



SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

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Baron Hirsch Celebrates 150 Years

Baron Hirsch congregation is currently in the midst of a joyous celebration of their 150th anniversary. The celebration began with a series of exhibitions titled "Connecting to Our Past—Building for Our Future," which featured a fascinating collection of photographs, objects and documents reflecting the life of the congregation in its three synagogue buildings: at Fourth and Washington, from 1892 to 1952; at Vollintine and Evergreen, from 1952 to 1987; and at 400 S. Yates, from 1987 to the present time.

The culmination of the celebration will be a gala tribute dinner on October 27, honoring Marilyn and Jack Belz, who are lifelong members of the congregation, and Chris Wallace, general manager and vice-president of basketball operations of the Memphis Grizzlies, who is an active supporter of the State of Israel.

Although there are varying accounts of the earliest history of Baron Hirsch Congregation, according to some sources it was founded in 1862. In his book written in 1957, *Baron Hirsch Congregation from Ur to Memphis*, Sam Shankman quotes the Jewish Encyclo-

dia published in 1904 as follows:

"...Another orthodox congregation established in 1862 had no permanent place of worship until 1890, when the members bought a church and converted it into a synagogue, giving their organization the name of

'Baron Hirsch Congregation.' The number of members is at present (1904) eighty-four."

This statement was written for the Jewish Encyclopedia by Rabbi Max Samfield at a time when most of the members who had adopted the name of Baron Hirsch for the congregation were still alive. Shankman himself interviewed numerous men and women whose memories went back seventy or eighty years.

Most told the same story—that they remember the orthodox group praying "somewhere on Second Street" or "somewhere on North Main" and that it was the same group who later took the name of Baron Hirsch. The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia identifies the location where the group worshipped from 1886 to 1890 as "the second floor of Isaac's Book Store on North Main near Poplar." The bookstore's early location has also been de-

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Baron Hirsch and Menorah Institute at Fourth and Washington

JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH - FOUNDED IN 1986
c/o MJCC 6650 POPLAR AVENUE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38138

President's Message



David Ross

As a new president of any organization, one of the first things one does is to look at the supporting cast. How much help am I going to have? Having been installed a very short time ago, I have come to realize that the support I have is simply amazing.

I have been fortunate to have had leadership roles quite a few times in the past, but I can honestly say I have not seen the support in the past that I have seen in the Memphis Jewish Historical Society just in the last few months.

I feel this year will be an outstanding year of programming. Our programming committee, under the leadership of Sumner Levine, has already made contacts with a number of speakers and our calendar is complete.

We were very fortunate to have had George Lapidès speak at our first program in September. Those who attended said they felt it was a really special program.

One of my goals this year is to have a spring trip to Charleston, South Carolina, in the spring of 2014, and I have met with Rabbi David Radinsky to begin planning for this trip. Charleston has a great deal of history, both Jewish and secular.

I also recently met with the new archivist of Temple Israel, Jennifer Campbell. Although she realizes she has her work cut out for her in following Margie Kerstine, she is very excited to be able to continue the work that Margie began.

I look forward to this year and in particular to working with our new board to make this a very successful year for the Memphis Jewish Historical Society.

David Ross

President 2013-2014

The Jewish community of Memphis and the Mid-South plays an important role in regional and national history. Soon you will receive your bill for 2013-2014 dues. We urge you to rejoin in order to ensure the high quality programming that the Society provides, as well as to help preserve the past and present for the future.

Jewish Historical Society of Memphis & the Mid-South

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**Of Blessed Memory*

NEWSLETTER EDITOR Marcia Levy



Jewish Historical Society of
Memphis & the Mid-South

Founded in 1986

We encourage you to visit our website, which is full of information about the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South. Go to www.jhsmem.org. This will take you to our home page. Across the top is a menu which includes links to various pages on the site.

Click on "About Us", and you will find a list of the current officers of the society. You can also access contact information and a membership application. Click on "Programs" to find a list of upcoming speakers, with dates, times, and topics. Another item on the menu is "Research Resources." This link will take you to a complete listing of Memphis synagogues, as well as organizations and institutions that can provide answers to your research questions. There is also an interesting genealogical data base.

All issues of our newsletter, *Southern Jewish Heritage*, have been scanned onto the website. You'll find fascinating articles about people and places which are part of the rich history of our area and discover for yourself why it is so important to preserve that history.

Dick Rubin, our Webmaster, has done an outstanding job of making the Jewish Historical Society accessible to everyone via the internet. Explore and enjoy the wealth of information on www.jhsmem.org and please continue to support this vital organization.



Aaron Dubrovner, Cantor Joseph Rosenblatt, Cantor Morris Levine, 1934
(Center for Southern Folklore, Fagie Schaffer Collection)

BARON HIRSCH, continued from Page 1

scribed as being at Second and Jackson.

Some have wondered how the congregation came to be named Baron Hirsch. Born in 1831 in Munich, Baron Maurice de Hirsch was a German-Jewish philanthropist who set up charitable foundations to promote Jewish education and improve the lot of oppressed European Jewry. His grandfather was the first Jewish landowner in Bavaria, and his father, who was banker to the Bavarian king, was created a baron in 1869. For generations, the family occupied a prominent position in the German Jewish community. At the age of thirteen, Hirsch was sent to Brussels to school. He went into business at the age of seventeen. In 1855 he married Clara Bischoffsheim, by whom he had a son and daughter. He was an international banker and built railroads in Russia, the Balkans and Turkey, as well as the first railroads that connected Europe with Asia.

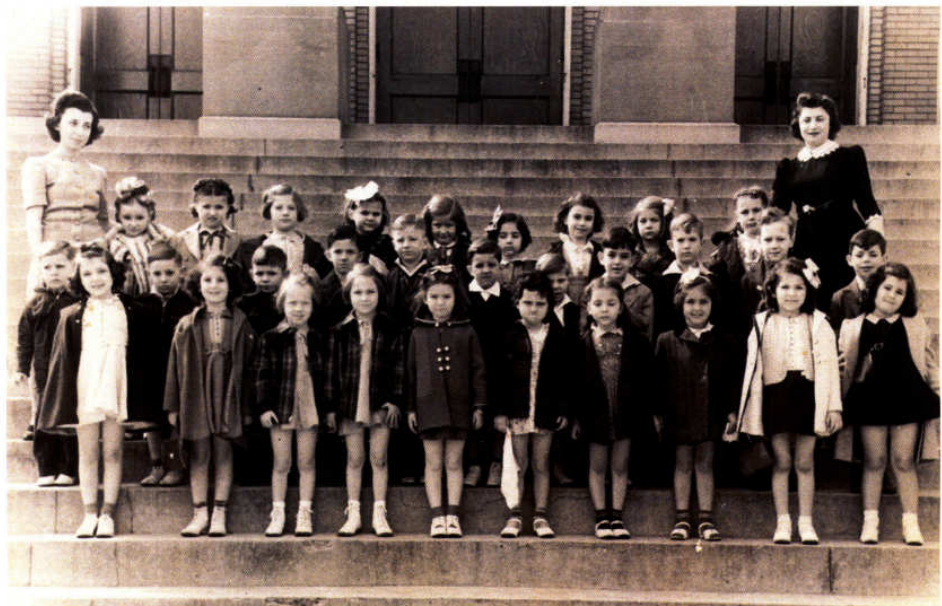
Baron de Hirsch was among the top 5 richest individuals in Europe at the time, with a fortune estimated at \$200,000,000. Be-

fore his death in 1896, he spent all of his earnings and most of his fortune—even all the prize money won by his string of racehorses—in helping to improve the conditions of the Jews in all parts of the world. He chartered ships to take Jews out of Russia and endowed schools in Galicia. In the United States his funds helped to Americanize, educate, and settle the immigrants in various parts of the country.

In the decade between 1880 and 1890 Eastern European Jews began coming to America in large numbers, and with the aid of Baron de Hirsch some were brought or sent to Memphis. On June 3, 1892, a group of men applied for a charter of incorporation of the Baron Hirsch Benevolent Society, using the name of their benefactor to honor him and show their gratitude for his generosity.

About the time the charter was received, a church on the corner of Fourth and Washington was purchased for \$5000 and converted into a synagogue. Some of the early rabbis of the new synagogue were Rabbi Benjamin Meyerowitz, Rabbi Bressler, and Rabbi Leiber Cohen. Officers of 1891-1892 were Jake Croner, president; H. Glickman, vice-president; and F. Loewenberg, secretary. Also in 1892, S. L. Benowitz, M. Lewis, David and Leopold Goldberger, and Hyman Kovinsky organized

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Kindergarten Class, 1939: Front: Sandra Cook (Wurzburg), Betty Jean Evensky, Rosenblum Twins, Renee Newman (Geyer), Rose Markowitz, Evelyn Margolin (Graber), Elaine Margolin (Katz), Claire Gruber, Rochelle Goldstein (Wiener). Row 2: Unidentified, Monte Wener, Unidentified, Unidentified, Unidentified, Bernie Thomas, Leslie Belz, Sidney Shankman, Ron Harkavy, Bernie Weinman, Melvin Katz. Back: Teacher; Doris Davis (Califf), Joan Lutsky, Arlyne Harris (Soloman), Doris Goldberger (Lucas), Unidentified, Sondra Davidson (Abraham), Arlyne Angel (Lovett), Yvette Levine, Gloria Walter (Feder); Teacher.



Talmud Torah Class, c. 1948: Front: Seymour Rosenberg, David Friedman, Irwin Sheft, Razelle Margolin (Wender), Evelyn Margolin (Graber), Elaine Margolin (Katz), Melvin Katz, Buddy Ballin, Unidentified. Back: Rabbi Elijah Stampfer, Seymour Kutner, Mr. Schwab, Unidentified, David Alperin, Jerome Makowsky, Cantor Levin, Rabbi Fruchter, Rabbi Goodman.

BARON HIRSCH, *continued from Page 3*



Boy Scouts, c. 1917: Front: Harry Herman, Gilbert Delugach, Izzy Rosen, Oscar Gold, Jake Walberg, Herman Braver, Oscar Goldberg. Row 2: Herman Gruber, Sam Angel, Louis Fooks, Unidentified, Harold Peiser, Nathan Engelberg, Harry Fortas. Back: Fannie Dlugach Summerfield, Dave Kaplan, Sam Fineberg, Morris Bloomfield, Unidentified.

(Center for Southern Folklore, Fanny Goldstein Collection)

a Talmud Torah. Meanwhile a group of women organized a Sunday school. The first graduation of the Baron Hirsch Sunday school class was on March 28, 1897.

The original one room church building was deteriorating, and in July, 1912, a resolution was unanimously passed authorizing the building committee to borrow \$15,000 from the bank to build a new synagogue at Washington and Fourth. Little progress was made until 1914, when Dave Derman was elected president. Under his leadership, a committee comprised of J. Kohen, J. Fortas, M. Lewis, S. Bronstein, L. Jacobson and J. Alperin was given full authority to plan, erect and complete the synagogue. The cornerstone of the new synagogue was laid on Sunday, June 2, 1914.

The rich history of Baron Hirsch congregation is firmly woven into the fabric of Memphis. In *Reflections: Baron Hirsch and Me*, Jack Belz, a past president of the congregation, wrote, "... it is more than simply bricks and mortar—it is a vibrant living entity on its own ... a special place made up of special people." ☆

From Ukraine to Coffeetown:

Harry Gorden's Amazing Story of Success

"A Jew store—and that is what people called it—was a modest establishment selling soft goods—clothing and domestics (bedding, towels, yard goods)—to the poorer people of the town—the farmers, the sharecroppers, the blacks, the factory workers." From *The Jew Store*, a book by Stella Suberman

By Marcia Levy

In April, 1912, Harry Gorden opened a "Jew store" in Coffeetown, Mississippi, and the amazing story of his life is itself worthy of a book. The store, which he called H. Gorden's, was the culmination of an arduous journey which had its beginnings in the Ukraine. Born in 1888, the oldest of five children of poor peasant farmers, Gorden worked and struggled along with his family to make a sufficient living simply to survive. At the age of 14, he attended a one-room Russian school for a few months, but soon resolved that he would have to leave his native land in order to make a better life for himself.

His opportunity came when, in 1905, at the age of 17, he joined a group of men, women, and children who were anxious to escape from Russia. His father paid their guide \$350, an enormous sum at the time, and the group set out on foot one night after dark. Gorden crossed the border into Germany, was moved by train to Holland, took a boat to Liverpool, England, and after a brief layover there, spent a nightmarish two weeks amid the cattle and other livestock in the hold of a ship destined for Boston, Massachusetts.

Unable to speak English, Gorden traveled to Exeter, New Hampshire, where he had a cousin. His first job was helping his cousin in his tailoring business, and after picking up a little English, he got a job in a shoe factory. He attended night school for a short time, but realizing that his main interest was a career in business, he decided to leave Exeter and move on to Newark, New Jersey, where he knew some "landsmen." Although his formal education was minimal, he was a fast learner, educating himself by working at a variety of jobs—in a bakery, a bottling plant, a leather factory, a saloon, and a billiard hall.

None of this work appealed to him, so he lined up with hundreds of other job-seekers to try for work at Thomas A. Edison's factory, where phonograph cabi-

nets were being made. After several days with no success, he sneaked into the back of the building, and upon being discovered by the foreman, pleaded his case. He was given a job running the elevator at \$6.00 per week, but soon lost that job when Mr. Edison himself found him asleep on the elevator. Using his ingenuity, Gorden begged Edison to give him another chance to work and thus avoid starvation, and he was put on the payroll at 15 cents an hour in the cabinet shop, even though he knew nothing about cabinet work. He tried to keep up, but when business slowed down, he was laid off.

Gorden had saved about \$100, and he bought a horse and wagon and began to do very well peddling fruits and vegetables. After a time, however, his competitors put him out of business by

poisoning his horse. He worked briefly doing menial chores in a store owned by a Catholic priest, but that job was also doomed, for when the owner learned that his employee was a Jew, he let him go. While working at the store, he had befriended a Jewish woman who asked him to write letters in Yiddish for her. Some of the letters were to her son in Edwards, Mississippi, and eventually the woman asked her son to give Gorden a job in his store. She bought him a train ticket, and he was off to Mississippi, the state which would enable him to earn a livelihood and become his permanent home.

In order to secure a job in the store in Edwards, Gorden had to agree to a four-year contract. He clerked there from 1908 until early in 1912. Among the close friends he made during those years, two would play important roles in his future. One was a Baptist preacher who, along with his wife, taught him about American customs and helped him improve his English. The other was a Colonel Montgomery, who helped him in many ways. Colonel Montgomery once offered Gorden an opportunity to invest \$400 in some property, but Gorden



Harry Gorden

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HARRY GORDEN, *continued from Page 5*

refused because he was saving every penny to open his own store. Later, after Gorden had moved to Coffeeville, he received a check for \$3000. Colonel Montgomery had invested his own money in Gorden's name, then sold it and sent him the profit.

Colonel Montgomery also advised Gorden regarding a town in which to locate his store. He recommended Jackson, but Gorden's capital would not allow him to open in a city of that size. Finally he decided on Coffeeville. He lived in the store, ate very little, and worked long hours, but continued to persevere. He heard about a beautiful

young Jewish woman, Ethel Siegel, who lived in Moorhead, Mississippi, and wrote her an appealing letter. When she wrote back, he confessed in a second letter that some things in his first letter were not true. Nevertheless, she accepted his invitation to come to Coffeeville for a date, and she was evidently impressed with Harry as well as his horse and buggy. On April 14, 1914, they were married. When she asked about the horse and buggy, he had to admit that he had sold them, as he felt he could not feed a new wife and also a horse.

H. Gorden's thrived, and over time, Harry Gorden was able to bring three brothers, a sister, and his parents to America from Russia. Eventually his family members opened stores throughout Mississippi—in Okolona, Amory, Baldwin, Fulton, and Pontotoc. The Gordens were part of a group of Jewish merchants who operated businesses all along Mississippi's Interstate 55. Calling themselves the "55 Club," they socialized and went to market together.

Harry Gorden became a highly respected member of the Coffeeville community. He took an active part in civic activities and opened his heart and his pocketbook

to aid those in need. Rarely, if ever, did his family experience any anti-Semitism. One day, however, he looked out the front window of the store and saw a group from the Ku Klux Klan dressed up in full regalia parading down the street. Gorden walked boldly up to one of the men, yanked off his hood, and said, "Why, Dr. (blank), you should be ashamed of yourself!" Gorden

had recognized the man by his shoes, which had been purchased from H. Gorden's a few days earlier.

Like many small town stores of its era, H. Gorden's became a multi-generational business. Harry's son Aaron went into the business, and his grandson, Morton, began working in the store when he



Interior of H. Gorden's: Harry Gorden in center and son Aaron next to Harry on the right

was only ten years old. At that age, Morton still had much to learn about H. Gorden's customers. When he asked his grandfather why a certain man was buying six fifty-pound bags of sugar at one time, the reply was that "the man makes the best moonshine whiskey in this part of Mississippi." Morton also learned the hard way to "keep his mouth shut" in the store. A man came in and selected a dress, and Morton observed that the man's wife was too big to wear that size. It turned out that the man was not buying the dress for his wife!

In 1962 H. Gorden's celebrated its 50th anniversary. Furniture and appliances were added to the stock, but gradually the small town stores began to disappear as customers were attracted to larger towns and bigger stores where they could find cheaper prices. Harry Gorden's "Jew store" had spanned three generations, lasting 76 years before closing in 1988. ☆

Many thanks to Morton Gorden and his wife Sheryl, who now live in Memphis, for the information contained in this article.

Additional information came from the June 2, 1962 edition of The Coffeeville Courier.

Greenhorn...a book by Anna Olswanger

Thirty years ago on a Baron Hirsch trip to Israel, Anna Olswanger heard a story about a little boy who had lost his parents in the Holocaust and who wouldn't let a tin box out of his sight. Rabbi Rafael Grossman, Senior Rabbi of Baron Hirsch at the time, stood at the front of the tour bus as the group approached Jerusalem and told the story.

This was what Anna heard: When the school principal came into Rabbi Grossman's sixth-grade class to announce that the yeshiva would take in fifty boys, he introduced "Daniel," a young boy who had no possessions, except for a small, tin box. The class later discovered that inside the box was a bar of soap. Daniel believed that the soap, manufactured by the Nazis, was made from the body fat of Jews murdered in the death camps. And he believed that maybe, just maybe, that bar of soap contained his parents' remains. He said he didn't have anything else from his parents, not even a photograph. Daniel, who found a friend in eleven-year-old Rabbi Grossman, eventually let go of the box.

Anna knew as soon as the rabbi began talking that the story was important and that she wanted to write it, but she was born in America after the Holocaust, and her grandparents and great-grandparents had left Eastern Europe in the 1890s, years before the Holocaust. What did she know about what this little boy had gone through?

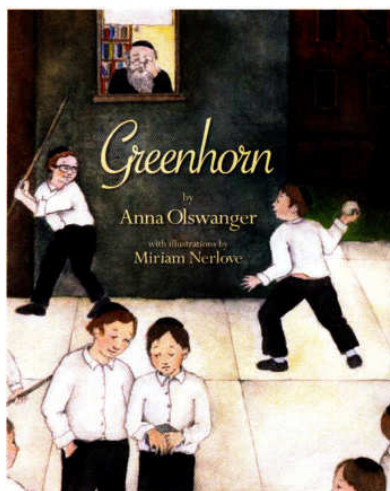
Rabbi Grossman, a participant in the story, was preoccupied with leading his large Baron Hirsch congregation and couldn't write the story. Anna had no idea where the little boy was forty years after the Holocaust, so she couldn't ask him to write the story.

She knew if she didn't write the story, it would be lost. She felt that she had to write it.

It took years for Anna to write the story that became *Greenhorn*, a novel for young readers, and during that time, she moved from Memphis to New York where she is now a literary agent. Last December, *Greenhorn* was published as both a hard cover and ebook, and immediately found its audience. Karen Cushman, Newbery Medalist, called it "a tender, touching celebration of friendship, family, and faith." David Adler, winner of the Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book

for Nonfiction, called *Greenhorn* "a heartwarming and heartrending story of friendship and tragedy."

Greenhorn will soon become a film. Tom Whitus, an award-winning filmmaker whose work has been shown on the Lifetime Network and Showtime, is developing the book into an independent film to be submitted ultimately, for an Academy Award in the Short Films Awards category. Tom believes that making *Greenhorn* into a film will help reach a broader audience "in a way a book cannot." The film-making process is still in the early stages of location seeking, editing, and soon, casting. Anna and Tom are co-producers of the film. ☆



Jewish Historical Society Programs 2013-2014

October 30: Dr. David Jacobson
at U. of Memphis, Fogelman Center
"The Jerusalem Temple of Herod the Great"

November 10: Patricia McFarland
Jews' involvement early in the medical profession

December 22: Steve Tabachnick
"Lawrence of Arabia and the Jews"

January 12: Rabbi Adam Grossman
"Truth, Justice and the Jewish Way:
A Historical Analysis of Jews and the
Comic Book Superhero"

February 9: Dan Unowsky
"Vienna 1900: Jews, Modern
Culture and Anti-Semitism at the
Fin de Siècle"

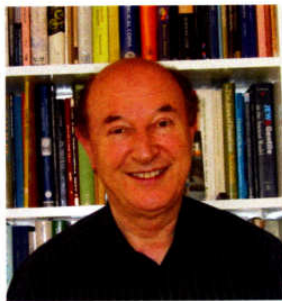
March 2: Leonard Rogoff
Down Home: Book, Exhibit & Cantata

April 27-May 1: Trip to Charleston

May 5: Joyce Antler
"You Never Call, You Never Write"

June 1: Rabbi Samuel M. Stahl
"The Future of Jewish Religious De-
nominations in North America."

World Authority on the Second Temple and Herod Will Speak on "The Jerusalem Temple of Herod the Great"



Dr. David Jacobson

On October 30 the Jewish Historical Society will co-sponsor a lecture with the University of Memphis Bornblum Department of Judaic Studies. The program will be held at the University's Fogelman Center.

Dr. David Jacobson holds doctorates in Classical Archaeology and in Materials Science and divides his time between these disciplines. He lectured in Materials Engineering at the Ben Gurion University in Beer-Sheva and has headed industrial Research and Development departments in British industry. He has taught courses on Roman architecture at Kings College London, and on the Jews and the Classical World at University College London. He has won prizes for his innovative scientific research from the American Welding Society and in 2005 was awarded with the Chair of Manufacturing Technologies at Buckinghamshire New University in High Wycombe, England. Jacobson is the author or editor of several books, including *Herod and Augustus* and *The Hellenistic Paintings of Marissa*. He is editor of the prestigious "Palestine Exploration Quarterly," which is published in London and is probably the most important journal of biblical archaeology in the world. He also has published "Below the Temple Mount in Jerusalem" with Professor Shimon Gibson, which catalogues all the recorded underground features of the Temple Mount. Widely acknowledged as an authority on the building program of Herod the Great, including the Temple, in recent years Jacobson's research has focused on ancient Jewish coins, placing them in a wider Mediterranean context.

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