



# SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

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## Robert and Esther Cohen: a story of love and success

*The following article is an edited version of an original tribute written by the late Sam Shankman for Robert Cohen on the occasion of his seventieth birthday.*

The story of Robert and Esther Cohen is similar to that of many other Jews who were born in Russia in the last quarter of the 19th century. Yet it is unique; not only did they achieve financial success but they were marvelously matched, and they and their family enjoyed both physical and spiritual beauty.

The government of Czarist Russia was rotten to the core. It had carried on Imperial wars in Europe and Asia. The sons and the horses of the peasants were dying in the battlefields of Turkey and China while their meager earnings were being taxed beyond their means. The feudal system was in full sway. There were ominous rumblings in the land, and here and there peasants revolted against their landlords and burned their estates.

The rulers of Russia had to appease their people. It was much easier to find a scapegoat on whom to wreak vengeance than to make reforms and give up fat profits.

It was not hard to find the victims. The Jews were a minority; they had no government of their own anywhere in the world and no ambassadors to make protests.

In 1882 when Esther Sarsar and Robert Cohen were just a few years old, secret orders to rob, loot, burn, and murder Jews spread throughout Russia. A few Jews escaped because bribed police officials defended their property and their lives, but eventually about 300 Jewish communities in Russia were wholly or partially destroyed. Thus the victims of the Czar's cruelties became a homeless people. The Cohens and Sarsars were among the many Russian Jews who were fortunate enough to find a home in America.

Robert, son of Libby and Zalman Cohen, was born in the village of Sabashik, Valkinier county, forty miles from Kovna, capital of Lithuania. The family of five brothers and a sister derived a livelihood by operating a watermill for a Polish landlord. There were no public schools in Russia and all the peasants were illiter-

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*Wedding of Robert Cohen and Esther Sarsar.*

Sunday, October 20, 2002, at 2:00 p.m.      Memphis Jewish Community Center

### "Jews North and South in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement"

Speaker: Charles Ferris, Doctoral Student, University of Memphis History Department

JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH - FOUNDED IN 1986  
P.O. BOX 17304, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38187



## President's Message . . . .



Max Notowitz

After having lived in Memphis some 35 years, I was faced with a small problem that I tried to resolve by checking local books, religious sources, and conversations. Then the idea struck me to ask someone who was born and raised in Memphis. I turned to my late mother-in-law, Corinne G. Delugach, to find out if she knew anything about the people in question. As I mentioned, this was after having lived here over 35 years and my mother-in-law still jokingly referred to me as "a newcomer." Not only did she personally know the people in question, but she knew the family background, marriages, children and grandchildren, and location of their early residences, including details not ordinarily found in books or biographies. And when I thanked her for all that information, she seemed to indicate that there was really nothing to it, that she knew many other local families as well.

To me, it was an eye-opener that so much information was available from people who were getting older, and without recording the information for posterity, it would be lost when they died. We don't realize the importance of the Oral and Recorded Histories that the Jewish Historical Society is gathering and assembling so that future generations have a source for research and continuation of those who came before us. This is one of the projects we proudly support thanks to the untiring efforts of May Lynn Mansbach, Sumner Levine, and all the others who have worked on it in the past and continue for the future.

Since this is my first opportunity to communicate with you in my capacity as President, I want to assure you that the board, the committees, and I will do our utmost to continue the tradition of service to the membership. We plan and hope to provide meaningful programs and maintain the high standards set by our predecessors.

And in the spirit of the time, I want to wish all of you and your families L'Shana Tova, a very Happy New Year.

### WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS

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Gertrude Discher	Katy and Clay Levit
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## Selections from Belz Judaica collection on exhibit at Jewish Community Center

An exhibition of Jewish art work and religious ceremonial objects from the collection of Jack and Marilyn Belz is currently on display in the Shainberg Gallery of the Memphis Jewish Community Center. The exhibit is co-sponsored by the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South and the MJCC.

The collection includes paintings; sculptures; illuminated parchments; paper cuts; engravings; Russian lacquer boxes with Judaic themes; gold, silver, and enamel artifacts; and exclusive calligraphy, gathered over many years. According to Leonid Saharovici, curator of the exhibition, this collection is a reflection of the Belzes' love and appreciation of the State of Israel, the Jewish religion, history, heritage, customs and glorious traditions, along with their unquenchable love of art.

The exhibition serves as an inspiration as well as an educational resource for the community. Groups can make an appointment to tour the gallery by calling Mr. Saharovici at 682-0103. The exhibit will end on September 26.

**Coming November 14: Bill Aron**  
**"Images of Jewish Life in the South"**



ate. But the Cohens, along with two other Jewish families supported out of their meager earnings a Melamed (teacher) who taught the children Hebrew, Bible and Talmud.

The great ambition of any Jewish family at that time was to have one of its sons become a rabbi. Mrs. Cohen selected Robert to attain that goal. At the age of six he showed signs of alertness and intelligence, and because he was frail and delicate, she thought he would never be fit for a trade which required physical exertion. In order to facilitate educating the children, the family moved to Yanover, a larger Jewish community with a better school. Robert was a willing and capable student and the Bible, Mishna, and Gemara fascinated him.

Chaim Avraham, oldest of the Cohen sons, married into a family of moderate circumstances and moved to Kovna where one of the best Yeshivas was located. It was decided that Robert would go to live with his brother and study to become a rabbi. Because his parents were so poor, they had no means of dressing him for the journey, so his mother took off her coat and fitted it on him and put her shoes on his feet. In that way she sent him with her blessing to Kovna. Soon afterward, her body weakened by poverty, hard labor, and fear, she passed away.

When Libby died, Zalman was a lost man. There were still small children in the home who needed a woman's care. The household was neglected and disorganized. It was not proper for a religious Jew to remain unmarried. After a few months Zalman remarried, and the home was reestablished, but for Robert it no longer held its charm and meaning.



*Isadore Sarsar and daughters: Front: Lena, Isadore, Rae; Back: Rose, Sophie, Nina, Esther.*

At fourteen Robert was still frail of stature but his mind was developing rapidly. He was filled with compassion for his fellow Jews and longed for a better world. His brother consulted the Rabbi who said, "A noble, pious Jew is much better than a rabbi." Thus Robert left the Yeshiva and began to shift for himself. He did all kinds of odd jobs. He was a bottle washer, a waiter, and a hod carrier until finally he learned the trade of brick masonry, which he followed until he was nineteen.

As he approached military age, the prospect of spending four years in the Russian army with a compen-

sation of fifteen cents per month was not very inviting. The stream of emigration from Eastern Europe, which had begun in 1882, was swelling rapidly. Robert had a brother in New York and he decided to make the journey to America.

He landed in New York on Christmas Day, 1893, and began immediately to hunt for a job. The brick

masons were well organized and Robert found it impossible to pay the high fee and meet other requirements for admission to the union. Once again he turned to odd jobs in the building industry. Many times he pretended to be an experienced painter. He dabbed his hat and overalls with paint as a mark of craftsmanship, but each time he was discovered and fired.

His opportunity finally came when there were a few old

tall buildings to be painted. The job was a dangerous one high above the streets of New York, but his inexperience could not be readily observed. His partner on the scaffold was a good-natured fellow, and Robert managed to gain his sympathy and pledge not to reveal that the quantity and quality of his work were lacking. The work lasted several months, during which Robert learned the trade fairly well. By hard labor and intelligent planning he managed to save a few hundred dollars—his first in the Land of Opportunity.

Painting was a profitable trade,

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but the work season was short. Most of the painters idled away their time between work periods but inactivity did not appeal to Robert. He peddled various goods until he met a man from Greenwood, Mississippi who gave him ideas of venturing south. He and his new friend, a Mr. Blumenthal, took a boat from New York to Savannah, where they formed a sort of peddler partnership in the fall and winter, returning to New York for the painting season. This friendly partnership was to last for many years.

In the summer of 1895 Cohen and Blumenthal came to Memphis and opened a second-hand store on Beale Street. They were successful from the start, but this business was not to Cohen's liking. However, the city of Memphis was important to Robert for another reason. During his stay in 1895-1896, he was befriended by the Sarsar family. In their home he met their beautiful daughter Esther. Memphis became an enchanted place, and when he had to leave, it was with the hope of returning with means enough to ask for her hand in marriage.

Esther Sarsar was born in the village Baslov, near Moscow, in 1882, after the wave of massacres and oppressive laws of restricted settlement for Jews were introduced. When Esther was two years old, the Sarsar family moved to Moscow, but even there Jews were constantly harassed and humiliated. The Sarsars managed to exist, but their great hope was to escape Russia. Esther's father was in the commission business in partnership with a man named Levinson. In 1890, with a little money saved, the father, Esther, her sister Rose, and Levinson embarked for America.

Although Esther was only ten, she was suspicious of Levinson and won-

dered why her father let him hold all the money and why he traveled in second class while they were in steerage. At any rate, when the ship arrived in New York, Levinson, a second class passenger with money in his pocket, was permitted to land without interrogation or physical examination, and that was the last the Sarsars ever saw or heard of him.

Their money stolen, the family faced a hard and bitter struggle. Friendless, homeless, penniless, and jobless, the father went around the East Side peddling matches. Rose managed to find a job in a sweatshop as a finisher and even ten-year-old Esther was employed by a shirt factory for about two cents per hour.

When Esther was three years old, she had fallen off a porch and sustained an injury which caused her to become cross-eyed. Had she had the benefit of proper medical care, her trouble could have been adjusted easily, but as this was not the case, she was growing up with impaired double vision. In the shirt factory, while cutting threads, she saw double and cut a large hole in an expensive silk shirt. The incident cost her her job; however, she refused to leave without her thimble. Unable to find a job for her, the father sent her to school and again the crossed eyes caused her grief. The children teased and threw rocks at her, making life one long nightmare.

In 1891 the mother and five other children arrived in New York, and the family of nine lived in one room in a crowded tenement house. Life was a miserable existence to them.

The school year of 1891-1892 was the only one that Esther attended. It would have been a pleasant year, for she liked America and her school. However, she was conscious of her physical disability and the constant teasing, skirt-pulling, and rock-throw-

ing and remarks like "cross-eyed greenhorn" marred her happiness. In her child-mind, she wondered why they should torment her. Once she was sure she had discovered the reason. "It is my white stockings they do not like," she told her mother. "Everybody wears black stockings while I wear white."

A change of stockings was a big problem for the father who earned his living peddling matches. Esther decided to pray and her prayer was answered. A neighbor across the hall was ill. Esther volunteered to wash dishes, clean the house and attend the sick woman in bed. The woman gave Esther fifteen cents which was exactly the price of black stockings.

When Esther discovered that a change in the color of her stockings did not alter the situation, she became convinced that it was the defect in her eyes that caused her trouble. Esther pleaded with God to straighten them.

One day as she stood on the sidewalk, a doctor happened to be passing by. He noticed her crossed eyes and offered to straighten them free of charge.

Esther ran to her mother with the good news, but her mother was afraid the doctor would make Esther blind. She also informed Esther that they would be leaving for Memphis the next day. The Jewish Immigrant Aid Society had offered to send the family to Memphis and they looked forward to a renewed life.

The South Memphis Cotton Mill was located in Fort Pickering on the banks of the Mississippi River. There were two-room shacks nearby built especially for the workers, and one of them became the home of the Sarsars. The father became a foreman at \$7 per week. The five older children earned wages of three cents an hour for the oldest to a penny an



hour for the youngest. Many times the children fell asleep at their work and once, Jake, the youngest, dozed off near a belt and was pulled up to the ceiling, his skull crushed and his life barely saved.

Three years later Lena was born and the mother soon afterward became an invalid. Esther, who was then fifteen, quit her job at the factory and assumed the role of housekeeper. As her mother grew steadily worse, she became like a foster mother to her younger brother and especially to little Lena. When Esther married, she took the child with her and raised her to womanhood. Lena later married Julius Lewis.

In 1895 Jake and Esther were walking on Second Street between Union and Monroe. A man riding on a bicycle stopped and offered to fix her eyes. He told her to bring her mother with her, but Esther feared that she would not allow her to have the operation so she said, "My mother is ill. Can you do it now?" The operation was performed, and Mrs. Klaus, an old friend of the family, took Esther home to break the news to her mother. The operation was very painful and she was blindfolded for weeks, but when the bandages were removed, she looked straight forward upon a beautiful and promising world.

Robert spent three years in Greenwood, Mississippi. He had saved several thousand dollars. He felt that he could now ask Esther, whom he had first met while she was on her hands and knees scrubbing floors, to marry him. He remembered that she had looked up at him and smiled at his witty remarks. Beauty and goodness were in her eyes which attracted him and which he had never

forgotten.

They were married February 17, 1901. Soon after the wedding, Robert and his father-in-law formed a partnership in the mercantile business. Cohen was conservative while Sarsar was daring. Cohen was twenty-seven while Sarsar was past middle age. Robert assented to his father-in-law's



Robert and Esther Cohen on their 40th anniversary.

way of business and at the end of one year they were penniless.


Once again Robert had to climb from the very bottom but this time he had Esther by his side. For twenty years the two worked hand-in-hand nearly every day of the week. Their four children all were born in the back of the store. Esther had many duties to perform as mother, housekeeper, and storekeeper.

It was hard work but Robert's good nature and sense of humor made life pleasant. One night they came home from the store and the rain was pouring through the roof onto their table. Robert opened an umbrella and

told Esther it would be fun for two to eat under one umbrella.

After many years of being confined to the store seven days a week, Memphis passed a Sunday closing ordinance. Robert felt lost on his first free Sunday so he went to a B'nai B'rith meeting. Thus began his dedication to community, charity, and religious work. He served as president of B'nai B'rith, president of Baron Hirsch Synagogue several times, and leader of the Memphis Zionist District.

Esther, like her husband, gave many years of service to her community and her people. She was the first Jewish woman in Memphis to serve as matron of Eastern Star. She was president of Hadassah. In 1920 she was elected president of the Jewish Ladies Aid Society and was reelected ten times to that office. In addition, she raised many thousands of dollars for a number of philanthropic organizations, including the Red Cross.

The early struggles with poverty and oppression did not harden the Cohens, but rather, created in them a desire to alleviate the suffering of others. The maxim of Judaism, "Be ye a blessing" was a daily rule with them. 

*The four Cohen children followed in their parents' footsteps. Bertha married Dr. Jacob Plesofsky. They lived in Memphis and are the late parents of Ina Plesofsky Eiseman and Dr. Charles Plesofsky. The other children were LaVerne (Garlove) who moved to Louisville, Zelda (Bierner) who moved to Dallas, and Fred, who contracted hepatitis in India during his WWII military service and died two years after returning to Memphis. In 1948, immediately following the unveiling of her son Fred's stone, Esther Cohen lay down and quietly passed away. Her husband Robert died just four months later after suffering a heart attack.*



# Old cash register holds many treasured memories for three generations of Bernard Danzig's family

A cash register has been in Bernard Danzig's family for as long as he can remember. When he was growing up in Rolling Fork, Mississippi, it was the source of an assortment of childhood treasures. Today it sits in a prominent place in his living room and has become a source of treasured memories.

The cash register was in his father's store in Rolling Fork and probably originally belonged to his uncle, who had sold the store to Danzig's father. The register survived the Mississippi Delta flood of 1927 and a fire in the store in the late 1950's.

Danzig remembers playing with the cash register as a child. The metal register is connected to a wooden cabinet with four drawers, and each time he looked in the drawers, he would find something different: marbles, pencils, chalk, screws, and odd hardware items. The most fun was when he was allowed to ring up a sale, pushing a button to select a drawer, pushing the buttons for the amount of the sale, and turning the crank to open the drawer.

Like many other Jewish merchants in the South, the Danzigs began their business as a dry goods store. In the mid-fifties, they switched from dry goods to furniture. Danzig's father also sometimes purchased fur animal skins such as raccoon, mink, and rabbit from local hunters and then resold them.

Saturday was always the busiest day in a small Southern town, and the store sometimes stayed open until midnight to accommodate shoppers. In the back of the store was a partitioned space with a small grill, and on Saturdays they would cook steak and smothered onions for supper. Bernard Danzig still recalls the delicious aroma, which permeated the entire store.

Bernard's father, Edwin Danzig, came to America from Russia at the age of fourteen. He first lived in Midnight, Mississippi, and later moved to Rolling Fork. Bernard recalls that his father would ride the train to another community with his chickens to have them koshered. For many years Edwin served as

the Shammash of the Rolling Fork Temple, seeing that it was clean and in good repair and preparing it for services by placing prayer books in each seat, turning on the heat or air, and even sweeping up if needed.

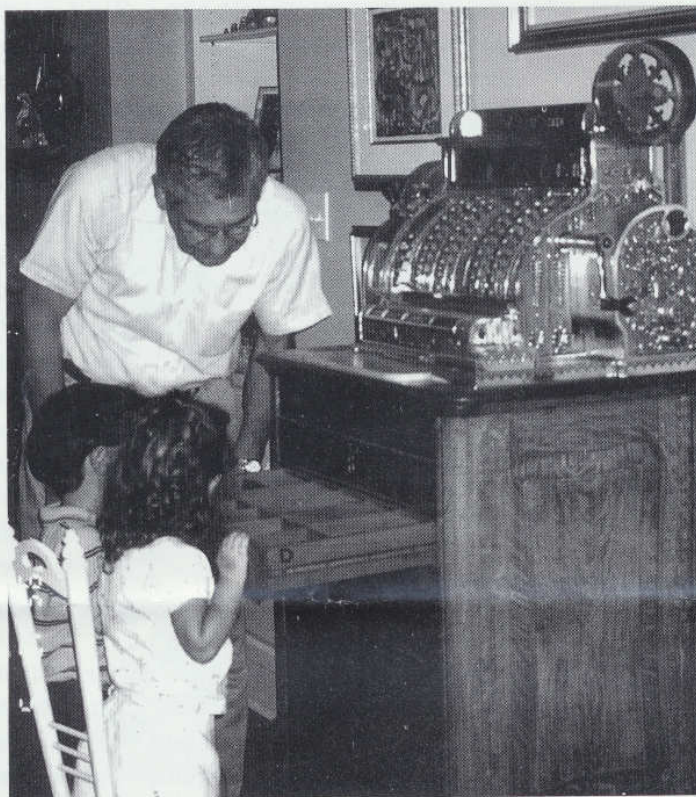
The Temple in Rolling Fork served about 25 to 35 members from three counties. It began in the back of a Presbyterian church. Then someone donated land, and a building campaign provided money for a new brick structure with a circular gravel driveway. Although there was no permanent rabbi, it was written into the contract of the rabbi in nearby Greenville that he would go to the Rolling Fork Temple every other Sunday. Over the years, the Temple presidency was held by some member of almost every family who belonged.

Bernard also remembers his high school, which was very small. His senior class had about 16 students. He was on the

school football team, which had three Jewish players. During his junior and senior years, the coach would get the dates of Jewish holidays in advance, so no games would be scheduled on those days, as the team would suffer if three players were all out at one time.

Edwin Danzig ran the store in Rolling Fork until it was closed in about 1995. A few years prior to closing, the old cash register quit working and was replaced by a small electric one. The old register remained, however, in its regular place. After the store closed, the register was brought to Memphis, and Bernard took it to a retired National Cash Register repairman who said he could repair the broken mechanism and remove the layers of silver paint that had been sprayed on the metal register and the wooden cabinet. When Bernard saw the restored register, he could not believe his eyes. It was in working order, the metal parts were shiny brass, and the refinished cabinet was a beautiful solid oak.

*Continued on next page*



*Bernard Danzig and his grandchildren, Jacob and Sarah Gubin, with the family cash register.*





*The Danzig furniture store in Rolling Fork, Mississippi.*

Bernard's children had played with the cash register when it was still in the store, and now the family cash register is a favorite of a new generation of children. Bernard keeps the cabinet drawers stocked with small toys, balls, and videos so when his grandchildren come to visit, they can discover their own treasures. ☆

## **"The Many Souths of Southern Jewry" theme for SJHS meeting in Shreveport**

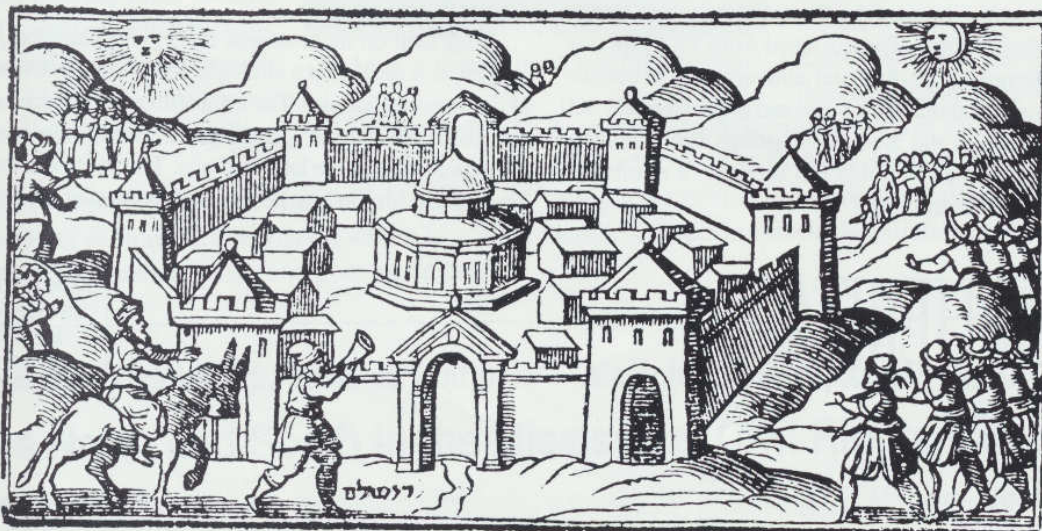
The 27th Annual Conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society (SJHS) will be in Shreveport, Louisiana, October 25-27, 2002. An exciting weekend has been planned to both educate and entertain.

This convention, which is being sponsored jointly by the Jewish Historical Society of Shreveport and the Texas Jewish Historical Society, caps a month-long celebration of Shreveport/Bossier City Jewish History month. Among the planned activities is a city tour, with many points of interest including the Meadows Museum which features an exhibit from the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience; the old Agudath Achim Synagogue with its Art Deco Architecture; the old B'nai Zion Temple (1914) with its Lafarge stained glass windows; LSU-Shreveport Archives and the Bossier Parish Historical Society exhibit on Jewish Pioneers of Northwestern Louisiana.

A number of outstanding speakers will be on the program, including Brandeis University Professor Dr. Jonathan D. Sarna; photographer Bill Aron; prominent historian Paul M. Gaston; and Louis D. Rubin, Jr., who has been a critic, novelist, journalist, teacher, editor and publisher.

For additional information on this meeting, please contact Sumner Levine, 682-5935.

## **Rosh Hashana Greetings to our Members and Friends**



May there be peace within thy walls, prosperity within thy palaces.  
Psalms 122:7



# JHS members visit Jewish sites in historic Hot Springs

This year's excursion by the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South—a trip to Hot Springs, Arkansas—was a most memorable and delightful weekend, according to the organizers and participants.

The trip, which took place May 26-27, lived up to every expectation. Hot Springs is a treasure trove of valuable historical sites and points of interest from a Jewish perspective.

Participants were met at the outskirts of town by Susan Siegel, their tour guide for the weekend. She not only told many stories about the old homes and sites of Hot Springs but also stayed with the group the entire trip to make sure everything went smoothly.

The group drove past bath house row and saw the Jewish businesses both past and present, including bath houses and auction stores. They also saw the facade of the Knickerbocker Hotel, formerly a Kosher hotel.

The first stop was Spring Street Inn Bed and Breakfast, which is now on the National Historic Register. Filled with beautiful antiques, it originally was the 19th century home of the Meyer family, one of the oldest Jewish families in Hot Springs.

The group also visited Congregation House of Israel, where they had lunch arranged by the members of the congregation. The Memphians met with several members of the congregation, including old friends, and were treated to a history of the Temple by long-time residents Susie and Joe Rosensweig.

The Temple dates back to 1875 and its members and rabbis have been an integral part of the Hot Springs community. For over 49 years there have been Sabbath services almost without interruption. The congregation treasures the original hand-written constitution and by-laws of the Temple. They also have a letter from President Harry S. Truman dated April 17, 1950, congratulating the Temple on its diamond anniversary. The congregation now consists of about 75 families and approximately 300 Jewish residents are in the area. Hot Springs has become a haven for retired couples, and this has brought a number of Jewish families to the community.

The trip also included a visit to the Burgauer House, which was the home of one of the early Jewish families of the city. It has been purchased by a young engineer who completely remodeled the house and has turned it into a showplace perched on a large landscaped lot atop a hill.

Levi Towers, a high-rise for the elderly similar to the Memphis Plough Towers, was another stop on the tour. The group toured the ground floor and visited an apartment where they met enthusiastic residents.

At the Leo Levi Hospital the group was met by its executive director, Patrick McCabe, who took them through the corridor containing portraits of distinguished past leaders, board members, and donors. Several Memphians were among those honored with portraits. McCabe informed the group that Levi is no longer a center for arthritis patients, but is now a modern hospital that provides the community with psychiatric counseling for seniors, adults and children. Other services, such as hospice and osteoporosis testing and treatment, are also offered.

The tour included seeing Oaklawn Race Track and Lake Hamilton. A stop was made at a wedding chapel which was the childhood home of Helen Eichenbaum, whose daughter, JHS past president Peggy Jalenak, remembers playing there as a child. The sightseers also went to Beth Jacob Synagogue, formerly the Orthodox congregation, now used by Levi Towers for a hands-on therapeutic and community center.

The group learned that Hot Springs is home to the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival (HSDFF), similar to the annual Sundance Film Festival. Under the leadership of Jerry Tanenbaum, the HSDFF has acquired one of the major documentary film collections in the country, including a large selection of films with Jewish related themes.

Last stop on the tour was the Jewish cemetery. Small but elegant, it is nestled at a strategic corner not far from the center of commercial activity. The tombstones are a varied offering of size and shape, identifying the generations of the founding Hot Springs Jews and the later arrivals. The visit concluded with a luncheon at Mollie's, a kosher-style mainstay for many years.



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