



SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

VOL. 19, NO. 2

FALL 2006

History in the Making: Hurricane Katrina . . . The Memphis Jewish Community Responds

History is not always limited to events that occurred in the distant past. Sometimes an event is of such monumental proportions that it is instantly recognized as history in the making. This was true of the disaster in August, 2005, when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and many other coastal communities situated on the Gulf of Mexico.

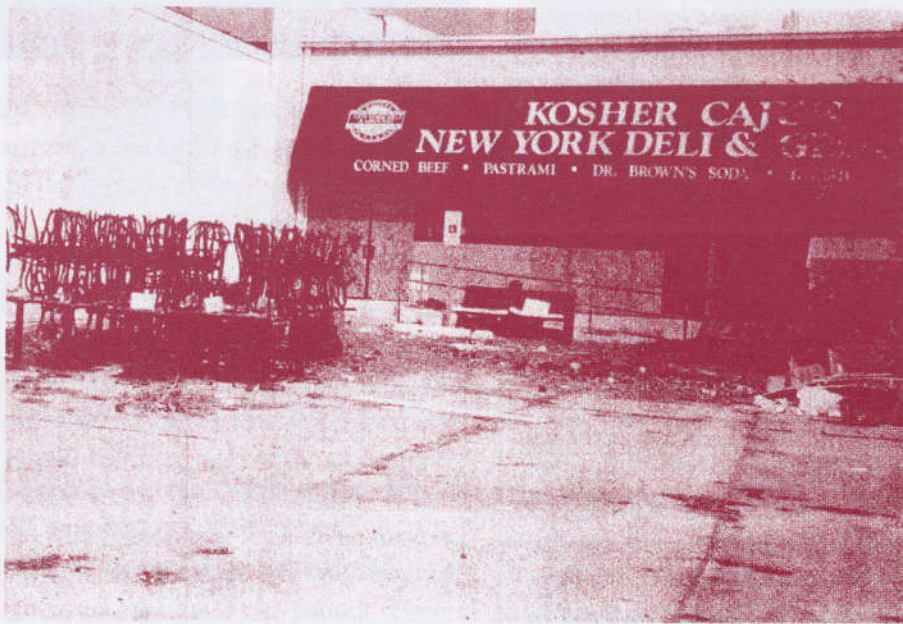
Hundreds of people who evacuated New Orleans came to Memphis, including a number of Jewish families. Some have returned to the city, some have found other places to live, and a few have now made Memphis their new home.

The Memphis Jewish community responded quickly to the needs of the evacuees, with both short term and long term assistance. Jewish Family Service assumed the role of coordinating the efforts of Memphis synagogues, Jewish institutions, and individuals who provided aid not only to Jews but to non-Jews as well. Jewish Family Service furnished services to any person who came to the agency. The

Jewish community donated huge amounts of clothing, toys, and other items—more than could be stored at JFS, so additional storage places had to be found. JFS also distributed money for groceries and clothing in the form of gift cards.

Once the evacuees realized there would be no immediate return to New Orleans,

other needs besides food, clothing, and shelter had to be met. Healthcare professionals offered pro-bono medical, dental, and optometry services. One woman, who was pregnant and ready to deliver, came to the Jewish Community Center. The JCC staff obtained a doctor for her, and she gave birth to her baby in

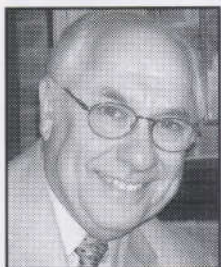


The Kosher Cajun New York Deli & Grocery in Metairie, Louisiana, suffered extensive hurricane damage. Owner Joel Brown and family came to Memphis but have returned to Metairie and reopened the business.

Memphis. The JCC also did some job placement. Short-term leases and reduced rents were offered by Jewish and non-Jewish property managers, and individuals provided vacant homes for use by single and multiple families. Both Plough Towers and the Memphis Jewish Home took in elderly evacuees.

Please see KATRINA, Page 6

President's Message



Gilbert Halpern

As the new president of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South, I feel quite fortunate, and a little intimidated, to be preceded by such a strong line of leaders. Although they have set the bar high, they have also set in motion an organization with great momentum. The ongoing committees and programs could probably run on their own, but it's not my wish to be just a caretaker;

instead, I plan to encourage our board and committees to reach new heights.

One of our initiatives will be to build our membership with an outreach effort to all of the area congregations.

Our programs for 2006-2007 are timely, informative, exciting, and educational. Look them over on our web site: www.jhsmem.org. You will not want to miss a single one.

In keeping with our mission to research and preserve the history of the Jews of our area, the cemetery committee will soon have pictures of the gravestones available for viewing on the internet.

Our other committees, which include Archives, Membership, Genealogy, Selma Lewis Scholars, Publicity, Community, Travel, Oral Histories, and more, will soon be announcing their plans for the coming year. Check out our web site for more information.

I look forward to working with you for a most productive year.

Gilbert Halpern

From the Archives*

Despite the short memory of most Americans, there are those who recall the event [Superflood of 1937]. Many remember the Mississippi River growing into a small sea over three miles wide, swallowing Mud Island, and creeping into the low-lying areas of the city. They still remember the thousands of refugees, the sickness, and the deaths. They are the ones who can appreciate how charitable Memphians can be, and how cruel. In an interview, a former resident of the Pinch neighborhood in North Memphis, Norris Blackburn, told a *Commercial Appeal* reporter that he remembered when there were sixty thousand cotton bales lining the Pinch's streets east of the river, the campus of Southwestern at Memphis, and at North Parkway and University across from Overton Park. The reporter asked: "Why?" Blackburn responded: "To keep it dry! That was 1937. Remember there was the big flood in '37."

**(From the archives of the Memphis/Shelby County Library)*

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**Of Blessed Memory*

NEWSLETTER EDITOR: Marcia Levy

Schedule of Programs 2006-2007

Sunday, November 5, 2006, 2:00 pm, MJCC
Dr. Shmuel Shepkaru, University of Oklahoma:
"Antisemitism: Medieval & Modern"

Sunday, November 19, 2006, 2:00 pm, MJCC
Marcie Cohen: "Jewish Cooking"

Sunday, January 21, 2007 2:00 pm,
Peabody Place Museum: Jack Belz

Monday, February 5, 2007, 7:30 pm, MJCC
David Moss, preeminent Jewish artist:
Ketubah Exhibit and lecture on history of the Ketubah

Sunday, February 25, 2007, 2:00 pm, MJCC
Elliot Chodoff, David Bornblum visiting scholar:
"Israel, the Middle East, and Terrorism"

Date To Be Announced, March/April, 2007
University of Memphis
Dr. Holly Shulman: "Mississippi Jewish Women"

Sunday, May 20, 2007, 2:00 pm, MJCC
Judy Ringel: "Planting Jewish Roots in Southern Soil:
Tales from the Archives of Temple Israel"

Leaving New Orleans by Ann Rabinovitz

So what do you think when you see on television that a category five hurricane is barreling up the gulf toward your city, and you have only evacuated one other time in forty-five years of living in New Orleans? Is this another false alarm? We had lived in Lakeview for forty-five years and in all that time our street may have flooded, but never our house. And in the worst of winds, we had only lost a few shingles off our roof, which was probably fifty years old.

But this time, things did not look good. We decided to evacuate, thinking we would be gone only a few days, three at the most. I called my neighbor as I had a feeling we were the only ones still left on our block.

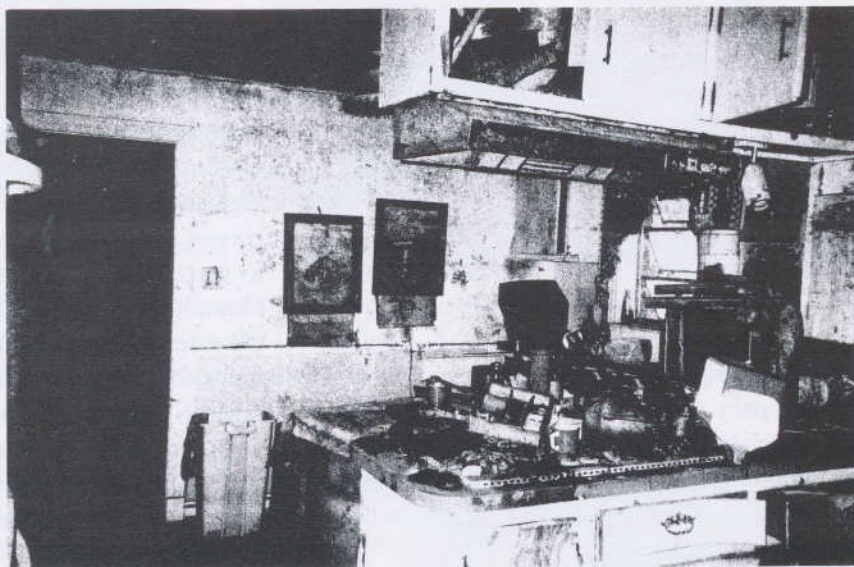
She has macular degeneration and would have had difficulty making a long drive on her own, so she came with us. My husband Sam made sandwiches, gathered up drinks, packed a few clothes, and took our second car down three blocks where the ground was a little higher. We had one room upstairs, and after looking around, I decided to take up a small Oriental rug and some pictures that belonged to an artist friend. Then I grabbed our medicines. We were baby sitting my daughter's cat, who was also on medicine, found his traveling bag, and stuffed him into it. We also grabbed passports and money, then took off.

We knew we would have a place to stay at the Henry S. Jacobs camp in Utica, Mississippi. What would normally have been a three hour drive took seven and a half hours; we finally arrived there and got the last two cabins. Monday morning, the storm appeared to be headed for Jackson, and though the news claimed that New Orleans had missed the bullet, we decided to head

further north to Memphis where our married daughter lived, as we knew there was room for all of us at her home.

I do not remember when we first saw on TV that the levees around the canals had broken through, but we still were not too concerned as we lived by the Orleans canal,

which did not break, were more than a mile from the 17th Street canal, and nowhere near the London canal. How much water could there be? By Tuesday or Wednesday we were deeply concerned and wondering why there were no pictures of our area on television. Finally someone sent us pictures on the internet and we found our house, which looked totally submerged except for



The Rabinovitz kitchen: mold-covered walls, ruined cabinets and appliances

the roof. How could that be? Since it was an aerial picture looking straight down, we tried to convince ourselves that we really weren't seeing eight feet of water in our house.

Of course the rest is history. Our area stayed flooded for three weeks. The first time we were able to return, near the end of September, my husband, son-in-law, a friend, and I borrowed an Explorer van, left Memphis at 11:00 pm, and drove all night to New Orleans. We were met by total destruction inside our still wet and mucked up house. Seeing not just the destruction of our house, but of the whole area where we had spent the last forty-five years of our lives, was most depressing to say the least. It was way beyond our imagination of what we had expected. Despite all the pictures and news that we had seen, nothing had really prepared us for our first glimpse of that part of the city that we were in. Downed trees and debris were everywhere, the waters had killed

The Marvelous Jews of Marvell

By Marcia Levy

The town of Marvell, Arkansas, is about 65 miles southwest of Memphis, as the crow flies. Marvell was founded when Marvell M. Carruth and his wife Rachel sold fifty lots of land to the Arkansas Central Railroad in the latter part of the nineteenth century. A train depot was soon established, and in 1873 Marvell became an unincorporated town. Three years later, on October 3, 1876, Marvell met the re-

quirements to become an incorporated town, and in 1877 the Arkansas Midland Railway Company began providing freight and passenger service from Clarendon to Brinkley and on to Helena, making a stop in Marvell along the way. Rail transportation helped the town's economy flourish—by the early 1900s there were fifteen different merchants in Marvell. One of the stores that stayed in business the longest was A. Hirsch & Co., which did a large mercantile business.

As a result of attrition and intermarriage, there is little Jewish presence in Marvell today, but a generation ago, there were five Jewish families who were an integral part of the community. As in many other small towns throughout the South, Jews had to walk a fine line between maintaining their religious identity and fitting in with their neighbors; however, several individuals who grew up in Marvell during the 1930s and 1940s said they experienced little or no prejudice and felt they were well accepted by the community as a whole. Marvell was a very social community, and Jews and Christians often got together for card games and progressive dinners.

The original Marvell Jewish families were the Bernsteins, Davidsons, Hirsches, Silversteins, and Weisbergers. Each of these families owned a store, and the Davidsons and Hirsches also owned land, operated farms, and were involved in the cotton business. As in other rural communities, Saturday was the busiest shopping day, and doing business on Shabbat was regarded as essential for financial survival—on Saturdays,

even the wives helped in the stores. Although they usually had household help, these women also cooked many of the family meals and prepared lunch for their husbands who came home from the store at noontime each day to eat. Like their Christian friends, Jewish families generally had a large mid-day Sunday dinner, and the fried chicken that graced the table sometimes came from a coop in the back yard.

Marvell Jews belonged to Temple Beth El in nearby Helena, where the children attended Sunday School and were confirmed. Helena also served as a source of entertainment and extracurricular activities. For many years, Marvell had no movie theater—the nearest one being in Helena. Children went to Helena for dancing classes, and a Helena piano teacher was enlisted to teach Marvell students. For major shopping Memphis was the destination, and although there were several doctors in Marvell, many families

came to Memphis for medical attention.

Edith Davidson Reiter, born in 1917 and now living in Memphis, recalls the years she spent growing up in Marvell, as well as the early years of her marriage there. While her recollections may not necessarily represent the experiences of every

Marvell Jew, they do reflect a slice of Jewish life in a small southern town during an idyllic time, and are a reminder of the reality that this way of life has faded and now belongs to the past.

Edith's grandparents, Samuel Joseph

Davidson and Fanny Bernstein Davidson both came from Minsk, Russia, some time in the late 1800s. When Samuel first entered the United States, he came through the Carolinas to Clarendon, Arkansas. He and Fanny married, and after their store in Clarendon burned, they moved to Marvell, where they began buying land.

Edith's father, Abe J. Davidson, was one of six children. Although one of his brothers became a doctor and another



A. Hirsch & Co. about 1914



Davidson's Department Store & Cotton Buyers

Continued on next page

studied law, Abe quit school after the eighth grade to play on baseball teams throughout the South. Later he returned to Marvell and was engaged to be married, but while visiting one day in Clarendon, he spotted Sally Rankin—who, according to Edith, he thought was “mighty cute”—walking down the street.

Abe found a mutual friend to introduce him to Sally, and despite objections from both their families because of their religious differences, he broke his prior engagement and they were married.

Abe's mother

Fanny immediately gave his Christian bride a Jewish name, Sarah, and she was known by that name for the rest of her life. Sarah's father, Jesse Rankin, told his daughter she was making a big mistake marrying Abe. When she and Abe celebrated their 65th anniversary, Sarah recalled his words, and commented, “I wish my father could see my mistake now.” At the age of 74, unbeknownst to her family, Sarah began taking instruction for conversion to Judaism. She invited them to the ceremony at the Temple in Helena. Afterwards, she asked Abe if he was proud of her for converting. He replied, “I don't know why you thought you had to do that—you've always been Jewish to me.”

It was Sarah—affectionately dubbed “Sadie” by her family—who was the primary influence in maintaining a Jewish home. According to Edith, “She would never eat a bite on Yom Kippur, even though it always made her sick, and no ham or bacon was served in our house.”

When Edith's senior high banquet fell during Pesach, Sadie made her take chicken and hard-boiled eggs for her meal. “Of course,” confessed Edith, “I traded it as soon as I got there for the ham.”

Edith and her younger sister Dorothy were permitted to go out with boys who were not Jewish as long as they didn't date any one boy exclusively. “What choice did we have,” she said, “in a town with a population of 897? As teenagers, we

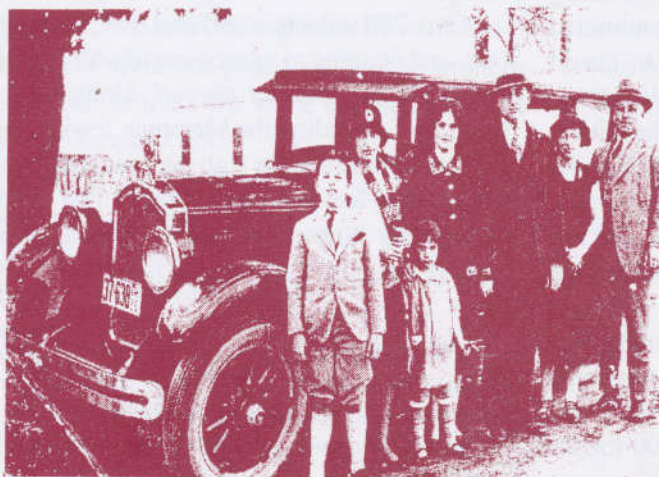
had nothing to do on the weekends but dance. There were dances at the American Legion Hut, dances in the towns all around Marvell, and Junior Congregation dances at the Temple in Memphis. Our other weekend activity was going to the High School football games, which, of course, were always on Friday nights.”

After Edith married Murray Reiter, they lived briefly in his native Brooklyn, New York. When Edith proposed the possibility of moving back to Marvell, Murray jumped at the chance. “Murray loved the South and Marvell. We later moved to Memphis when our children were little, but after they grew up, he even suggested that we move back there.” Edith vetoed this idea, but her parents, Abe and Sarah Davidson remained in Marvell throughout their lives. After Abe's death, his family donated land for a park in his memory. Davidson Park was opened on October 27, 1984, and for the first time in Marvell's history the stores closed on Saturday for the gala dedication. In addition, the American Legion Hut was renamed the Davidson Civic Center in honor of Abe, who

had founded the local American Legion Post and served as Arkansas State Commander.

Edith's cousin, Joe Davidson, took over Davidson's

Department Store from his Uncle Abe, and he and his wife Betty bought the home originally built by his uncle, Saul Davidson. Joe, who served on the city council and the school board, is now deceased, but his widow, Betty, still lives in that home in Marvell. Several members of the Hirsch family still reside in Marvell as well. The building which had housed Davidson's store was donated to the city to be used for a library, but this plan never came to fruition—the building was torn down, and the site is



Max, Amelia, Gene, Irene, Edmund, Frieda, & Ludwig Hirsch, 1925



Edith Davidson weds Murray Reiter, September 3, 1939

now used for a farmer's market.

The current population of Marvell is listed as 1395; however, after railroad service was discontinued in 1952, industrial and economic growth gradually declined. Nevertheless, the residents of Marvell, both past and present, still take pride in their small town roots, and the Jews of Marvell can take pride in the fact that they left an indelible mark on the town and its history. ☆

Katrina struck just as a new school year was getting underway. Memphis Jewish schools opened their classrooms with no hesitation. Margolin Hebrew Academy/Feinstone Yeshiva of the South took in twenty-seven students, increasing the school's population by ten percent. Students were admitted with no questions asked. Yeshiva University sent Dr. David Pelcovitz, a world renowned expert on post-traumatic stress, to offer guidance to students, parents, and faculty of the school.

Other Jewish day schools took in students as well. Several enrolled briefly in the Bornblum Solomon Schechter School, two children enrolled in the Temple Israel pre-school, and one in the Temple religious school. Several children attended the JCC pre-school.

The generosity of the Memphis Jewish community was overwhelming. Memphis Jewish Federation had a campaign for hurricane relief that raised over \$53,000. Temple Israel partnered with two churches and raised over \$70,000 for the

Red Cross, in addition to \$10,000 from the Women of Reform Judaism-Sisterhood, earmarked for hurricane relief. Schechter School students donated their Tzedakah money for a month to hurricane relief. Baron Hirsch Synagogue hosted a community dinner for the Jewish families who had sought refuge in Memphis.

Over 200 volunteers offered time, housing, transportation, food, and clothing to approximately 60 Jewish families. In the true spirit of *gemilut chesed*, along with the tradition of Southern hospitality, the Memphis Jewish community opened its arms to embrace the Katrina evacuees, making every effort to help them feel welcome, whether this city would be simply a temporary home or whether it would become a permanent home in which to begin a new life. ☆

This article is based upon information furnished by Bernard Danzig and Linda Schlesinger. It documents only a few of the numerous acts of kindness performed by the Memphis Jewish community in response to Hurricane Katrina.

In Memoriam . . . Dr. Thomas Neuton Stern

Well-known Memphis cardiologist Dr. Thomas Neuton Stern, who was deeply involved in his synagogue and the Jewish and general community of Memphis, died Saturday, September 9, 2006, at Baptist Memorial Hospital. Dr. Stern, who was 80 years old, was the husband of Harriet Stern. Dr. Stern was a past president of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South, and he and his wife, also a past president, were among the founding members of the society.

The son of the South's first cardiologist, the late Dr. Neuton Stern, Dr. Thomas Stern joined his father in 1952 to help run The Cardiology Group of Memphis, which was later changed to the Stern Cardiovascular Center, PA. A member and former member of the Board of Trustees of Temple Israel, Dr. Tom Stern was a former chairman of the Memphis Chapter of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and was a member of the National Executive Council of the AJC.

Dr. Stern was a former clinical professor of Medicine and Cardiology at the University of Tennessee, where he was awarded a plaque for distinguished teaching, and was a member of the Memphis-Shelby County Medical Society, Tennessee Medical Association, American Medical Association, Fellow of American College of Physicians, American College of Cardiology, and Council on Clinical Cardiology of the American Heart Association. Dr. Stern was a past president of the Memphis Heart Association, past secretary of the Tennessee Heart Association, past chairman of the professional Education Committee of the Southern Regional Heart Committee. He also served as chief of cardiology training at Baptist Memorial Hospital and received the Tennessee State Medical Association Distinguished Service Award.

Dr. Stern was also a former board member of the Memphis Orchestral Society; former board member and vice president of the Memphis Arts Council; former board member and vice president of Opera Memphis; former commissioner and president of the Board of Education, Memphis City Schools; past director of the Council of Great City Schools; board member and chairman of the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis; and board member and past president of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art.

He attended Harvard College and the University of Tennessee College of Medicine and obtained his medical degree at Washington University Medical School in St. Louis. He was a graduate of Central High School and was an Army captain during the Korean War.

A Fellow of the American Heart Association, he practiced clinical cardiology and took a special interest in lipid management and congestive heart failure research. In honor of his 80th birthday earlier this year, the Stern Cardiovascular Center endowed the Dr. Thomas N. Stern Pre-Med Scholarship at the University of Memphis. Also, the Baptist Memorial Health Care Foundation created the Thomas N. Stern, M.D. Award for Excellence in Cardiovascular Medicine. A plaque and medal were presented to Dr. Stern, former chairman of the Department of Medicine at Baptist Hospital, to commemorate the award.

Born in Memphis on April 22, 1926, Dr. Stern was the son of the late Beatrice and Dr. Neuton Stern. He was preceded in death by a brother, Robert Stern. Besides his wife of 49 years, Dr. Stern is survived by two daughters, Susan Edelman of Memphis and Carol Ciaglo of Louisville, Colorado; a son, David Stern of Ann Arbor, Michigan; and nine grandchildren.

(Reprinted with permission from *The Hebrew Watchman*)

all the foliage, plants, and grass, and the quiet was eerie as there were no birds, animals, or insects around. It was a totally grey landscape despite a hot shining sun outside.

The most we could manage inside our house was a few minutes at a time. We had come prepared with water and a few snacks. We were not prepared for the smell or destruction inside the house. We were dressed in tyvac suits, wore boots, masks, and gloves. Everything looked hopeless. There was furniture strewn everywhere, upside down, broken, and in different rooms from where it had been. The hall was impassable with fallen books and shelves. In another doorway the freezer blocked our entrance to the bedroom side of the house and to the one room upstairs. The carpet was still sopping wet and mold was everywhere.

Were we ever going to come back? What should we save first? We decided on the good china and the silverware. Taking what we could outside, we carried filthy wet dishes down half a block to a neighbor's brick wall. Our van was parked there as we could not get through to our street or alley. Somehow we survived for two hours, on no sleep, in the heat, trudging thru the mucky alley to salvage a few boxes of our prized possessions. By this time we were exhausted, dirty, sweating and thoroughly discouraged by not only our loss but that of the whole area for blocks and blocks. We could not get out of there fast enough, and though we had planned to drive to Baton Rouge to spend the night, we just drove straight back to Memphis, utterly spent, emotionally and physically.

After that first trip, it did not take us long to realize that some decisions had to be made and made soon. Were we going back to New Orleans to live? It didn't look like it. We were retired, had few relatives left there and most of the friends we had talked to were not going back either. So where to go? Our choices seemed to be

Memphis or New York where our daughters lived. Memphis won out as it seemed it would be easier to make a new life here similar to the one we had in New Orleans and easier to make friends.

We found a house near our daughter's, found the Temple and met a few people. We finally got to our upstairs room on one of our trips back to New Orleans, found it in pristine condition, and brought everything there back to Memphis. It was my calligraphy studio so I was able to set up my

business here in Memphis. After six trips back to New Orleans, meeting with insurance adjusters, emptying the house and gutting it, buying all new furniture for our new home, we are settled at last. Was it the right move? Yes, because we are comfortable and not living in a trailer trying to find workmen to redo our gutted house.

We have much to be grateful for, but we miss our friends who are scattered all over the country now. It is not easy to replace them. We were welcomed by people in Memphis, but they have their own lives and being newcomers, we're still trying to find our niche. But we have joined the symphony, the art museum, and the library and are finding our way through the winding streets on our own. Our daughter and son-in-law have gone beyond the line of duty in helping us, as have their friends.

We could not have done this without their help and support.

In summing up, we were yanked out of our house at a time we were least expecting it, made to move with most of our possessions and family memorabilia destroyed beyond salvaging, and forced to make quick decisions that will affect the rest of our lives, as we are no longer youngsters. My husband has suffered more, as he was born in New Orleans and lived there all his seventy-seven years. But I am finding out that we are survivors, along with thousands of others. We are not alone in this disaster, and New Orleans will be a long time in mending its structure and its people—both those who are still there and those of us who were displaced and would still like to call it home. ☆



After Katrina: The Rabinovitz home in New Orleans

Southern Jewish Historical Society

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