

Lincoln's Jewish Spy: The Life and Times of Issachar Zacharie

Meg Groeling
bloodnight@aol.com

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Review

Groeling, Meg

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Years ago, I read Gore Vidal's *Lincoln: A Novel*. One of the most memorable, although minor, characters is also the topic of E. Lawrence Abel's *Lincoln's Jewish Spy: The Life and Times of Issachar Zacharie*. I was surprised when I saw the book. I had assumed the fellow who worked on Mr. Lincoln's corns and bunions was a fictional creation. Not so! Issachar Zacharie was undoubtedly real and one of the fascinating folks that make the nineteenth century so compelling.

Author E. Lawrence Abel is an emeritus professor of psychology and obstetrics and gynecology at Wayne State University in Detroit. He has written over forty books, mostly concerned with science and the Civil War. *John Wilkes Booth and the Women Who Loved Him* has lately been reviewed in these pages. This time Abel introduces readers to Dr. Issachar Zacharie, a distinguished foot doctor to the political elite before and during the American Civil War.

Dr. Zacharie was an immigrant from England, and when he arrived in America, he reinvented himself—as did many. No papers or diplomas indicate that the foot doctor was anything other than self-taught, but he claimed to have been instructed by the finest physicians in Europe. Luckily for Lincoln, Zacharie was an excellent natural at relieving foot pain and excising corns, bunions, and calluses. He began his business in Charleston, where he lived when he was sixteen years old. From there, he moved to New Orleans, then Philadelphia, and finally, Baltimore. Along the way, Zacharie collected endorsements from the wealthiest and most influential people upon whom he worked—or so he claimed. Many of his celebrity endorsements were fake, especially the ones from "titled, European royalty." Zacharie even plagiarized whole books, merely putting his name down as the author of *Surgical and Practical Operations; Corns, Operations on the Feet; and Causes and Cures of Diseases of the Feet*. None of this appeared to bother anyone, and his

business grew. In each of the places Zacharie called home, he became a leader within the Jewish community, but New York City finally lured him North.

On April 12, 1861, Charleston's Fort Sumter was fired upon, beginning the American Civil War. Soon after, Issachar Zacharie moved his business to Washington City, put on his best suit, and proceeded to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Secretary John Hay responded to his knock, brought the good doctor to Lincoln, and shut the office door. A bit later, Zacharie left with a testimonial from the U. S. president: "Dr. Zacharie has operated on my feet with good success and considerable addition to my comfort." He also left with the trust of the president and an idea for an interesting business/military proposition: the creation of a Chiropody Corps for the Army of the Potomac. Perhaps curing foot soldiers of corns and bunions would also cure them of "the slows." The plan went nowhere. However, Dr. Zacharie's access to Lincoln, as well as his contacts in New Orleans and Charleston, made him the perfect spy. Author Abel explores this suggestion in depth, using primary documentation from personal letters to and from Zacharie and various military men, principally Union Major General Nathaniel Banks. Banks replaced Major General Ben Butler in New Orleans as commander of the Department of the Gulf and availed himself of Zacharie's offer to spy on New Orleans's populace. Both men developed a personal relationship, although the elaborate promises of personal political renown for Banks never materialized. Letters flew back and forth concerning the mood of New Orleans citizens and their support for Banks. None of them, however, changed the conduct or outcome of the war. That Issachar Zacharie spied for Banks and Lincoln has never been definitively proven. Lawrence Abel provides a fascinating in-depth look at alleged spying attempts but allows readers to come to their own conclusions.

Lincoln's assassination at John Wilkes Booth's hands ended Dr. Zacharie's communications with the White House. It did not end contact with General Banks. Banks had pursued a run at the presidency in the 1864 election, with encouragement from Zacharie. Although it came to nothing, Banks did have a successful political life after the war. He represented Massachusetts in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Zacharie moved his corn-and-bunion business from New York City to Philadelphia, had no dealings with President Grant, and sat out the 1868 election. He was still in contact with Banks, warning him against supporting Grant, whom he assumed would lose. By 1874, Zacharie relocated his family to London, reopened his business in fashionable Grosvenor Square, and died, in 1900, in his home. Lengthy obituaries—on both sides of the

Atlantic—praised his efforts in support of the Union and his skill at relieving the foot troubles of common soldiers as well as the rich and famous.

Lawrence Abel's book, *Lincoln's Jewish Spy*, is an enjoyable read, artfully presenting this eccentric Victorian gentleman in his odd natural habitat, among the feet of the famous. The doctor was always a natty dresser, lived in beautiful homes, could turn a *bon mot* with the best, and genuinely sought to help both President Lincoln and the war effort. That he always had a large display of corns and bunions he had removed from various people in his office does nothing to make him appear less peculiar. I was certainly pleased to have been asked to review this small book. It turns out Gore Vidal did not make Issachar Zacharie up after all—the real Dr. Zacharie is far more interesting than any literary character, even one of Vidal's.

***Meg Groeling** earned her master's degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which will also be published by Savas Beatie. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War.*