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Abe Fortas of Memphis

by Dr. Berkley Kalin



Dr. Berkley Kalin

Abe Fortas is a rarity: a famous Memphian who was actually born in Memphis. E.H. Crump, Elvis Presley, W.C. Handy and Ida Wells, to name a few examples, were not. And yet this Memphian who rose to the highest appointive office in the land, is perhaps the least appreciated famous Mid-Southerner. In fact, Memphis Jews know more of the other Jewish Justices than they know of their native son who held a position on the same level as the President of the United States. Abe Fortas' influences on American law and public policy over a half century are of incalculable significance. Ironically he is remembered (to use the words of biographer Laura Kalman) as the "first Supreme Court justice to resign under a cloud."

Scholarly monographs such as Bruce A. Murphy's *Fortas: the rise and ruin of a Supreme Court Justice* and Laura Kalman's *Abe Fortas: a biography* have failed to fathom the idealistic streak which drove the "inner Fortas". In his correspondence with Memphis entrepreneur and philanthropist Hardwig Peres (whom Kalman incorrectly titles "Rabbi" Peres), young Abe reveals some of the inner tensions which tear at his psyche. This fascinating set of twenty-five Fortas letters, held in the Special Collections of Brister Library, Memphis State University, have never been utilized by any Fortas biographer.

Abe Fortas was the first recipient of the Israel Peres scholarship to Southwestern in Memphis. In a letter to Hard-

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Rabbi Max Samfield

Spiritual Leader - Community Leader

by Dr. Selma Lewis

This is the fifth in a series of biographical sketches of Jewish community leaders included in our forthcoming book, "Chronicles of the Jewish Community of Memphis."

When Rabbi Max Samfield's funeral was held on October 1, 1915, much of the entire city of Memphis paused to pay its final respects. For ten minutes during the services at the Poplar Avenue Temple practically every business house in the city was closed. At ten o'clock sharp The Memphis Street Car Company shut off its power, and every street car in the city came to a halt for a minute. No traffic was allowed to pass within several blocks of the temple. It was reported that one of the largest groups ever assembled in Memphis attended the funeral services, overflowing the building and crowded outside into the streets. At the expressed wish of Rabbi Samfield, there were no flowers, he and his family requested favor of charitable donations be sent instead.

The unusual tributes he received testify to the wide influence Rabbi Samfield had in the city, as well as the regard in which he was held by many diverse groups and individuals. He had come to Memphis in 1871 to succeed Rabbi Simon Tuska as the spiritual leader of Temple Israel and he had requested that he be appointed Rabbi Emeritus, which was scheduled to occur on the very day he died.

Samfield was born in 1844 in Markgreff, Bavaria, where his education included both Jewish religious studies and secular learning. He was ordained when he completed his work at the Julius University in Duerzburg. In 1867, he went to Beth Zion congregation in Shreveport, Louisiana, where he remained until he came to Memphis on August 18, 1871.

During his tenure as rabbi of Congregation B'Nai Israel Memphis endured the Yellow Fever epidemics, which created great hardships for the city and for



Rabbi Max Samfield

the congregation. For a short period they were unable to pay the rabbi's salary.

While many people fled the city in 1878-9, Rabbi Samfield remained, to serve the poor and sick, regardless of their race or creed. The Memphis Appeal in an 1878 article, described a burial of Jewish victims of the fever that took place at the Bass Avenue cemetery: "The epidemic which for the past three weeks has been raging in our midst has been noticeably felt among the Israelites of our city. Many of their families have been visited by the scourge, and their sorrow is great. Last evening a most solemn scene was witnessed at their burial ground on Bass Avenue. It was the occasion of the burial of three of their faith, citizens of our once happy city, Mr. A. Johl, his son, and Simon Loeb. All these had died of the yellow fever yesterday morning, but, it being the Jewish Sabbath, they were not in-

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JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH - FOUNDED IN 1986
163 BEALE STREET, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38103

President's Message



Gloria Felsenthal

The rewards of community work are intrinsic, the primary reward being the satisfaction of working for a cause in which one believes. The ideals of this organization are noble and in keeping with our tradition as a people who have recorded history and gleaned meaning from the multiplicity of stories gathered. The society has drawn together Memphians and mid-Southerners of all ages and perspectives. Our younger historians approach our recent history much in the same way as they approach more distant history—as events which relate to them in a peripheral way. The older students of our history bring to the study and share with us a perspective which has benefitted from sifting and sorting. Those in the middle of the spectrum greet history with the wide-eyed enthusiasm of newcomers to an aged tradition. History is becoming real, a living enterprise. They can begin to see a larger picture and the relationship of the parts.

Among the rewards of my two years at the helm of the organization are the new friendships formed and old friendships solidified. I would like to thank especially my two predecessors, Harriet Stern and Leonid Saharavici, for support, friendship, patience, enthusiasm, and guidance. A special thanks also goes to our editor, David Schneider, who tirelessly scavenges for news and views, arranges his material artfully, and sends this newsletter out to all of us in timely sequence. I greatly appreciate the willingness of all the

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members of the Board in working towards our common goal and, of course, the support, encouragement, and interest of our general membership. ■

Welcome To Our New Members

Mrs. Rose Burson Mr. Joe Magdovitz
Mr. Julius Herscovici Mrs. Joseph Rothschild
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Vicksburg

The Jewish Community at 150 Years
by Julius Herscovici

On the twenty-ninth of January, 1825, the Walnut Hills settlement was incorporated under the name of Vicksburg. At the time of incorporation, the city of Vicksburg had a population of about three thousand people, of which about twenty families were Jewish. The Jewish presence in Vicksburg can be traced back as early as 1815. Virtually all Jewish settlers living in Vicksburg came from Bavaria, Alsace-Lorraine and other German lands. The German roots were meaningless at this point in time, but played a pivotal role in a decision made many years later.

Between 1820-1840 the Jewish population in Vicksburg stayed at the same level. The 20-30 families who lived in Vicksburg kept kosher, and a shochet provided kosher meat. Religious observances were kept in accordance with orthodox customs and regular Sabbath and Festival services were conducted in private homes. In 1841 the Jewish community decided to es-

tablish a congregation and the founding members choose the name: "Hebrew Benevolent Congregation of the Man of Mercy".

From 1845 to 1865 a second wave of Jewish immigrants settled in Vicksburg. In addition to German Jews, a larger number came from Russia and Poland. On the first of March, 1862, the existing Jewish congregation was formally incorporated in the State of Mississippi, under the name: "Anshe Chesed Congregation". The Hebrew name was the exact translation of the name chosen by its founders back in 1841.

Henry B. Godthelf became the congregations first full time Rabbi in 1866. Rabbi Godthelf was a native of Germany. This was significant as it revealed the social and power structure of the community, as well as showing the community's philosophy of life. In 1868, the ground was broken for the building of the first synagogue in Vicksburg and the formal dedication took place on Friday, May 20th, 1870, at 2 P.M.

In 1873 a crucial decision was made, a decision that was to shape the life and

destiny of all the Jews living in Vicksburg and the surrounding communities. This historical decision was to join the "Union of American Hebrew Congregations"; better known as Reform Judaism. On April 25, 1974, the "Anshe Chesed Congregation" was officially admitted into the Reform Movement as the twenty-fifth congregation with the status of a founding congregation. Every time I think about this decision, in my mind pops up Robert Frost's lines":

"I shall be telling this with a sith
Somewhere ages and ages hence
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

Not all the members of the congregation were happy with the decision to abandon traditional Judaism. The numbers of those dedicated to follow the orthodox path increased at the turn of the century with the arrival of a third wave of immigrants who came mainly from Eastern Europe and Russia. The newcomers and members of the old congregation decided in 1900 to form an orthodox congregation. On Sep-

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wig dated May 1, 1930, the nineteen-year-old Abe expressed his awareness of the high standards set by the Peres example. "Nothing could be closer to my desire than to have the opportunity of going to Yale, not merely because there I may have the opportunity—not of rivaling him whose memorial scholarship I now hold, but of following in his footsteps."

Three years later Fortas graduated from Yale and became one of the "bright young men" of FDR's New Deal administration. As a senior he had served as editor of the Yale Law Review and attracted the support of law professor William O. Douglas, who later became a Justice of the Supreme Court and Fortas' closest friend. While still in his twenties, Fortas held important posts in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the Department of Interior. As Under Secretary of Interior, he had a very significant role in shaping the course of the New Deal. The Interior Department was the most important division of FDR's administration—a most unusual situation. But besides serving as Under Secretary, Fortas was also Secretary of the Petroleum Reserves Corporation, Acting General Counsel of the National Power Policy Committee, director of the Virgin Island Company, and a member of the Food Advisory Committee, the Committee of Legal Personnel of the Civil Service Commission, the Special Committee of International Power Problems, and the President's Committee to Study Changes in The Organic Act of Puerto Rico. He was a veritable dynamo of activity, known as a tough but extremely capable administrator. He was also courageous, unafraid to tackle controversial political issues which might jeopardize his future career in government. For instance, it was Fortas who fought in vain to stop FDR's Japanese relocation program on the West Coast. He and Secretary of Interior Ickes were successful, however, in getting Roosevelt to soften the harsh martial law initially imposed on Hawaii.

In a letter written April 19, 1939, Fortas expressed gratitude for Hardwig Peres' communications with Senator Kenneth McKellar and Congressman Walter Chandler on his behalf. He

explained his decision to become General Counsel of the Public Works Administration and not to replace William O. Douglas on the Securities and Exchange Commission. Like all Jews of the 1930s Fortas was threatened by the spectre of anti-Semitism which haunted America as well as Europe. "It was impossible to get me appointed to Douglas' place because that would result in two Jews being on the SEC (the other being Chairman Jerome Frank)...a thing which in the present climate of opinion is neither possible nor desirable."

Another letter to Peres, written a decade later (September 15, 1943), mentioned "conflicts of duty, loyalty, and interests" which plagued Fortas all of his life. FDR and Ickes were accused of favoritism when they requested that Fortas be exempt from military service for medical reasons so that he could continue his work in the Interior Department. Anti-semitic remarks were bandied around Congress, attacking the character of Fortas, even though many military exemptions had been granted less worthy candidates. Fortas, in the same letter, expressed great concern over rising anti-Semitism. "I could not escape the feeling that another attack on a Jew in connection with the deferment issue would do tremendous damage to all Jews in this country. This last consideration weighed most heavily with me. I felt that if there were in the future a strong wave of anti-Semitism in this country, I should never be able to evade the feeling that I had somewhat contributed to it."

The decline of Fortas' public career after the age of 58 is attributed to greed on his part. But in the September 15, 1933 letter to Peres he spoke of the ideal of self-sacrifice which a career of public service demands. "The plain fact is that people generally do not understand the disadvantages and hazards of honest public service in a conspicuous post. They do not realize that it involves absolute rejection of financial or economic benefit, or the making of business or professional alliances for the future. And they don't understand that honest public service in a post such as mine, in times like these (World War II), involves terrifying physical and emotional wear and tear." Fortas' wife Carol had had a similar dilemma. "She had something of a



Abe Fortas

problem as to whether she could justify leaving the Government service at a time when competent tax lawyers are desperately needed and are almost impossible to find...It is again an amusing commentary upon our present attitudes that she has had a number of offers from private business at substantially more than the sum for which she was willing to do what she considered a service to her Government." Later Carol Fortas joined a blue chip law firm: "Her work is more remunerative but less responsible and satisfying than her government job."

Fortas' World War II letters to Peres also illustrate his life-long commitment to Zionism. Undoubtedly the octogenarian Hardwig Peres sparked his interest in a Jewish homeland. It is interesting that Fortas was a Zionist and other more Jewishly observant Supreme Court Justices were not. Several letters allude to concerns with Palestine. For instance—(September 17, 1944) "I am spending most of my time on Persian Gulf oil problems, and I hope that we will be able to work something out which will be of lasting benefit to the Nation. In connection with this work, I have been getting some information about Palestine. I hope that when I am in Memphis in March you will take time to talk with me about that problem." (April 25, 1944) "I have had some more interesting talks with Dr. Josef Cohn. You may know that there was a rumor which caused the Zionists a lot of harm to the effect that Dr. Weizmann offered a "bribe to Ibn-Saud. Dr. Nahum Goldmann and Dr. Cohn gave me a complete and satisfac-

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Legal Profession Highlighted In Special Program

On January 13, the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South presented a special program, "Contributions of Jewish Memphians to the Legal Profession." Guest Speakers were Mr. Herschel Feibelman and Judge Irving Strauch.

Judge Strauch opened the program telling about the Jewish judges from Memphis and that he knew all personally except one, Leopold Lehman, who was the first Jewish Judge in Memphis. Lehman, born in Cincinnati in 1863, came to Memphis to practice law with his brother and was an authority on Law and Philosophy. He served a six month term as a State Supreme Court Justice in 1892. Judge Strauch continued to tell of Israel H. Peres who was named Chancellor of Part II, Chancery Court in 1917 and served on the bench six years.

Louis H. Morris served as a Justice of the Peace for 8 years and Judge Strauch noted that a park at the corner of Manassas and Poplar was named for him.

Louis B. Jack served as Chancellor from 1924-54 and was appointed to the Tennessee Court of Appeals where he sat until his death in 1979 at age 73. He was born in Moscow, Tennessee, was a Harvard graduate and a close friend of Memphis E.H. "Boss" Crump, Judge Strauch stated.

Abe Fortas was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson and served until 1969, when he resigned under pressure from President Richard Nixon and Attorney General John Mitchell. He attended Southside High School, Southwestern College, played the violin and performed at dances at the Menorah Institute and even performed with such notables as Isaac Stern. Fortas was a partner in one of the larger law firms in Washington when President Johnson pressured him to accept the position on the Supreme Court.

Judge Strauch said he gave up his teaching position at Southern Law School at the request of Governor Frank Clement, to fill an unexpired term on the Circuit Court in 1965. Judge Strauch indicated his pride at his service on the Uniform Law Commission where he represented Tennessee in working to

achieve legal definitions accepted nationally. He stated that the Commission's legal definition of death as "irreversible brain damage" was accepted by 49 states.

Speaking of Judge Bernie Weinman, who first served in City Court and now presides in Criminal Court, Judge Strauch predicted that Judge Weinman will be appointed to the Court of Criminal Appeals in the near future. He cited him as an "outstanding man and teacher."

Herschel Feibelman opened his comments stating that there had been hundreds of Jewish lawyers in Memphis over the years who have "made for us a wonderful place for Jews to live and surely a wonderful place for a Jewish lawyer to practice."

Feibelman, after consulting city directories, said he could find no Jewish lawyers in 1860 and concluded that the first Jewish lawyer of distinction was Judge Lehman.

Elias Gates, who grew up in Philadelphia, became associated with Lehman Brothers and is remembered by an annual award given to the outstanding member of the junior congregation of Temple Israel. Gates and Sam Taubenblatt (1896-1956) "did more to enhance the stature and image of the Jewish lawyer than any two men of their time", Feibelman said. He continued and mentioned several prominent names, including the Bearmans who he said are in their third generation with law practices in two states; the Hanovers, including Joe, whose vote in the Tennessee legislature was responsible for giving women the vote in this state. Abe Waldauer was responsible for beginning the law school at Memphis State University; William Gerber served as District Attorney General; and Ron Gilman was President of the Tennessee State Bar Association.

Southern Law School was founded in the 1920's by Sam Margolin who also founded the Memphis Hebrew Academy which was recently renamed The Margolin Hebrew Academy, in honor of Sam and his family, Feibelman continued. The law school, which merged with MSU, was second to none including Yale and Harvard, in the number of graduates who passed the bar the first time, he stated.

Feibelman spoke fondly of Ralph Davis

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tory story of the basis of this rumor in a memorandum which I will send on to you if you indicate that you are interested. I have been able to use the information that they gave me to quiet the disturbance around town that the rumor caused. (undated letter) "At the request of Mr. William Rosenblatt, I am trying to persuade Secretary Ickes to speak at a dinner being held by the American fund for Palestinian Institutions. I think Ickes will agree to do it although he has recently declined all invitations to speak on Palestine because of the restrictions which have been imposed by the President at the insistence of the State Department."

Abe Fortas was a complex individual who wanted it all: the high ideals, the good works, and the private profits and luxuries. His Jewishness marked him as an outsider and he was devoted to the downtrodden. He offered his services gratis in the precedent-shattering Gideon case; he championed people accused of being "security risks" during the McCarthy era; he made significant contributions to the development of constitutional law in the areas of civil rights, loyalty-security checks, the rights of criminal defendants, reapportionment, and he "wrote the book" on juvenile-court law. Yet his obsession for getting money which led to shabby involvements and his inability to refrain from giving inappropriate advice to President Johnson while he was on the Court obscured positive perceptions of this dedicated man.

Memphis was Johnson country, never Kennedy country. The fact that Fortas was Johnson's closest confidant affected Memphis in ways which still need to be analyzed. At the time of Fortas' resignation, Lyndon said, "I made him take the judgeship. In that way, I ruined his life." In a sense Fortas was an early victim of a conservative counterrevolution that has won five of the last six Presidential elections and reshaped the Supreme Court."

Abe Fortas founded a fabulously successful blue chip law firm, defended the oppressed, played fiddle with the greatest musicians of his day, gave advice to a President whenever a crisis occurred, and was a "near great" Supreme Court Justice. ■

The Jews of the Mississippi Delta

The Urgent Need to Preserve a History that has Almost Vanished

by Richard Rubin

Richard Rubin is a freelance writer and historian living in Memphis. He has devoted the last two years to working on his project, "The Jews of the Mississippi Delta: An Oral History."

It was about two a.m. that November night back in 1988, when I made a discovery that would change my life. I was driving back to Greenwood, Mississippi, after a visit to Jackson that had lasted longer than I'd intended. To save time, I tried a shortcut a friend had recommended a few weeks earlier. Instead of driving the entire 100 or so miles up U.S. 49, a two-lane that meandered through Yazoo City, Tchula, Cruger, and half dozen other tiny Delta towns, I'd cruise up 1-55 for about fifty miles, then cut over on State Route 14, through Lexington, and down to 49 in Tchula, shaving perhaps 20 minutes off the trip. I was tired, and it was late, but I had another reason for wanting to take this route: I wanted to see Lexington. I knew I wouldn't see much of it at two o'clock in the morning, but I had to go anyway. Just the name—Lexington, Mississippi—was enough to conjure up vivid images in a history buff's head: I pictured an antebellum town, modeled after and resembling that in which the Shot Heard 'Round the World was fired.

What I found was something I never could have imagined.

As I wound my way through the charming prototype of a Mississippi town square, which revolves around one of the most beautiful County Courthouses in the South, something caught my eye. I shook my head, blinked a few times. It was very late, after all, and I'd been up for almost twenty hours. But it was still there: Sitting over the huge glass window of corner store, a faded, peeling, but still powerful painted sign: COHEN'S.

Cohen's? In Lexington, Mississippi? At two o'clock in the morning?

How much of a surprise this was to a 21-year-old Jewish kid from New York, exploring the Deep South for the first time, can't be overestimated. Of course, I had been shocked two months before, when I first moved to Greenwood, to discover that not only did the town have one Jewish Synagogue—and an Orthodox one, at that—but that it used to have two (after all—my goodness! This was

the Mississippi Delta—the most rural section of the most rural state in the nation!) The Reformed Synagogue had been closed just a few years before I'd gotten there, most of its members having passed on. And this last fact mixed a few drops of sorrow into the initial joy of my most unusual discovery.

As the months progressed, I learned of, and visited, other Delta congregations—in Greenville, in Clarksdale, in Cleveland. The congregants were as surprised to meet me as I was them. After all, a young Jewish person hadn't moved to the Delta in anyone's recent memory. From, yes: to, no. and at each congregation, I heard the same sad tale: The community has been dwindling for years. The young people moved away decades ago, the older ones have died. Soon, there won't be anything left of the Jewish community but a cemetery.

And now, as I stared at the store that claimed to be Cohen's. I was certain that I was seeing nothing but another tombstone. Surely, I reasoned, if towns like Greenwood, Clarksdale, and Greenville, which were many times the size of Lexington, had only few members remaining from what were once thriving Jewish communities, then I must have missed Lexington's altogether. I concluded, somewhat despondently, that this sign, Cohen's which cracked and peeled before my eyes, was all that remained of the Jewish presence in Lexington, Mississippi. I got back in my car and drove home. It was two a.m., and I was tired. There were no stories to listen to here.

I almost forgot about Cohen's. A reporter's life is busy at a small daily newspaper, and what little time I had set aside for exploration was spent in and around Leflore County, walking through Greenwood's two Jewish cemeteries—the Reformed, at the west end of Greenwood's most prestigious white cemetery, and the Orthodox, in a plot of its own—and talking with my Jewish friends, listening to their tales of growing up in or moving to Greenwood, tales of their

parents' and grandparents' lives as itinerant peddlers and later storekeepers, tales of growing up Jewish in rural Mississippi, tales of the Railroads and the Depression and World War II and the Civil Rights Movement. Once in a while, we'd gather at Ahavath Rayim, the surviving synagogue; it had once been Orthodox, established by high-minded immigrants determined to preserve their religion and heritage in the new land, but since the Reformed Temple had closed, the two groups fused, and now Ahavath Rayim was Conservative. There were Harry Diamond, who was born in Greenwood but lived most of his adult life in Moorhead, where he owned a store and served for 18 years on the Sunflower County Board of Education; Leslie Kornfeld, who took over his father's store, his wife Gert, a native of Philadelphia whom Leslie met while in the service, and their son, Murray, whom everyone called "Bubba"; Marshall Levitt and his mother, Nancy, who had lived all her life in the same house on Washington Street in which she was born in 1895; Ilsa Goldberg, a German refugee who came to Greenwood after World War II and now ran the shoe store her husband's father had founded; Sam Kaplan, who had owned a scrap metal business; Meyer Gelman, who once told me a story about his cousin from Meridian, a man he'd described as "the orneriest Jew" he'd even known; Jerry Wexler, a businessman who owned a Catfish restaurant outside of town; and Joe Martin Erber, a Postman and part-time police officer, who'd shown me my first copy of The Hebrew Watchman and in the absence of a Rabbi sometimes led services clad in his police uniform, his loaded .38 bobbing at his side as he davened. If there had been no other Jewish communities in the Delta, this one would have been enough.

Then, one afternoon the following spring, I found myself in Lexington's town square again, passing through on my way down to Jackson. As I'd wound around a curve just outside of town, I saw a large black wrought-iron sign which asked me: "Is Jesus Christ Lord of Lexington?" I wondered what the past owner of Cohen's would have thought. A few minutes later, as I passed the store, I noticed that it was open. I decided to go in. Maybe the

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present owner could tell me about whomever had named the store.

It turned out, to my immense surprise, that the present owner was none else than the grandson of the original Cohen—and a Cohen himself! Phil Cohen, to be precise. And, in all likelihood, he will be the last Cohen to own Cohen's, which has stood on the same spot in Lexington almost since the turn of the century.

Phil Cohen and I talked a lot that afternoon, so much that I never did make it down to Jackson. As it turned out, he has an excellent memory for detail, and is something of an historian himself, not only tracing his own family's roots, but following the story of all of the Delta's Jewish communities, a task made easier by the fact that, like most Jews in that area, he has blood relatives all over the Delta.

Phil Cohen told me about his father and his grandfather, about what Lexington Mississippi—the seat of Holmes County, the second poorest in the nation, a town which had never had a population over 10,000—looked like through the eyes of a small boy in the 1940s. He told me about the town square, which had, at one time, been predominantly occupied by Jewish-owned ships; now, there were only two left, although the names—Flower's, Schur's, Herrmann's—still hung on old, fading signs outside, watching over the stores as if they were the eyes of the proud founders; of going with his father to Durant a few miles away, and seeing hundreds, thousands of blacks, the men just back from the war, lined up outside the Depot of the Illinois Central Railroad, waiting to catch the train to Chicago and opportunity; of the Civil Rights Movement, and difficulties that being a Jew posed in that tense situation. I learned that the first Jew, a man named Sontheimer, had come to Lexington from New Orleans in the 1840s, and that ever since, Jews had been an important part of the town, at the heart of its growth. I followed the rise of the community, and traced its fall—back, predictably to World War II, which was the catalyst for so much change in rural America this century, Phil Cohen explained that, of the 28 young Jewish men who left Lexington for the army in those years, 26 chose not to return; they'd seen other

parts of America, and the world, and decided that their fortunes lay elsewhere. The community never recovered.

As I left Cohen's, checking my watch and deciding to turn back to Greenwood, I marveled at all I had learned that day. And I discovered a purpose: To record these stories, while the storytellers were still around and able to tell them. To document one of the most interesting and unusual chapters in American Jewish History. To preserve the memory of communities that will soon be gone, so that, in 20 or 30 more years, when another 21-year-old Jewish kid from New York drives through Lexington and sees Cohen's, he'll be able to learn all about Jewish life and the Jewish community in Lexington, even though Phil Cohen, and the half dozen or so Jews who remain there now, will have since passed on, one way or another.

Even though it saddens me that I came along so late, that I missed the Golden Age of Mississippi Delta Jewish life—some fifty years ago—I am grateful that I did not come by too late. Although the vast majority of the Delta's Jews lie in cemeteries today, there are still a few left who remember the old days, who remember the tales their parents and grandparents told them, tales of the immigrant experience in the Deep South, tales of dirt roads and mules and steam trains, of the Reconstruction and the Civil War and even of the Old South. Had I come along just a few years later, I would have missed even these. The vast majority of the remaining Delta Jews—there are only a hundred or two left—are in their 70s and 80s. Phil Cohen—who is 55—his wife (a Greenville Stein), and their young children are the only Jews in Lexington who are not, like Phil Cohen's own mother, elderly widows.

And were it not for a twist of fate, even they would not be here. Phil, who was born and raised in Lexington, left to attend Tulane, then spent only a little time back home before striking out—for New York, for the stockbroker's life. Eventually, he found his way to San Antonio, where he spent over a decade. Then, in 1974, his father, Ephraim, became ill with Alzheimer's, and Phil came home, as he put it, "just for a while—to set the store in order". It must have ended up taking longer than he'd expected, because 18 years later, he's

still here, behind the counter of the general clothing store his grandfather founded.

But if you ask Phil Cohen now, he'll tell you that he doesn't expect to spend another 18 years here. He plans to leave as soon as his kids are in college, if not sooner. In 1992, there's not much in Lexington, Mississippi, population 2,227, to hold Phil Cohen and his family. He believes that what's left of Lexington's Jewish community will be gone in 15 years, if not sooner. All that will remain, to testify to the fact that Jews had once lived here, will be the Jewish Cemetery, carved out of a section of the old Odd Fellows' Cemetery, and an empty temple, a beautifully simple whitewashed edifice built in 1905.

The mission, then, is clear: These people must be interviewed while they are still there, to be found in places like Lexington and Greenwood, Clarksdale and Cleveland, Shaw and Indianola, Ruleville and Bolivar, Moorhead and Leland, Charleston and Drew, Schlater and Rosedale, Merigold and Durant, Winona and Batesville, Marks and Rolling Fork, Belzoni and Yazoo City. Their stories must be collected before they are lost forever, leaving us no recourse but to read tombstones if we want to glean some tiny bit of knowledge of what their lives were like.

It was with this goal in mind, then—to collect these histories, consolidate them into a book and maybe even a film, and share them with the country and the world—that I returned to this area, where I hope to find the encouragement and funding necessary to support this project and preserve the Golden Age of Jewish Life in the Mississippi Delta. ■

If you would like to help continue this important project, please contact Judy Peiser, Center for Southern Folklore, 152 Beale St., Memphis, TN 38103. Ph. (901)525-3655.

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who he said was probably "the most colorful man of our time, an iconoclast who wore high heels, long hair and assumed the effected manner of a Shakespearian actor".

We were pleased to see many members of the legal profession in attendance along with our regular membership. Both Judge Strauch and Herschel Feibelman are to be congratulated for presenting such a wonderful and interesting program. ■

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tered until in the night after the ending of their Sabbath...Two pine torches lit up the scene, and by the faint light of a lantern, Rabbi Samfield, in a most feeling and solemn manner, read the burial service. It was a sight never to be forgotten. The prayers of the noble Rabbi, who has, during all the sickness, nobly and faithfully performed the duties of his office, not alone to those of his faith, but in the hut of the lowly in the infected district has he daily given succor and consolation to all, regardless of their creed, met a heartfelt response in the breasts of those present..." During the epidemics Rabbi Samfield was chairman of the Masonic Relief Board, and an active member of the Howard Association.

Samfield was one of the incorporators and active members of the Hebrew Hospital and Relief Association formed for the purpose of caring for the poor, sick, and dying during the epidemics. Other incorporators were: Jonathan Rice, Louis Loubrie, David Hilman, Henry Seessel, Sr., Elias Lowenstein, and A.E. Frankland.

Among his other civic activities was his close association with the Masons in which he attained the rank of 32nd Degree. He often lectured on subjects related to Masonic interests. He joined the organization in Shreveport, becoming a member of the Lelia Scott Lodge in Memphis in 1872, of which he remained a member until his death. He also took an active part in the B'nai B'rith, which he joined upon his arrival in Memphis. He was a past president of the Memphis lodge where he was vocal in support of widows, orphans, and delinquent and defective individuals. For many years he was a director of the Cleveland Orphan Asylum, one of the institutions supported by the organization.

Samfield had been a member of the Elks for ten years before he died, serving as the president of the Tennessee Elks' State Association. He was a founder of the Tennessee Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Children.

During his forty-four years in Memphis Samfield helped the smaller congregations in the towns around Memphis, organizing many congregations and Sabbath schools. He also dedicated or assisted in dedicating many synagogues in neighboring cities. He

was one of the founders of the United Charities of Memphis, of the Young Men's Hebrew Association, and the Hebrew Relief Association, and first vice-president of the Federation of Jewish Charities of Memphis. He was one of the governors of the Hebrew Union College, and a trustee of the New Orleans Orphan Asylum Home.

Samfield's philanthropy was broad, extending to many segments of the community. He was involved in the improvements made to the Memphis school system and he was a counselor and offered his help to the Franciscan monk Francis, one of the primary movers in the founding of the St. Joseph Hospital. He assisted the sisters of charities when collections were sought to build the first hospital, and was in the forefront in later years when money was again needed to build an annex. He was instrumental in securing many large contributions. When the hospital celebrated its one hundredth anniversary, Rabbi Samfield was honored posthumously for his role in its founding.

In 1885, Rabbi Samfield established a Jewish weekly journal, "The Jewish Spectator," devoted to Judaism, science, and literature. It proved to be a successful venture, with a large number of readers, especially in the South and Southwest.

The long list of pallbearers at his funeral attests to the breadth of Samfield's activities in the city. They were:

Active pallbearers, representing the Masons: Hardwig Peres, Samuel Schloss, Simon Levi, J.B. Levy, Albert Dreyfus, David Sternberg, David Gensburger, Herman Bluthenthal, H. Bluthenthal.

Honorary pallbearers: Dr. Edward Mitchell, Sol Schneider, Mose Gross, Henry D. Bauer, S.H. Shepherd, A. Greener, T.P. Fortune, Meyer M. Gattman.

Honorary pallbearers from Congregation Children of Israel: Israel H. Peres, Joseph Newburger, Jacob Goldsmith, Leon Sternberger, Samuel Hirsch, Samuel Slager, Benjamin W. Hirsh, Simon Jacobs, Otto Metzger, Elias Gates, Joseph Rosenfield, Ben Goodman, Saul Isenber, Harry Cohn.

Honorary pallbearers from the Memphis Lodge, B'nai B'rith: Henry J. Lewis, C.H. Forhlich, Seymour L. Lee, Charles J. Haase, George Ellman, Mayer B. Mayers, H. Henochsberg, Leo Goodman,

Philips Cohen.

Honorary pallbearers from the Baron Hirsch Congregation: D.Dermon, K.A. Alperin, Jake Alperin, Morris Lipman, N. Louis, S. Steinberg, M. Kaplan, R. Rosenthal, M. Lerner, J. Bronstein.

Honorary pallbearers from various organizations and commercial interests: Mayor E.H. Crump, Major E.C. LaHache, H.H. Litty, Elias Lowenstein, Henry Loeb, Sam Oppenheimer, Henry C. Loeb, Jacob Marks, Jacob Scharff, Phil A. Halle, Dr. Marcus Haase, Felix Lehman, Judge Heiskell, A.L. Lowenstein along with 40 additional members of the business community.

And the following representatives of the clergymen of the city: Bishop Gailor, The Rev. L. Falbish, the Rev. Edmons Bennett, Dr. A.U. Boone, Dr. W.D. Buckner, Dr. Benj Cox, the Rev. Father Leo, the Rev. J. Craik Morris, Dr. C.H. Williamson, the Rev. J.L. Jacobs, the Rev. Father Scanlon, and the Rev. T.W. Lewis.

Vicksburg continued from page 2

tember 17, 1906, the orthodox congregation of Vicksburg was incorporated in the State of Mississippi under the name: "Ahavas Achim Aashei". The orthodox congregation was never strong enough to hire a full time rabbi nor build a separate synagogue. Services were held in an old Masonic Temple Building. After many years of struggling, the orthodox congregation of Vicksburg ceased to exist in 1948.

Reform Judaism continued to grow, and in 1969, a new Temple was inaugurated. This building was a modern facility with over 7000 square feet under the roof and a sanctuary with 300 seats. Unfortunately, today only 65 persons (no families) belong to Anshe Chesed Congregation. Like so many other small southern communities, the migration to larger cities, drained the membership of the synagogue and the total Jewish community of Vicksburg. ■

Mark Your Calendar

October 30 - November 1
in Montgomery, AL
Southern Jewish
Historical Society
17th Conference

For more information contact Harriet Stern

Brownsville, Tn 1860 -- 1992

by Ann L. Marks

From the earliest days of Haywood County's settling there have been Jewish citizens in Brownsville, TN. At one time in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the community numbered thirty families - some family members were Rothschild, Sternberger, Felsenthal and Tamm.

The thriving group built a house of worship in 1882. This wooden structure provided a home at last of the Torah which Joe Sternberger had brought from Germany in the early 1860's. The Torah, meticulously handwritten on sheepskin, contains the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) and is treasured as a continuity of tradition which is the pulsing heartbeat of worship.

When Joe Sternberger arrived in the early 1860's in Brownsville, he found a receptive group anxious to begin religious services. Jacob and Karoline Felsenthal set aside a room in their home for the Torah and services. Isaac Levi was the first lay reader. In 1867 Congregation Adas Israel began. In 1869, Isaac Levi died and Emil Tamm came to Brownsville from Alsace Lorraine. He studied in Bavaria for the rabbinate and became the new lay reader until his death in 1907. Before the temple was built, the Anker and Rothschild families provided sanctuary for the Torah.

Two more lay readers, Abe Sternberger from 1909-1931 and Morton Felsenthal from 1936-1982, preceded



Congregation Adas Israel

the present lay reader, Fred Silverstein, Jr., who is the great grandson of Emil Tamm.

In the early 1920's, the Temple was changed - from wood to brick veneer. It has undergone several changes in the interior through the years and received many memorial gifts such as stained glass windows, an organ, menorahs, Tablets of stone and a perpetual lamp, erected in reverence and faithfulness that the early county Congregation envisioned. It is named on the National Register of Historic places.

Several wonderful stories abound about the ways the Jewish Congregation and members of other faiths have assisted each other in the worship of

the God they share. When the original Methodist church in Brownsville burned Methodists worshiped in the Temple on Sundays. Through the years, members of other congregations have assisted in the music for the High Holy Days. Each group has profited by the close association, and the community is richer for its heritage of understanding and kinship in the family of God.

The Temple at present houses a baby grand piano belonging to the Wednesday Morning Musicales, and every other year the music club has a series of concerts here on Sunday. Also, when a group from the Church of Christ separated from the mother church, they asked for and received permission to hold services here on Sunday morning.

The flame of Judaism is left now to five families living in this small town. It is a flame that the worst barbarism the world has ever witnessed tried to extinguish in the Holocaust. Yet, it is a flame that has not flickered, but gained strength when it is oppressed. It is a light that is glowing steadily, returned now, like the flame of Marathon, to its birthplace in Israel.

Haywood County has been enriched by the cultural diversity of many different groups which contributed to its early character. But no group has added as much of culture, learning, character and honor as has the Jewish people in Brownsville. The heritage belongs to us all for our destinies have bound us together for more than a century. ■



SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

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