Haym Salomon

A Jewish immigrant from Poland, Haym Salomon was a currency broker and merchant who went into bankruptcy by loaning money to finance the American Revolution. For his sacrifice he was later recognized as the "financial hero of the Revolution."

Salomon was born in Lissa, Poland, in 1740. As a young man, he traveled extensively in Europe and England and developed fluency in several languages. He returned to Poland in 1770 to participate in the Polish independence movement, but at that movement's defeat and the first partition of Poland, he was forced to leave his native land. He arrived in New York City in 1772 and opened a brokerage and commission merchant's business.

Salomon's involvement in the movement for Polish independence drew him to the Sons of Liberty, and when war broke out in 1775 he was contracted to supply Continental troops in central New York. After General William Howe seized New York City, Salomon drew the disfavor of the British troops and was imprisoned on several occasions. But he did not stay in prison long, as the British noted his capacity for languages and employed him as an interpreter. He used his new position, however, to foster dissension and desertion among the Hessian troops working for the British.

In the aftermath of a fire in New York City in 1778, the British once again arrested Salomon and sentenced him to death for espionage activities. Assisted by the Sons of Liberty, he escaped to Philadelphia, where he established an office as a dealer in bills of exchange and securities. His ability to exchange French bills attracted the attention of the French minister to Congress, Anne-Cesar de la Luzerne, who appointed Salomon paymaster general of the French forces in North America. Salomon also served as broker for bills of exchange from the Dutch and Spanish governments. In 1781, Congress established the Office of Finance and appointed Robert Morris superintendent. Morris preferred to do business with brokers of his own faith, but he agreed to meet with Salomon at Luzerne's suggestion. After this initial meeting, Morris often sent for Salomon. Morris's diary recorded that the two men conducted 75 transactions before the end of the war. Salomon advanced loans directly to Congress to pay for supplies for the Continental Army. He also loaned money to members of the Continental Congress with no interest. James Madison wrote to a friend in Virginia: "I have for some time been a pensioner on the favor of Haym Salomon, a Jew broker."

Salomon died on January 6, 1785. His financial contributions to the cause of American independence left him destitute, and his family was penniless at the time of his death. He held bonds nominally worth more than $600,000, a debt that Salomon's children unsuccessfully tried to collect from the federal government.

Further Reading

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