposite of when something evil or bad happens, Jews pray that it is not one of their own. For Jews it was as if Levine, though a passenger, was the first Jewish aviator in history. He was not.

Levine's wife arrived quickly and brought him back to New York. His ten minutes in the sun was over and forgotten by the time he returned to America. It was the apex of his life; an apex from which he steadily descended from until his obscure death many years later.

### **The first American Jewish aviator was Arthur Welsh.**



Welsh seated in a Wright B flyer in Dayton, Ohio, 1911.

His real name was Laibel Wellcher. Laibel was born in Russia, August 14, 1881. His family emigrated, because of the great Russian anti-Semitic upheavals, and settled in Philadelphia in 1890. Laibel attended public school as well as traditional *cheder* (Hebrew school). His father died, suddenly, tragically. His mother remarried and the family moved to Washington, D.C.

Their neighborhood was a mini-Jewish immigrant ghetto centered on 4<sup>th</sup> Street in the South West part of the city. The tiny community became better known in later years because of the Cantor of Talmud Torah Congregation, Moshe Reuben Yoelson. Cantor Yoelson's son changed his name to better fit into the American world and avoid anti-Semitism. Cantor Yoelson was the father of the great popular culture American singer and movie star, Al Jolson.

In 1901, Laibel Wellcher, joined the American Navy and quickly learned the same lesson. He changed his name to Arthur Welsh. After four years of honorable service, aboard the U.S.S. Hancock and U.S.S. Monongahela, he was discharged in 1905. Arthur returned to Washington, taking a minor job as an accountant at the Gas Pintach Company. He began attending meetings of the Young Zionist Union at Washington's Adas Israel Congregation. He met and fell in love with another believer in the Zionist vision, Anna Harmel. The young couple had the distinction of being the first couple married in the magnificent new Adas Israel edifice at 6<sup>th</sup> & I Streets in Washington, October 10, 1907.

Anna's father was Paul Harmel, who served on the Board of Managers of Adas Israel. Paul was a founder of the Hebrew Free Loan Association and the Hebrew Relief Society. Anna's mother, Rosa, helped found the Jewish Foster Home. Continuing with her daughter's Zionist beliefs, Rosa became a founding member of the Washington chapter of Hadassah in 1919.

Arthur watched, fascinated, a public demonstration of flight by Orville Wright across the Potomac River at Fort Meyers. The Wright Brothers were trying to convince the American military of the feasibility and application of flight. Though married only two years in 1909, Arthur determined he wanted to fly. His initial applications to the Wright Brothers were turned down due to his lack of apparent qualifications. Traveling to Dayton, Arthur persisted and the Wright Brothers relented. March 10, 1910, Arthur Welsh joined the first class of the Wright Flying School in Montgomery, Alabama. Later, training directly with Orville, Wright, he eventually became a seasoned, trusted test pilot for the Wright Brothers Aircraft Company. He soon was their best pilot becoming an instructor and member of the company exhibition team.

Through 1910-1911, Welsh achieved several records for American flight speed and altitude. Welsh won the \$3,000 prize, August 1911, during the International Aviation Meet held at Grant Park in Chicago, for being the first aviator to fly more than two hours with a passenger.

June of 1912, Welsh was again back in Washington working for the Wrights to obtain a military contract for aircraft. His job was to demonstrate the capability of the new Wright model C aircraft. Flying out of College Park, Maryland airfield, June 12, after more than 16 successful tests, he took the model C up again with Lt. Hazelhurst to conduct a loaded test climb. Climbing to about 200 feet and then diving to gain momentum, like a roller coaster, to swing back higher, the Model C stalled. The aircraft slammed into the ground, Arthur Welsh and Lt. Hazelhurst were killed instantly. Arthur was almost 31.

Arthur's funeral was June 13. Among his pallbearers were Orville Wright and Lt. Henry H. Arnold, whom Welsh trained as a pilot. Lt. Henry H. Arnold would become five star general Hap Arnold, Chief of the American Air command during World War II. Arnold wrote in his

autobiography years later about Arthur Welsh, "He taught me everything I know, but he knew much more."

Arthur Welsh is buried in Adas Israel's (old) cemetery on Alabama, Ave. in Washington, section E lot 34. His grave is marked by a simple flat stone, "Arthur L. Welsh, father" in the Silverman family plot. He dreamed and followed his dream. No one celebrated Arthur Welsh as a great American Jewish flier; certainly, not the Jews. He was forgotten fifteen years before Charles A. Levine and the Columbia flew.

Charles A. Levine, the man with the pugilist's face and attitude to life and self-promotion was celebrated. He was the first American Jew to achieve popular international fame and be self-cast into disgraceful oblivion and personal hell.

Racial identification and stereotyping of groups in America was not abnormal in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Racial-Eugenic theory had been born in the American scientific community. Eugenics was ultimately rejected by the 1930's except by nativist groups such as the America First Committee. Their public relations face was that of Charles A. Lindbergh.

American Jews, in the 1920's, were largely immigrant or first generation communities. They culturally struggled with poor self-esteem, poor self respect, poor sense of personal and community worth relative to their non-Jewish neighbors.

Jewish children had been told for centuries, by the world outside of America, they were not as good as non-Jewish children. No matter how many times Jewish parents soothed their children gently saying, "You are one of the Chosen People, the People of God" they could not overcome the truth of being second class guests in the countries they lived in. The children knew, smelled, felt and ingested the hard reality into their very souls. Though they denied it, they secretly feared they were not as good, as strong, as brave as the non-Jew.

America was different. America was a confusing reality to American Jewry. Anti-Semitism was part of the American story but never was it institutionalized, legalized, through governmental fiat as it had been in Europe or in the Muslim world. America was a country of immigrants trying to melt into one fabric. American Jewry could become American if they chose to. If they chose to adopt American culture and change their own, they could be more easily accepted.

American Jewry needed shining examples of American Jewish success: American Jews they could be proud of. Jews, historically, positively affirm their self worth, their self-esteem and identity by proudly associating with any accomplishment by a Jew in the non-Jewish world; "He is Jewish," is the oft used phrase.<sup>2</sup>

For a brief moment, Charles A. Levine was that man: for a very brief moment. The seeds of Levine's fall were inherent in his rise from poverty to riches. Religion was never the dominant value in his life. That he was a Jew, he never shrank from or feared to confront. More often it was a temper that flashed whenever he was insulted. His fists were always ready to assist: a supposedly very un-Jewish trait. (Few Jews today have heard the name Daniel Mendoza – the greatest bare-knuckle prizefighter in British history. Mendoza was a Jew. He transformed the

English stereotype of a Jew from a weak, indefensible person into someone deserving of respect.)

*Time magazine; Monday, August 13, 1928; Quivering Jewish ire last week faced suave Anglo-Saxon aplomb in the Casino at Deauville, France, focal point of international folly. Said the man with the ire: "You the guy that edits The Boulevardier and responsible for the dirty cracks taken at me?" Said the man with aplomb, "Yes, I'm the guy. What about it?" "Just that!" shouted the man with the ire, planting his left fist on the other's foppish jaw. The Casino's colorful clientele assembled to separate the pair. Ireful Charles A. Levine, famed passenger, was led away by his bejeweled protégé Miss Mabel Boll.*

Levine's wife hurried to Europe for a reason. It was not to share in the glory and the adulation but to look after her marriage and her wayward leaning husband. Within a short time, she separated from Charles after she realized that Miss Mabel Boll was more than a protégé. She was his mistress. Levine was divorced. His family had almost nothing to do with him for the rest of his long life.

Levine's fortune evaporated in the stock market crash of 1929. The diamonds and Miss Boll soon were gone.

Levine began a series of desperate criminal activities attempting to recoup his lost fortune and status.

1930 He was arrested for selling counterfeit coins in Vienna, Austria. The charges were dropped. 1932 He was arrested for grand larceny, forgery, and violating Workmen's compensation laws. He received a suspended sentence. 1933 Levine was arrested for passing counterfeit money. The charges were dropped. 1934 - Levine attempted suicide. He was found in his the kitchen with six gas jets open. 1935 – Grand larceny and forgery charges were dropped. 1937- He was arrested for smuggling 2,000 pounds of tungsten into the U.S. He was sentenced and served 18 months in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania prison and fined \$5,000.

Levine may once have been an acute businessman but as a criminal he was always an inept, pathetic failure. Perhaps it was from an altruistic spirit to help the Jewish people; perhaps it was for money but Levine's final criminal effort tragically failed.

Levine was arrested in 1942 attempting to smuggle an illegal immigrant into America from Mexico. The man's name was Edward Schinek. He was a German, a Jewish refugee who had escaped from Hitler's concentration camps. He was trying to come to America. Levine, for good or bad, was trying to assist him. <sup>3</sup>

Los Angeles Times, January 11, 1942. Charles A. Levine, the ex-junk dealer who claimed the now-obscured fame of being the first trans-Atlantic airplane passenger in 1927, was jailed in New York yesterday on a Los Angeles indictment of conspiring to smuggle a German alien into the United States. The confessed alien and an asserted accomplice of Levine are held in the County Jail here. The man, who called himself the

"Millionaire Stowaway" when he and Clarence Chamberlin flew the huge plane Columbia to Germany, waived removal proceedings in New York Federal court and was held in \$1,000 bail. Asst. U.S. Atty. Russell K. Lambeau declared yesterday that the illegal entrance of the alien, Edward Schinek, occurred last May 30, when Peter Joseph Walter, Los Angeles hotel man, and the latter's son, assertedly spirited Schinek across the Mexican border at Laredo, Texas. Lambeau said that Walter went to the Hall of Records here and obtained the birth certificate of an American citizen, Edward Siegel, of Los Angeles, and that Levine supplied the letter stating that Schinek, posing as Siegel, was an American businessman and an old acquaintance of the Atlantic flyer. With the asserted false birth certificate and Levine's letter, Schinek was brought across the border. Schinek's wife, in a subsequent operation, according to Lambeau, was hidden in a huge gasoline tank beneath an automobile and brought into the United States at San Ysidro below San Diego. She was arrested for illegal entry but is now at liberty on her own recognizance. Schinek has pleaded guilty to illegal entry charges, and Walter has pleaded guilty to smuggling charges, Lambeau asserted. Walter's son, also named by Federal authorities as a co-conspirator in the smuggling, is still in Mexico. Los Angeles Times; March 19, 1942; Levine Asks Time for Fine Payment. Charles A. Levine, 45, who became the first trans-Atlantic plane passenger by financing an air-trip to Europe without making an appreciable nick in his once expansive bankroll, found himself in trouble with the law again yesterday over a matter of \$500. Fined \$500 and given a suspended 150-day jail sentence last month by Federal Judge J.F.T. O'Connor for conspiring to smuggle a German alien, Edgar Schinek, into this country.

The tragic Schinek smuggling effort was the last recorded cross Levine had with the law. He descended into the world of New York's flophouses and seedy life. Levine survived by hand outs and virtual begging off of people from his former life. 1958 – the U.S. Government gave up attempting to collect on the fines Levine had accumulated and not paid. He could not have done so anyway. 1991 - He was brought to Washington, D.C. from New York, by a former admirer who had taken pity on him. The woman was reputed to have sent him money for thirty years.

New York Times; December 18, 1991; Charles A. Levine, 94, Is Dead; First Transatlantic Air Passenger. Charles A. Levine, who became aviation's first trans-Atlantic passenger in 1927 when he sponsored an attempt to beat Col. Charles A. Lindbergh to Europe, died December 6 at Sibley Memorial Hospital in Washington. He was 94 years old and had moved to Washington from New York City this fall.....

Charles A. Levine, the intrepid first transatlantic passenger, has disappeared from his history. His resting place is unknown. For a brief, shining moment he was the pride of Jewry: He was the brave, fearless, adventurer who represented what could be for American Jewry. His human weaknesses and foibles were greater than his Jewish soul.

Postscript:

Jewish bravery and participation in the story of aviation has not been fully told. Until it was recorded and told, to the anger of the Nazis, nothing was known about Jewish aviators and aces that flew for Germany in World War I. American Jews flew for the United States in World War I

and World War II. Many paid with their lives, such as Lt. Irving Cohen of Council Bluffs, Iowa, who was shot down over Europe in 1943. Taken for granted but remembered with awe are the pilots of the IDF who though vastly outnumbered destroyed the air forces of Egypt, Jordan and Syria beginning on June 5, 1967. June 5 was exactly forty years to the day that the Columbia with Charles A. Levine bravely was winging its way somewhere over the Atlantic.

A new frontier of flight is ahead – space. Jews are part of that story as well.

Jewish Members of the American space program are:

Jay Apt, a veteran of four missions

Ellen Baker, two missions

Martin Fettman, one mission

John Grunsfeld, four missions

Jeffrey Hoffman, three missions

Marsh Ivins, three missions

Judith Resnick, one mission

David Wolfe, three missions

Garret Reisman

Though not American but deserving of mention are:

Yuri Gagarin – the first Russian to fly in space is rumored to be of Jewish background.

Ilan Ramon of Israel

