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Preserving the Past and Enhancing the Future

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Two Exceptional Centenarians: Mildred Schwartz and Mary Shainberg

By Marcia Levy

The days of our years are three-score years and ten, or even by reason of strength four-score years...

So teach us to number our days, that we may get us a heart of wisdom.

Psalm 90, 10...12

The ancient Psalmist never could have imagined that someday people might exceed the age of four-score years, but in today's world, 100 may be the new 80. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are currently more than 90,000 centenarians in the United States and that number continues to grow.

Mary Shainberg and Mildred Schwartz were centenarians. Mary lived to be 101, and Mildred died just a few weeks shy of her 101st birthday. In some ways their lives were quite different, but in addition to their longevity, there were interesting similarities that they shared. Both began their lives in small southern towns, Mary in Hazen, Arkansas, and Mildred in Newellton, Louisiana. Both were born in December—Mary on December 14, 1916, and Mildred on December 6, 1918.

They both experienced hard times and prosperity. Both had careers in business in an era when this was a rarity for women, and both traveled alone throughout the country as representatives of their companies. Both

exercised, even in their later years, Mary at the Jewish Community Center and Mildred on the golf course.

Both generously supported charitable causes in the Memphis community, and they worked side by side as volunteers in the archives at Temple Israel.

Mary Sparks Shainberg was born on a farm outside Hazen, Arkansas, where her family raised cotton, corn, hogs, beef, chickens, and ducks. She was the baby of the family, with two brothers and a sister. When she was about seven years old, the family moved about 43 miles west to Little Rock. Mary attended school there and graduated from Little Rock High School. She was unable to go to college because of the Depression, and went to work in a restaurant for a dollar a day plus her uniforms and meals. Her father suggested that she donate ten cents of every dollar to charity. "Will it make any difference in your life if you wake up in the morning with 90 cents or one dollar?" he asked her. Mary carried her father's



Mildred and Mary, at Mary's 100th Birthday Party

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President's Message



As I begin my second term as President of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South (JHSM), I can hardly believe a year has passed by. Thank you to the supportive and creative Board for all your hard work in making this past year so successful and well received.

I was so excited this time last year to begin the 2019-2020 Sumner Levine Speaker Series, continue oral histories, work in the archives, and begin a few long-term projects while fulfilling our mission to *Preserve the Past and Enhance the Future*.

September, 2019, to February, 2020, went smoothly and we welcomed Memphian, Steven Stern to Memphis, followed by Cantorial Soloist Robyn Helzner, author Kirsten Fermaglich, and Memphis' own Rabbi Micah Greenstein speaking about the Jews of Cuba following the film *Cuba's Forgotten Jewels*.

In March of this year, things changed and changed quickly. COVID-19 became real in the United States and the Jewish communities across the country suffered hard. Along with all the Jewish organizations in Memphis, JHSM made the decision to postpone or cancel scheduled programs in March, April, and May.

My most difficult call was to Dr. Perry Brickman, a retired Atlanta dentist with deep Memphis connections. Dr. Brickman was so looking forward to speaking in March in partnership with the MJCC, Memphis Jewish Federation's Hillel of Memphis and Maimonides Society, Facing History and Ourselves, the University of Tennessee Health Science Center-College of Dentistry, and Novel bookstore. Dr. Brickman attended an exhibit at Emory University and uncovered the truth on why so many Jewish students, including Dr. Brickman, had failed out of Emory's dental school from 1949 to 1959. After six years of research and interviews, Dr. Brickman was permitted to present his documentary research to Emory officials. Emory made a public apology and created a documentary, *From Silence to Recognition: Confronting Discrimination in Emory's Dental School History*. After Dr. Brickman was unfairly ejected from Emory, it was the University of Tennessee dental school who offered him a place, and he completed his dental training in Memphis. Dr. Brickman really wanted to tell his story

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**Of Blessed Memory*

to his Memphis community, and I urge you to read Dr. Brickman's book, *Extracted: Unmasking Rampant Anti-semitism in America's Higher Education*.

Zoom quickly became the format of connection; we had a Passover Seder with our sons and attended weekly Shabbat services via Zoom. Staying connected to the Jewish community is now more important than ever. Please frequently check our website, www.jhsmem.org and the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South Facebook page for programming and learning opportunities.

Personally, COVID became very real for me on April 25, 2020. My father's first cousin, Marjorie Denaburg Watsky, of blessed memory, passed away as a result of COVID-19 in Morristown, New Jersey. Margie had

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Mary in 1922

charitable wisdom in her heart for the rest of her years.

Several years later, she attended business school, and when she was 22, she married her first husband, Jack Wolfe, and moved to Memphis. Jack worked for Memphis Fisher Aircraft during the war, and Mary began working at Gerber's selling cosmetics. When the war end-

ed, they moved back to Little Rock. Mary continued a career in cosmetics, both behind the counter and as a buyer, and soon was hired by Charles of the Ritz, as a traveling representative with an extensive territory that included Chicago, San Francisco, Dallas, Memphis, and Hawaii. Her husband also traveled but they both were able to come home for weekends.



In 1964 Mary's husband Jack died of lung cancer; however, Mary continued living in Little Rock and working for Charles of the Ritz. In an Oral History interview, she described how she was introduced to her second husband, Herbert Shainberg, by Harold Rutstein:

"Harold Rutstein . . . had married a friend of mine (who) I worked

with and met at Gerber's during the war. We had remained friends all of these years. I was coming over to spend Christmas with my sister who lived here (in Memphis) already. Harold called me and wanted to know . . . He said, 'Why don't you come here a couple of days early and spend a couple of days with us because we're leaving Christmas Day and going to Dallas.' So I did and the night before I came over, he called me and he said, 'By the way I have a date for you on Saturday night.' I said, 'A date? What in the hell am I going to do with a date?' He said, 'Well,

that's up to you. He's a good friend of mine and he lost his wife about six months ago. I think you two should meet.' And that's how we met. And Herbert had two children, Suzanne and Terry. Each of them have three children. So I inherited a beautiful family . . ."

Mary and Herbert had a long distance relationship, mostly on the telephone. In 1972 she moved to Memphis after going to work for Estée Lauder, and in 1975 they were married.

Mary was raised Baptist. When she lived in Hazen



Mary in 1937

she attended Sunday school and services at a church called Center Point. In those days her family didn't own a car, so they rode to church in a wagon. After marrying Herbert she thought about how she had inherited his family. She believed that to be a whole family you should have unity, so she made an appointment with Rabbi James Wax at Temple Israel and told him she was thinking about converting to Judaism and why she wanted to convert. He gave her three books to read. She told no one,

not even Herbert, about meeting with the rabbi.

One night when they were reading in bed, Herbert said, "What are you reading?" and Mary said, "What Jews Believe." Jokingly, Herbert responded, "Hell, when you find out, tell me!" Still Mary said nothing to Herbert about what she was planning to do. When she had finished reading the books, she made another appointment with Rabbi Wax, and said to Herbert, "What are you doing Tuesday at 11:00? I want you to go with me to meet with Rabbi Wax.



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I'm thinking about converting." Totally taken by surprise, Herbert said, "Are you crazy? I never asked you to convert!" And Mary replied, "Thank God! I'm glad you didn't, 'cause if you did, I never would have!" She believed that conversion is something you do for yourself, not for someone else. She was truly a Jew by Choice.

Mary was instilled with the spirit of Mitzvah before she had ever heard of the word. She remembered back when she was a child in Hazen, if there was a neighbor in trouble or sick, the other neighbors chipped in and took care of their farm, chopping cotton or doing the planting. She recalled that her mother was always doing something for someone else. After retirement she became a full time volunteer, generously sharing her time and resources with the Memphis Jewish Community Center, the Memphis Jewish Home, and LeBonheur Children's Hospital, to which her gifts included advanced medical equipment to save or improve the lives of many children. She knitted throws for chemo patients at West Clinic while watching, in her words, "that idiot box."

Herbert Shainberg died in 1985. After outliving two husbands, Mary married for a third time. She and Seymour Gilman were introduced by a mutual friend and in 1989 they were wed. Unfortunately, their happiness together was brief, as their marriage lasted only three months. The couple was on a honeymoon cruise to South America when Seymour had a heart attack and died in a hospital in Manaus, Brazil in January, 1990.

Mary lived to be

101. When asked if she had any advice for the next generation, she said, "Get involved and get busy. Be a leader and not a follower."

Like Mary Shainberg, Mildred Salomon Schwartz was also involved, busy, and a leader. Unlike Mary, she had Jewish roots. She was the daughter of Julius Salomon and Vivian Kaufman Salomon. Her paternal grandfather, Abraham Salomon was strictly "old country Polish," from Warsaw, Poland. He owned a meat market and ice house in Newellton, Louisiana. Her maternal grandfather was from Alsace-Lorraine, tall and straight and very mannerly, a French gentleman who wore a string bow tie. His wife was born in New Orleans. Grandpa Kaufman had a general store about ten miles away from Newellton in a town called L'Argent. Eventually the store was flooded and the entire town of L'Argent

was washed into the river.

There were only six Jewish families in Newellton, and Mildred's parents belonged to the Jewish temple in nearby Natchez, Mississippi. One of her uncles had a Union Prayer Book, and on the High Holy Days her family would go to his house and he would conduct a little service. All her family is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Natchez.

Mildred's father had inherited her grandfather's meat market and ice house. He was also mayor of the town. After he died, her mother tried to run the



Mary and Herbert Shainberg



Mildred and her brother Alvin

Mildred as a child

business, but the Christian men of the town thought it was not appropriate for a Jewish woman to have the prestige of being a business owner. The Ku Klux Klan would threaten anyone who wanted to work for her or anyone who bought from her and eventually it became impossible for her to make a living.

In 1922, when Mildred was four years old, she, her mother, her older brother Alvin, and her Grandfather Kaufman moved to Memphis, where her mother's brother and his wife were already living. Her mother bought and ran a small dry goods store at the corner of Poplar and Lauderdale. They lived over the store and her mother bought merchandise wholesale from a local distributor, William R. Moore. Mildred attended Merrill School and the two children were enrolled in Sunday school at Temple Israel.

Mildred's mother had invested in the stock market and lost quite a bit of money during the Depression. She had to sell the store and the family moved into an apartment. Mildred said she wasn't aware that they were poor, even when her mother put metal caps on the toes of her shoes so she wouldn't wear them out. She said she thought nothing of having only two nice dresses to wear to Sunday school. Not long after coming to Memphis, Mildred's mother died, and the children moved in with their uncle and aunt. In the summers they visited other aunts and uncles in Newellton and Montgomery, Alabama. It was a difficult time for everyone.

When she was in high school Mildred worked part time in a shoe store. She would save up her money to be able to don her white gloves and hat and go to the Peabody Hotel for lunch on Saturdays with her friends. Most of her social life as a teenager revolved

around the Junior Congregation at Temple, which had dances and provided a place for Jewish young people to meet each other. After high school, she attended the University of Memphis, then called State Teachers College. She went to classes in the morning, worked

as a legal stenographer in the afternoon, and went to law school at night. She was the only woman in her law school class. She intended to become a lawyer, but soon met her husband to be, Max Schwartz.

In an oral history interview, Mildred described how she met Max:

"Well actually my husband was my brother's best friend and when they would go to the movies on Saturday afternoon, my mother would insist that they take me. And they would always walk in front and I was dragging behind and I couldn't stand him

(Max). I thought he was the worst thing on earth." Later, Mildred's brother married one of her friends. One night, Mildred and Max were planning to double date with her brother and his wife. When the married couple had an argument and the wife refused to go out, Mildred and Max were alone for the first time, and that was when they started going together.

After she and Max married, he went into the navy in World War II, and she took over his job as a manufacturer's representative traveling with Doris Dodson dresses. She was the only woman salesperson in an organization of 50 salesmen. She was a perfect salesperson because she could actually wear the junior size dresses. Max was away for three years on the battleship Texas. Fortunately he was never injured. They lived in Norfolk, Virginia, for a time, sharing a house with another couple. Because of rationing, there was no heat in the house during the day. Mildred worked

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Mildred and Max Schwartz on the golf course



Mildred at her 100th birthday party

in a lingerie shop and they had to wait until evening when everyone came home to turn on the heat.

Mildred was an active supporter of the Memphis community, giving freely of her time not only for Jewish organizations but for other worthy causes as well. She was the first woman president of Temple Israel, Chairwoman of the Plough Towers Board, and a board member of United Way of Greater Memphis. Because of her excellent leadership skills, she was elected as a National Vice President of NCJW, the National Council of Jewish Women. Through NCJW, she had the unforgettable experience of meeting and having a conversation with Golda Meir.

She worked closely with the Junior League of Memphis to create the Volunteer Center of Memphis, at a time when the League did not admit Jewish members. Her outstanding volunteer work earned her a Key to the City of Memphis, Volunteer of the Year Award, and the Good Neighbor Award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Along with all her volunteer activities, she somehow found time to be an accomplished golfer and to serve as Chairwoman of the Ridgeway Ladies Golf League.

Mary Shainberg and Mildred Schwartz were exceptional centenarians. Not only did they surpass the biblically ordained age of four-score years, but for 100 years their lives enriched the lives of so many others. ☆



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE, *continued from page 2*

just turned 89 years of age and was a strong beautiful woman who grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, married, then moved to New Orleans and later Las Vegas. Margie was the colorful cousin with the incredible memory. It was Margie's memory which helped me locate the American descendants of Leib Denaburg in order to create a Denaburg family history book for the 2009 and 2019 family reunions. I learned how to use Ancestry.com and Jewishgen.org because of Margie's fantastic memory and my growing passion for genealogy.

JHSMM is adapting, and Linnie Mirvis and Phyllis Groskind have been very busy planning the 2020-2021 Sumner Levine Speakers Series via Zoom. We are all

looking forward to the interesting upcoming programs listed on the back of the newsletter. Although, this is not how we envisioned programs to look this year we want everyone to stay safe and well. Our goal is to bring quality learning opportunities to the community virtually until it is safe to resume group gatherings.

Thank you for the opportunity and honor of serving as your President. Wishing everyone a very happy and healthy NewYear, L' Shana Tova 5781,

Stay safe and well,

Lorraine Wolf

Some Famous Jewish Centenarians

Could it be genetics? Lifestyle? Environment? Chicken soup? Maybe all of the above. Numerous scientific studies, including some which focus specifically on Ashkenazi Jews, continue to be conducted to ascertain a definitive answer to the puzzle of why some people live to be 100 and others do not. Previous studies of centenarians have determined that some individuals are ‘delayers,’ who do not contract an age-related disease until 80 years old or later. Almost half are ‘survivors,’ those getting sick before 80 yet still reaching 100, while the rest who have no signs of clinical disease at all have been called ‘escapers.’ Here are a few well known Jewish centenarians.



Irving Berlin (1888-1989) was born Israel Beilin in the Russian Empire. Although his family came from the shtetl of Tolochin (today in Belarus), documents say that he was born in Tyumen, Siberia. He was one of eight children of Moses and Lena Lipkin Beilin. His father, a cantor in a synagogue, uprooted the family to America, as did many other Jewish families in the late 19th century. When they arrived at Ellis Island, Israel was put in a pen with his brother and five sisters until immigration officials declared them fit to be allowed into the city. One of the most prolific songwriters ever to work in the entertainment industry, he composed 17 film scores, 21 Broadway scores, and wrote over 3000 songs, including “There’s No Business Like Show Business” and “God Bless America.”



George Burns (1896-1996), born Nathan Birnbaum in New York City, was the ninth of twelve children of Hadassah “Dorah” and Eliezer (known as Louis) Birnbaum, Jewish immigrants from Kolbuszowa, Galicia (now Poland). His father was a substitute cantor at a local synagogue but usually worked as a coat presser. Burns was a comedian, actor, singer, and writer, who started smoking cigars at age 14. He was one of the few entertainers whose career spanned vaudeville, radio, film, and television. Burns’ second wife was Gracie Allen, his famous partner in their entertainment routines. In a standup special in Las Vegas shortly before he died, he said “It’s nice to be here. When you’re 100 years old, it’s nice to be anywhere.”



Kirk Douglas (1916-2020) was born Issur Danielovitch in Amsterdam, New York, the son of Bryna “Bertha” and Herschel “Harry” Danielovitch, Jewish immigrants from Chavusy, Mogilev Region, in the Russian Empire (now Belarus). The family adopted the surname “Demskey” in the United States, and Douglas grew up as Izzy Demskey. He legally changed his name to Kirk Douglas before entering the U.S. Navy during World War II. Douglas appeared in nearly 40 films, including *Lust For Life* and *Spartacus*. He had distanced himself from his religion for many years, but after almost dying in a helicopter crash, he again embraced his Judaism. His autobiography, *The Ragman’s Son*, became a best-seller, and he and his wife supported a number of non-profit causes during his career.



Herman Wouk (1915-2019), born in the Bronx, was the second of three children of Esther and Abraham Isaac Wouk, Russian Jewish immigrants from what today is Belarus. When Wouk was 13, his maternal grandfather, Mendel Leib Levine, came from Minsk to live with them and took charge of his grandson’s education. Wouk was frustrated by the amount of time he was expected to study the Talmud, but his father told him, “If I were on my deathbed and I had breath to say one more thing to you, I would say ‘Study the Talmud.’” Judaism became integral to both his personal life and his career. Among his many novels were *Marjorie Morningstar* and *The Caine Mutiny*, which won a Pulitzer Prize. In 1959 he wrote his first non-fiction work, *This is My God: The Jewish Way of Life*.

Program Schedule 2020

Via Zoom!

August 23, 2020: Schelly Talalay Dardashti & Maria Apodaca
Discovering Sephardic Roots Through DNA & Family History

September 13, 2020: Rabbi Micah Greenstein, Susan Adler Thorp & Murray Riss
Beloved: A View of One of the South's Oldest Jewish Cemeteries

October 25, 2020: Bill Haltom, Author (in partnership with MJCC Cultural Arts)
Why Can't Mother Vote? Joseph Hanover and the Unfinished Business of Democracy

November 15, 2020: Margery Kerstine, Author & former Memphian
Merchants on Issaquena: Avenue of the Blues in Mississippi

For more information about these programs, please see our website:
www.jhsmem.org