

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

VOL. 3, NO. 1

JANUARY 1990

## Society Hosts Special Event Feb. 4 at Dixon Art Gallery



Dr. Zifera Gitay

The Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South is pleased to announce that Dr. Zefira Gitay of Israel will be the guest lecturer on the special arts program organized by the society at the Dixon Art Gallery. Dr. Zifera Gitay is a visiting professor at the Born-

blum Judaic Studies and is in the Art Department at Memphis State University. Among the courses Dr. Gitay is teaching is a course in Bible and Art. The lecture will be in conjunction with the exhibit, "Three Centuries of Pewter from the Adler Collection."

The program will take place Sunday, February 4, 1990 at 3:30 p.m. at the Dixon Art Gallery. The topic of the lecture will be "Jewish Art in Historical Perspective."

Dr. Gitay is a well known expert on Jewish art. Her Israeli teaching career has included Ben Gurion University and Bezlel Academy of Art in Israel, Wesleyan University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in America. She has written extensively on topics concerning the Bible and art. She has a large curatorial experience accumulated in work done at the Israeli Museum in Jerusalem and the Prehistoric Museum in Haifa as well as other known museums. Her husband, Professor Yehoshua Gitay, holds the Chair of Excellence in Judaic Studies at the Bornblum Judaic Program at Memphis State University.

After the lecture, Mrs. Justin H. Adler will offer an exclusive tour for our members giving background information on several of the more important pieces from the Collection, which also includes Judaica items. The collection comprises over 100 pewter objects, decorative and utilitarian pieces such as plates, urns, candlesticks, and tankards created in the last 300 years by the talented craftsmen from England, France, Germany, and the U.S.A. This is a rare opportunity to see a

## Dr. James A. Wax

The death of Dr. James Aaron Wax, Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Israel on October 17, 1989 left an irreparable tear in the fabric of the city. It deprived the local clergy of a prominent leader who proclaimed the duty of religion to create an honorable society which ensured justice for all of God's children. It removed a courageous defender of racial and religious equality. It stilled the voice of a compassionate advocate of the rights of the mentally ill. And all of us who were within sound of his voice or witness to the example of his actions lost a beacon of morality.

The Jewish Historical Society is acutely aware of the legacy of Rabbi Wax as a pioneer in the field of Jewish history in this community. His writings include The History of the Jews of Memphis, 1860-1865 and Our First Century, a history of Temple Israel written in collaboration with his wife, Helen. These

works make important contributions to the knowledge of local Jewish history. By both inclination and ability, Rabbi Wax was a historian. He clearly recognized and articulated the need to study the past in order to understand the present and inform the future.

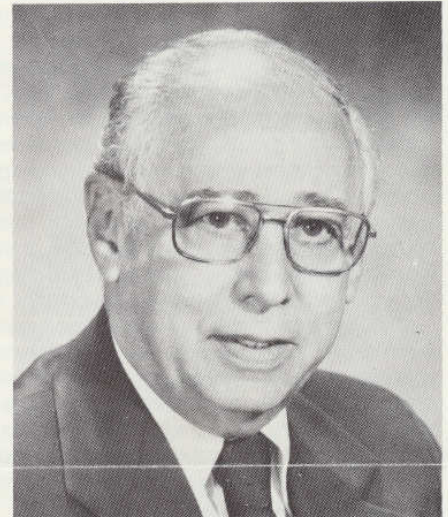
Many of Rabbi Wax's sermons reflect his interest in history. His donation of his papers to the Memphis Public Library and Information Service's Memphis Room attest to his desire to foster historical scholarship by present and future generations. The "Rabbi James A. Wax Collection" significantly enhances the materials owned by the library.

Had his health permitted, Rabbi Wax had planned to write a history of religion in Memphis, including all faiths within its scope. He had done a great deal of research, and was especially eager to write the book as his contribution to Memphis, which he felt "had been so good to him." Although in his retirement he was able to teach both at Rhodes College and at the Memphis Theological Seminary, where his courses were always oversubscribed, precarious health prevented completion of this work. It does, however, provide further evidence of his deep and abiding commitment to history.

When the idea of a local Jewish Historical Society first arose, Rabbi Wax was one of its staunchest supporters. He wrote the original letter inviting people to join the organization.

Our debt to Rabbi Wax extends to many areas of our lives; we acknowledge it gratefully. But for him, the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South might never have been more than an idea. He was vitally important in its birth and in its initial years of growth. His support sustained and inspired us. We hope to be worthy of it.

by Selma Lewis



splendid collection built with great dedication by Dr. Justin and Herta Adler. The only other exhibition of this great collection was at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg.

by Leonid Saharovici

## JOIN US FEB. 4

There is no charge  
For Society Members



## Presidents Message . . . . Leonid Saharovici



Five years ago, I was privileged to be among a small group of enthusiastic history buffs who met first at Harriet Stern's home and later at Max Borod's, where we decided to form a Jewish Historical Society in Memphis. A pioneer of local Jewish history and strong supporter for a scientifically oriented historical society, Rabbi James A. Wax, of blessed memory, outlined the role of such a

Jewish organization. We were the new kid on the block, the youngest Jewish organization in Memphis. We were determined to prove that we would work hard to preserve and promote our heritage.

The rest is history. Our achievements in the first five years are great. From a small nucleus we have grown to more than three hundred members. From a small newsletter, with the help of our editor, David Schneider, we have developed an interesting and well received publication that attracts researchers, professional historians, and lay persons interested in Jewish history. With this issue our publication has a new name, "*Southern Jewish Heritage*", which reflects so well what we want to leave for future generations. We have organized lectures, conferences, and exhibits attended by large audiences. Our society commissioned Dr. Selma Lewis to write our book, the History of the Jews of Memphis. It will become a reality in the next two years and we hope it will be in every Jewish home in our city and in many libraries around the country.

The Memphis Jewish community has a splendid story to tell. Be a part of this active group of "Jewish history tellers;" share with us your personal and family experiences. Don't let the dust of forgetfulness spread over the remarkable contributions of Memphis Jewry to this city, southern region, and the U.S.A. We live in extraordinary times. Historical events of great magnitude are taking place all over the world. Preserving this history and maintaining public interest are our objectives for the future.

### Welcome To Our New Members

Mr. Bert H. Bornblum  
Mr. Ervin H. Levit  
Ms. Polly C. Cooper  
Mr. Mark J. Hayden  
Mrs. Harold Katz  
Mrs. Nina Katz  
Mr. Roman Mitelman  
Mr. Hal Gerber  
Ms. Joyce Morrison  
Mrs. John Spence  
Ms. Sue Younger

Mr. Steven E. Jacobs  
Mrs. Carla Love Maitland  
Mr. & Mrs. Jack I. Lewis  
Mr. & Mrs. Mannie Ettingoff  
Mr. & Mrs. Stanley L. Wender  
Mr. Norton Rosengarten  
Dr. & Mrs. Justin H. Adler  
Mr. & Mrs. Irvin Bogatin  
Mr. Allen E. Cohen  
Mr. & Mrs. Charles F. Goodman  
Mr. & Mrs. Leon S. Burson

Mr. & Mrs. William G. Sternberger  
Memphis-Plough Community Foundation

### Thanks To Our Contributors

Bensdorf Foundation  
Mrs. Nina Katz

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## There was a Need

by Nate Goler, President, Memphis JCC Men's Club

I arrived in Memphis May 9, 1939. I had been married for 2 days, having been born in Atlanta, I was having pangs of homesickness.

Atlanta had afforded me a wonderful growing up period. There were Jewish clubs for boys and girls. The Jewish Educational Alliance was the forerunner of what we know as a Jewish Community Center. We were there most of our free time. Club meetings, sports, Sunday afternoon basketball, gave us many an exciting weekend.

The Alliance was our place, a place for the Jewish kids. We could be ourselves. We could feel free. The feeling of just being together that we always had was a blessing. This atmosphere is where I grew up, where I learned how to be a member, a team player. When my parents needed me, all they had to do was to call me at the Alliance. Just knowing I was there, safe, must have given them a secure feeling. In those years Atlanta was a hot bed of anti-semitism, a dark period due to the tragic "Leo Frank" case. But that is another story.

So you can see, when I came to Memphis there was no place for children or young adults to call their own. I missed this association that I had known. When I moved here, the synagogues were the spiritual, cultural and social hub. You can understand why I missed the Atlanta Alliance. After I was here a few months I began to get phone calls from men. I did not know any of them. I was invited to come and play on their basketball team. I was not only flattered, but filled with anticipation to see where they played.

The games were played on Sunday downtown at the Catholic Club—a dingy looking building with a small court. Play was mostly pick up with our own referees. It was not what I had known as fun and relaxing. It was chaos, with frequent arguments and hollering at each other. It was the only game in town for us so I stuck it out.

It was then that I knew a Jewish Center was needed. It was a must, but it was a long time in coming. Gladly I became a charter member. Our first Center was merely a converted skating rink, but for the few of us who had known what growing up at a Jewish Center meant it was a dream come true. The 50 or so men who started the Center not only felt its worth, but we all helped it grow into what our Center is today. Yes, I know because I helped and I was happy to have been among many.



# The Two That Became One -- Among the Oldest and the Newest

## The Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth Congregation -- Memphis, Tennessee

*Part II -- Continued from October, 1989 Newsletter*

*by Rabbi A. Mark Levin, Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth Congregation*

In Part I Rabbi Levin surveyed the origins of the Beth El Emeth Congregation, one of the earliest Congregations in Memphis, describing its fortunes during its first century, prior to its merger with the Anshei Sphard Congregation. In Part II, Rabbi Levin completes the history of the mid-1960's, culminating in the merger of these two venerable Orthodox Congregations. In the final part of his historical survey, the Rabbi surveys the fortunes of the newest/oldest Congregation in Memphis, bringing readers up to date at the close of the decade of the 1980's.



In 1948, the Anshei Sphard Congregation, after worshipping for forty-two uninterrupted years at its Market Street site downtown, built and dedicated its new Synagogue at North Parkway and Bellevue, the first of a two-stage building program. In 1955, the Congregation dedicated its Nat Buring Educational Building to house its Sunday School which the Congregation had established with its move east in 1948. In the same year, the Katzman Memorial Chapel at the Anshei Sphard Cemetery was dedicated. The erection of the Nat Buring Educational Building and the Katzman Memorial Chapel were accomplished during the administration of President Isadore B. Baer, a prominent local attorney, who served from 1951-55. Providing religious leadership at that time was Rabbi Morton Baum.

Succeeding Isadore B. Baer as President was Dr. Ben Schaffer, and his election to office marked a significant milestone in the life of the Congregation: the first time a second-generation member, a son of one of the "founding fathers," served as President. Like Mr. Baer, Dr. Schaffer served for four years, from 1956-60. During his term of office, the Silverstein Tahara Shtibel, a place where full Orthodox burial rites could be handled, was dedicated.

From 1960 through 1963, Aaron Weiss served as President. During these years, the Anshei Sphard Ladies' Auxiliary was particularly energetic and active. They not only raised much-needed funds for the support of the Congregation, but frequently served as the catalyst for social activity within the Congregation for the benefit of its members, friends and guests, which bonded the member families both to the Congregation, and to each other, in a powerful fashion. Under the leadership of Aaron Weiss, the Congregation enjoyed great prosperity, laying the foundations for the successful administration of Max Bodin (1963-65), under whose administration Rabbi Saul Weiss was engaged as the Rabbi and Max Shimansky as Cantor.

The Anshei Sphard Congregation occu-

pled its magnificent facility for only twenty-two years, for it soon became evident that the Jewish Community was moving even farther east.

At the same time, the Memphis Jewish population was declining, and the city had not experienced significant economic growth to attract newcomers in search of job and career opportunities. The relatively stagnant economic situation in Memphis resulted in large numbers of sons and daughters of the Anshei Sphard Congregation, (and, indeed, all the other Congregations) after attending colleges and schools out of the city, not returning to Memphis.

In the early and mid-1960's, membership at Anshei Sphard Congregation remained constant, but spiraling cost resulted in a financial strain. Beth El Emeth Congregation with a declining membership was in a perilous financial situation. During the years just prior to the merger, the Anshei Sphard Congregation remained a vibrant, active and important part of the Jewish Community. However, Anshei Sphard perceived the possible merger as a way to consolidate funds for a new synagogue facility in East Memphis, the area to which the membership was moving. Without the merger with Beth El Emeth Congregation, it is likely that the plans of the Anshei Sphard Congregation to relocate in East Memphis would have been delayed.

Does this story sound familiar?

For, it is at this juncture, that the paths of the Anshei Sphard and Beth El Emeth Congregations begin to intersect, both of the Congregations experiencing, to a remarkable degree, similar problems and concerns: the move of its membership to different locations in the eastern part of Memphis; dwindling memberships; spiraling budgets too large for the dwindling memberships to sustain.

The leadership of the two Congregations engaged in merger discussions. After numerous meetings, and "on-again, off-again" merger agreements, the efforts undertaken in the term of office of Kolman Katz, President (1964-67) of the Anshei Sphard Congregation, and Jurdon Messenger, President (1965-66) of the Beth El Emeth Congregation, were consummated in 1966.

The merger agreement by the Anshei Sphard and Beth El Emeth Congregations in 1966 reflected the realities that their best hope for a viable future was to pool their human and material resources and relocate in the heart of East Memphis, the growing new center of the Memphis Jewish Community. Rabbinic leadership was provided by Rabbi Arthur Levin, who had been engaged in 1961 as the Rabbi of the Beth El Emeth Congregation. Soon after the merger, Cantor Efraim Shapiro was engaged.

An energetic search for a new site for the newest, and, at the same time, amongst the oldest, Congregations in Memphis was undertaken, with land in East Memphis at Rich and East Yates Road purchased by Mr. Nat Buring for the Synagogue.

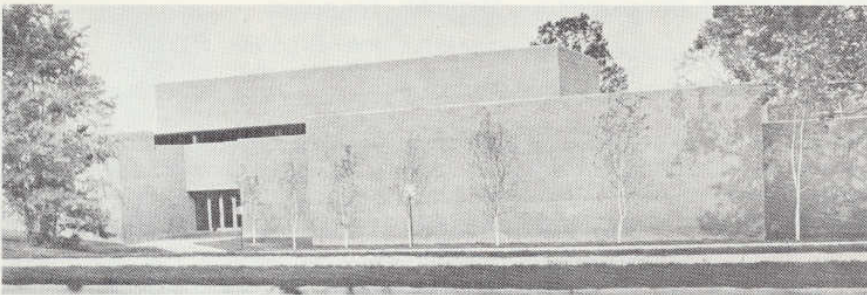
Nat Buring, prominent local Memphis businessman and member of the Cherry family, played an important role in the construction of the Anshei Sphard Congregation on Parkway, as well as in the new Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth Congregation, located in East Memphis. He was a major benefactor whose significant financial contributions to two building campaigns enabled their successful fruition. Mr. Buring had served as a member of the Board of Trustees for many years. In recognition and appreciation of his commitment and support, he was elevated to the position of Honorary-Life Vice President. In its second location on Parkway, the Congregation dedicated its new educational building in his honor as the "Nat Buring Educational Building," while his late wife, Sylvia, of blessed memory, was honored with the new Social Hall in the congregation's third location in East Memphis, the "Sylvia Buring Social Hall."

Another member of the Congregation, Mr. Harry Cooper, who, while offered the Presidency numerous times, never served as President, but played, and continues to play, an important role in the life of the Congregation. A prominent and successful Memphis businessman, Mr. Cooper served as Chairman of the Building Campaign to erect the Anshei Sphard Synagogue in its second location on East Parkway, and again served in that position almost twenty years later for the erection of the present magnificent facilities of the Congregation. On both occa-



## Two That Became One

*continued from page 3*



*Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth Today*

sions, he served with distinction, investing enormous amounts of time and energy, as well as financial commitment, in bringing both campaigns to successful fruition.

Under the presidency (1968-71) of an energetic young attorney, Ronald Harkavy, a superbly successful Building Fund Campaign and Program were initiated resulting in the dedication on September 13, 1970, of the strikingly modern and beautiful facility of Memphis' Jewish Community's newest/oldest Congregation--the Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth congregation. One of the later visionary acts of Mr. Harkavy was the establishment of the congregation's Endowment Fund, at that time, a rare and unusual instrument, but a necessary and farsighted one. For it was this Endowment Fund which was to stand the Congregation in good stead as it experienced difficult financial circumstances as a result of the ruling of the Tennessee State Supreme Court which defined Bingo, a major revenue-producing activity of the Congregation (providing 25 to 33-1/3% of its annual budget), as "gambling" and therefore illegal under the Tennessee State Constitution.

Succeeding Ronald Harkavy as President was Robert Hirsch, a builder and developer, who had served as Chairman of the Building Committee, successfully shepherding the actual construction of the Congregation's new facility. He served for two years (1971-72), and he was succeeded by local businessman, Robert Bernatsky, who, like Ronald Harkavy, was a member of the large and well-known Memphis Jewish family, the Cherry family. It was during administration that an energetic and activist young Rabbi, the present writer, was engaged as Rabbi. A native of South Africa, Rabbi A. Mark Levin was a graduate of the Yeshiva University-affiliated Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, where he had been ordained by the renowned Rabbi Dr. J.B. Soloveitchik, foremost and preeminent Orthodox Talmudic scholar and Jewish philosopher.

The new/old Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth Congregation had successfully accomplished numerous transitions: the merger of two struggling, small Orthodox Congregations

into one larger entity committed to Orthodox Judaism; the physical relocation of the newly-merged Congregation from the second site of each of the two Congregations into their new and combined third site, with the attendant emotional and financial strains and tensions; the leap from roots in Eastern Europe and the founding fathers and families of the two Congregations struggling to deal with the culture-shock they experienced in the New World, rooting themselves in the Pinch, weathering the Great Depression, sending their sons off to loyally serve their new country during the Second World War; establishing themselves financially; raising their children, frequently under difficult and trying circumstances--and now successfully relocated in the new, growing eastern part of the city of Memphis. Comfortably ensconced in its modern, futuristic and full-service facility, the congregation remains deeply rooted in, and committed to the primacy of Torah and Halacha (Jewish Law) as interpreted and taught by its Rabbis, in the governance of the Congregation.

While still struggling to meet a growing annual budget, the congregation could now turn its energies and resources into more intensive spiritual and educational activities for both young and old alike. It is these religious, spiritual and educational programs, activities and concerns which are the *raison d'être* of the congregation and infuse its physical facilities with meaning and kedush/holiness.

Beginning with the leadership of Robert "Bob" Bernatsky (1973-75), and succeeded by President Larry Brown (1976-78), Joseph Leibovich (1978-79), Lester Lit (1979-81); Stuart Zalowitz (1981-84); Samuel "Brooksie" Gold (1984-86); Dr. Avron Slutsky (1986-88), and present President, Dr. Ira Weinstein, the Rabbinic leadership, with the assistance of the Cantor/Youth Director, has been mandated to embark on a program of youth activities and adult education programs. These received national recognition from the Orthodox Union (Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America) and its youth-arm, the National Conference of Synagogue Youth.

Presently numbering some 380 members, representing some 750 souls, the Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth Congregation has become an integral, important and valuable part of the total Memphis Jewish Community, acclaimed nationally for its innovative programming.

During the past fifteen years, numerous endowed programs have enriched the religious, spiritual and cultural life of the congregation, and, indeed, the entire Memphis Jewish Community. These endowed programs have brought to and Memphis renowned and articulate exponents of Centrist Orthodox Judaism, the finest talents in Jewish music and the Cantorial arts, and innovative lecture series, workshops and programs, all under the umbrella of the Congregation's Jack Gold Institute of Adult Jewish Education. The Congregation's Sisterhood continues to be a powerhouse of service, energy and programs. Its annual Purim Carnivals or extravaganzas and Chanukah Dinners are among the highlights of the Congregation's year. The Sisterhood continues to follow in the traditions of its founders of helping support the budget of the Congregation. An important development of the past fifteen years has been the growing inclusion of Jewish women in authentic Jewish learning, the goal being the creation of cadres of knowledgeable and informed Jewish women deeply committed to the tenets of Orthodox Judaism.

Through the range of programs, workshops, concerts and youth activities, the Congregation continues to reach out into the entire Memphis Jewish Community. Members of the Congregation are to be found in important leadership positions in local and national Jewish organizations.

Another important development of the past fifteen years has been the growing assumption of responsibility by the Congregation for the entire community, manifest through its participation in the Metropolitan Interfaith Association's Food Pantry and Clothing Closet.

An important strength of the congregation is its diversity, including in its membership both newcomers and sixth-generation members; infants and children and senior citizens; families and single members; Jewishly-illiterate to Jewish-sophisticates; those deeply involved in Jewish observance and those only tenuously connected--a microcosm of Klal Yisrael, the totality of the Jewish people.

About to embark on its 128th year of service to its membership and community, this new/old Congregation faces the future, deeply rooted in, and committed to, Orthodox Judaism, with energy, optimism and confidence, ready and prepared for the challenges ahead, and eager to continue to contribute to the rich heritage of the Memphis Jewish Community.



## Jewish, American, and Southern:

### Women of the Pinch in Memphis, Tennessee

Part II

Continued from October, 1989, Newsletter

by Emily Angel Baer



In addition to a whirlwind social life for her daughter, the first generation Jewish immigrant woman in Memphis came face to face with another element of American society that was uniquely southern.

That was the close relationship between blacks and white. The Southern woman was at worst a racist and at best culturally influenced by black Americans. In Memphis, most immigrant women or their daughters had black maids and/or cooks, often living in close proximity to the family. The habits and traditions of one affected the other, in language, in food, and in social custom.

Southern social mannerisms and attitudes toward blacks were more evident in the second generation Pinch women than in the first. But perhaps the sharpest difference between the Old World mother and her American southern daughter involved the role of women in their society. Orthodox Judaism seems a paradox at times. The husbands and fathers of these women davened their morning and evening prayers daily. One of the prayers gives thanks to God for being born a man. However, the laws of the Torah also teach the utmost respect for women. In the Old World, women knew their role and responsibility. In America priorities changed for both men and women. Everything was ordered in the Old World, but in America, the lines were less clear. The women had to work in the shops to help their men succeed. The men had to struggle to maintain their dignity in a society where they were not only looked down upon by gentiles, but also by the established Jewish families who had immigrated from Germany in the early nineteenth century. It was left to the women to maintain a semblance of Old World order.

The Yiddish mama was a real balabos-teh. Without fail the Pinch women admired and revered the mother. Evelyn Weiss recalls her grandmother in the role of the matriarch: "My grandmother was like the queen of the big (extended) family...In my younger childhood days I always have these beautiful memories of the family getting together at my grandmother's house. She always baked all her goodies." Anna Gruber's mother not only took care of the store, the house, and the

cooking, she also founded, with others, the Jewish Ladies Aid Society. Esther Sellgman marveled at her mother's energy: "I don't know how my mother managed it. Every day we had a hot meal; twelve o'clock it was on the table. She baked bread, she baked all the bakery that we ate. She made all our clothes. She crocheted, she knitted...And she also helped my father in the shop." Fannie Goldstein cannot recall a moment when her mother was still: "I always said I never saw my mother sleeping, because she worked in the store all day and she baked all night."

The Pinch women venerated their mothers, who unknowingly were setting an example of strength and independence for their modern daughters. Hattie Bass remarks: "The older generation was...stronger...They were able to do things that women today don't have the energy to do. They were brought up to work, not to piddle around like our people do." These were true southern matriarchs, who assumed and taught responsibility, especially where traditional customs were concerned.

Almost all of the second generation Pinch women worked from a very young age in the family business. They were chagrined to find that as young women seeking careers this experience was discounted: "...I never will forget the first time I went to get a job (away from the family business where she had worked for years) and they gave me an application blank to fill out a Lowenstein. Among the questions that they asked was how much experience do you have. So I wrote in there a long sentence: I have been working all my life. And they asked where. In my Father's store. So when the superintendent, personnel man, looked it over, he took a pencil and scratched all that out and wrote there, 'no experience'. And I was furious. And I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'That doesn't count. You have not worked for anybody. Working at home doesn't count.' And he put me in for an absolute inexperienced worker. But that didn't make any difference; I still knew how to sell."

Women were quite visible in the Pinch. They displayed an uncanny knowledge of human nature. The idea was to assure results without being obvious, and their most effective area was the home. This story is representative of many similar tales: "...my mother used to make our things (but she wanted a new hat and coat for spring, and instead of just giving her the money, her mother) told me that I would have to ask my father for it and I was biting my tongue because that was a bit too much for me to do, but I finally...asked him for it. She had the money all the time. I think she was a very wise woman to make me ask my father for it. I think that our parents were very wise, I really do. You know we used to sit around the table,

meals were on time and everybody ate meals on time. We would sit around and talk about things and discuss them at the table. They were good times really and truly." There is a distinctly southern pace in this home, where the dinner was ready and the family had the time to communicate and the father's authority was unquestioned, but all of this was arranged by the mother.

Some historians consider food as one of the superficialities of being southern, like "impoliteness" in the North. But for Orthodox Jewish women, food was very important indeed. Keeping Kosher, observing the Jewish Dietary laws of Kashruth, was the measure of one's commitment to Judaism. The immigrants arrived in the Pinch having never wavered from that tradition.

The observance or non-observance of kashruth, such a key element in Jewish culture, was almost always determined by the woman of the house. The more assimilated to Southern society they became, the less likely they were to keep Kosher. Fanny Goldstein kept Kosher as a child, but gave it up: "I often wonder how I ever began eating non-kosher food. At the time on my way to school I'd pass a hamburger house and I'd cross the street because I couldn't stand the smell of non-kosher meat. It nauseated me. So how I ended up eating 'trafe' at any time in my life, I don't know. But I did. I'd get a barbecue."

Often the first taste of non-Kosher food came from black domestic workers in the home. Fagie Schaefer was grown and married when her maid combined southern cooking with Kosher cooking: "The maid would make greens for my kids--couldn't use bacon stock but she would substitute because I didn't know how. She would use brisket or a little schmaltz."

But for most women in the Pinch, keeping Kosher was considered too important a matter to surrender to the non-Jewish black maid. These women were not visitors in their own kitchen; rather, they planned and cooked the important meals. Many of them not only picked up southern cooking from the maid, but also gave the maid lessons in Jewish cooking, which resulted in many a black church social serving streudel and chopped liver.

The family or holiday meal was an important aspect of Jewish life, both in the Old World and the new. The success of this tradition rested solely with the mother, the matriarch of the family. In most Pinch families, the children had their job too. The mother worked in the store and after school, the boys went to cheder and the girls prepared the table. One reason the meal required everyone's cooperation is that it was rarely just the family, "...we had gangs of people all the time."

Ultimately, many of the women raised in



## Women of the Pinch

*continued from page 5*

the Pinch allowed their commitment to Kashruth to weaken, but many merely combined southern foods and techniques with Kosher foods and techniques. This loosening of observance in one area usually indicated a loosening in other areas of Orthodox Jewish tradition. But the gender-related task of cooking was a major factor in the southernization of Pinch Jews.

The women of the Pinch reveal many of the traits that serve as designators for southern women. First, they were very much aware of what a southern lady should or should not do, although their actions often rebelled against that myth. Second, their devotion to their religion was to a degree southern, for in the South religiosity is almost always highly respected. On a national average in the mid-twentieth century there was one synagogue for every 2800 Jews. In the South in the period from 1900 to about 1940 there was one synagogue for every 700 Jews. Third, the reverence for and centrality of the family and traditional values comprise another trait that is definitional of southern women. Here perhaps more than anywhere the old culture meshed with the new: "We had respect for our parents. Very much so. We were scared to death if we said the wrong words to them. You know, that was absolutely an unheard of thing to be smart-aleck, or to call a parent by his first name, or to be disobedient...you didn't tell a lie; you told the truth. You fasted on Yom Kippur, when you got old enough, you walked to shul, you didn't eat trefe. You saved your Sunday clothes for Sunday. You were absolutely lined up this way. This was your path."

The merger is apparent: the rigidity of family order and custom combined with traditional observances of Orthodox Judaism that were manifested at times in distinctly Protestant ways. There was no Sunday School in the Old World; it is not an integral part of the Jewish religion. Sunday School and Sunday clothes were an American invention designed to promote assimilation in the late nineteenth century. But Sunday School as well as other facets of southern culture, particularly in relation to food, did become part of Jewish life in the Pinch. The Pinch women had the foresight and strength to adapt.

Finally, an important part of the Americanization and "southernization" of these immigrant women and their daughters and their granddaughters was a cohesiveness, an awareness and a sense of themselves as Southerners as well as Jews. Pinch mothers were upset if their children married non-southern Jews. They recognized that they had

## History of the B'nai B'rith Youth in Memphis

*by Rachel Shankman*



In the Jewish tradition, the importance of a community and a sense of belonging is integral. At no time in human development is the need to belong felt more keenly than in adolescence. In 1924 the time was, ripe to establish an organization that would carry Jewish values and ideals, and yet be American in style. Thus, in May, 1924, in Omaha, Nebraska, the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization was founded nationally.

The founders, including Sam Beber, considered the "father" of the Aleph, Zaddik, Aleph, (the boys component of B.B.Y.O.), sensed the need for a group that would act as an informal Jewish educator and that would strengthen the identity of young Jewish men. An overriding concern that still permeates the organization is the concept that A.Z.A. be a Jewish fraternal organization, not just a fraternal organization composed of Jews. The idea of tzedekah was established at the onset, with \$1.00 of the each boy's dues set aside for charity.

The duality of purpose, helping young men in their personal growth as well as helping them develop socially useful lives, caught the imagination of Memphis youth leaders in 1927. Julius Bisno, Aaron Brenner, Fred Goldberg, Joe Allenberg, and Morris Fogelman, among others, saw the need to bridge the gap between youth from the various synagogues and the Temple. Leo Bearman Sr. acted as the boys' advisor in obtaining a charter. On March 20, 1928, Memphis #71 was launched as the first Memphis chapter of the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization. Joe Allenberg was installed as the first president of the 23 members, with the National B'nai B'rith leader Phillip Klutznick coming to Memphis for the installation. The charter members of Memphis A.Z.A. #71 reads like a "Who's Who" of Jewish leadership, including Herbert Shainberg, I.G. Goldsmith, Dave Blumberg, Morris Kemp, Sam Weiner, Izzy Karchmer, Henry Vosse, Theodore Folz, Irving Pelts, Nathan Dermon, Sam Goldstein, Joe Weiner, Alfred Scharf, Joe Benowitz, Arthur Hutkin, Fred Cohen, Morris Rosenblum, Newton Green, and Charles Schwartz, as well as those mentioned earlier. In 1929, Memphis #71 won the award as the outstanding chapter in the Order.

Arthur Hutkin not only loved his local chapter, but had the distinction of "hitchhiking" to 10 conventions. He still has his jacket with the map of the U.S. sewn on the back, in case he got lost.

Israel H. Peres became Memphis' second A.Z.A. chapter in 1938. As a result of the bulk of the members from #71 and Peres leaving for WWII, the chapters merged to become Peres #71. The only Jewish Memphian killed during the Viet Nam War, Richard Miller, was a Peres alumnus. The billboard memorializing him, is displayed in the Memphis Jewish Community Center. Peres #71 continues its tradition of tzedekah with its annual charity show and dance, Harvest Hop.

The second A.Z.A. chapter was formed in 1947 and named Harry Washer Chapter, #684. Harry Washer was an honor graduate of Humes High School, who, as a member of the 106th Infantry Division of the Armed Forces, fought in the Battle of the Bulge. Corporal Washer died at the age of 22 on December 21, 1944. (In 1981, the Memphis Jewish War Veterans also honored Cpl. Washer by forming the Cpl. Harry Washer Post #121.) Washer held an annual benefit show called Cotton Boll and a traditional Yom Kippur dance. After breaking the fast, Memphis youth of that era could be found dancing the night away at the Baron Hirsch Synagogue on Washington Street.

*continued on page 7*



## B'nai B'rith Youth

*continued from page 6*

In the spring of 1950, Stanley Okeon, a past advisor of Peres A.Z.A., Lester Friedman, then President of Peres, and Avron Brog met and conceived of the idea of forming another A.Z.A. chapter. The result was of Dr. Edward M. Fortas A.Z.A. The chapter was named in memory of Dr. Fortas, who had been very active in A.Z.A., and was serving in an advisory capacity when he died. Avron Brog was elected the first Aleph Godol, Doris Davis was elected the first sweetheart.

Fortas, with its exciting annual charity show and dance, *Chez Patee*, first written by Aunt Raye Evans, won many Regional and International awards. Some of the outstanding Fortas alumni include: Jerome Makowsky, Ronald Harkavy, Herbie Kosten, Alvin Walter, Alan Bisno, Irving Belz, Gerald Stern, Morris Kriger, and Alvin Notowich.

It seemed most fitting that the 4th AZA chapter be named in memory of Lester S. Okeon, who had served in almost every leadership position in the youth community, including the presidency of the first BBYO council in Memphis, and vice-president of the Cotton States Region. Lester Okeon, a graduate of Southwestern (Rhodes) College, was a civilian technician for the Navy, who died in an airplane crash near Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Okeon A.Z.A. was chartered on February 21, 1959, with Ben Reisman serving as the first president. Jerry Diamond, who at that time was President of the Cotton States Region, made the formal presentation of the charter to the group. As with earlier chapters, the charter members continue to be leaders in our, and other, Jewish communities. They include: Joel Cook, David Okeon, Milton Okeon, Jake Bredow, Arnold Engelberg, Bryan Schwartz, Ron Gilman, Harold Fineberg, Gary Blaiss, and Herbert Lansky. The first advisors to the group were Stanley Okeon and Dr. Joseph Parker. Mr. and Mrs. Harry Okeon, parents of Lester Okeon, for many years acted as "chapter parents," a role Mrs. Okeon continues today. As new members, called alephs-in-training, are installed, Mrs. Okeon recounts the history of Okeon A.Z.A. proudly. Okeon also has the distinction of having their present advisor, Herman Goldberger, serving them for 25 years. Okeon's "Summertime" charity show and dance is always an eagerly awaited event.

A 5th A.Z.A. chapter established December, 1963, was named for an outstanding humanitarian Leo Levy. Mr. Levy, who was 91 at his death, was born in a small village in Alsace-Lorraine. He worked actively for many years in Memphis for the United Jewish Appeal, YMCA, and the Crippled Children's Home. Mr. Levy was given a special award by HIAS

in 1959. William Zangwill, Alvin Jaffe, and Avron Smolensky represented the chapter at its first regional convention.

Today, Peres, Fortas and Okeon A.Z.A. continue the strong tradition of developing future leaders through their 5-fold approach. This includes programming that encompasses social, athletic, religious, cultural and community service events. The true meaning of A.Z.A. remains a commitment to harmony, benevolence, and brotherly love.

Where the boys are—can the girls be far behind? Certainly not in the realm of the Memphis youth movement. Initially, it was thought that a merger of boys and girls chapters would be appealing, but with the two decades that A.Z.A. had been in existence, it was decided that a separate organization for the girls was necessary. Synonymous with B'nai B'rith Girls (the female component of B.B.Y.O.) were Miriam Weiss and Fanny Brenner Asher. Not only did "Ma Brenner" help launch the first A.Z.A. chapter, she approached Mrs. Harold Katz, the former Dorothy Goldberger, to help form the first B.B.G. chapter. Dottie served as Brenner's first N'siah (president). Brenner became Memphis first B.B.G. chapter in December, 1944. "Ma Brenner" had the distinction of being the first and only living namesake of a B.B.Y.O. chapter. Brenner conceived of the formal installation banquet, which many chapters adopted through the years. Brenner had the first female delegation to attend the first winter convention, which was held at the Peabody Hotel. On October 2, 1946, Brenner B.B.G. became an official member of the international organization.

Brenner contributed many "firsts" to B.B.G. nationally, including the selection of a "beau." This honor was first bestowed on Sonny Anderson. Brenner also was the training ground for Ann Lansky who not only served as Brenner's president, but also Cotton States, District 7 President, and International Vice-president.

In 1947, Bluff City B.B.G. became Memphis's second chapter. The girls' meeting place was the second floor of the Southern Bowling alley, as the J.C.C. had not yet been built. The girls' advisor was "Aunt" Etta Chase. Among their illustrious alumnae, Fotsie Leffkovitz Weiner still credits her experience in Bluff as "having taught her all about how an organization works." Fotsie became both Regional and the first District 7 B.B.G. President. Bluff City later became Dr. Ben T. Finebaum B.B.G. in memory of Dr. Finebaum, a prominent optometrist whose wife Gloria had been a devoted advisor to Bluff City B.B.G.

Rose Belz Kriger was chartered as the third B.B.G. chapter in 1955. This chapter honored the memory of the accomplished musician and singer who led the Sunday

School assemblies at Sunday School at Baron Hirsch. Mrs. Kriger was the mother of Morris Kriger, and sister of Philip Belz. The chapter started with twelve girls who were former Bluff City members: Marlene Belz, Joan Sternberger, Brenda Cook, Sandy Peiser, Judy Schwartz, Marsha Eversky, Evelyn Salky, Joyce Reisman, Miriam Jablin, Margaret Herzog, Lorraine Engelberg, and Mitzi Kappel.

The girls had pleaded with the District Director, Jack Weiner, to them to establish the new chapter, that the existing tree had too many branches. Irving Belz was the first beau.

The 4th B.B.G. chapter in Memphis was Cantor Morris I. Levin, established in 1960. The young women chose to honor Cantor Levin, who before his death, had served Baron Hirsch Synagogue for 32 years. The initial members included Donna Fenberg, who served as the first N'siah, Sherry Kapell, Karen Abrams, Sheila Hytken, Marie Jagendorf, Michelle Levin, Beverly Treson, Sandra Herzog, Doris Seigman, Mickey Glassman, Rita Meer, Susan Rubenstein, Janet Schriener, Doris Seigman, Carol Smith, Deanna Paul, Merrill Kahn and Mildred Sebulsky. Ann Slutsky served as the first advisor.

For the initial meeting of the 6th B.B.G. chapter, Reena B.B.G., the girls were treated to a recipe for the ideal chapter. The skit was written by Kay Woolner, a chapter member. Ingredients for the recipe included Responsibility, read by Ms. Woolner; Jennie Jacobson added Enthusiasm; Sheila Lubin spoke about Effort; Sherry Goldman told about Neighbornliness, and Rochelle Meyers added Ability. These ingredients added up to Reena B.B.G.

River City B.B.G., the newest B.B.G. chapter, came into being in 1978, when this writer in her role of Regional Director felt the city needed an additional B.B.G. chapter. The charter members included Jody Danzig, Tracy Weiner, Daneel Buring, Valerie Cassius, Elizabeth Cohen, Jill Hanover, Jackie Frank, Karen Goldstein, Hallie Salky, and Helen Danziger. Tracy Weiner was the first N'siah, and Ricky Libby had the distinction of being the first beau. The first advisors were Cathy Libman and Dee Cannell.

As we move into the 90's, B.B.G. and A.Z.A. continue to find the Jewish youth of Memphis working and playing together. They are conducting services at the B'nai B'rith Home, listening to a speaker on Cults, learning Israeli dancing, playing softball, attending conventions and leadership seminars. Friendship and the sense of belonging motivate their activities as they did in 1924.

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## The Pinch -- 1989

by David McCourt

Worn brick buildings and empty lots line Main Street in the Pinch district less than a mile from downtown. Painted posterboard backdrops of bright blue curtains and bouquets fill the second story windows with a false life which hides the hollow interiors within. The pictures cover the truth like make-up on a corpse.

The name Pinch began as an appellation of a slang phrase, Pinch Gut, which outsiders used to describe the hungry appearance of the immigrants who lived there almost a century ago. Ironically, the most-visited spots in the Pinch today are two eateries at the corners of Jackson and Main.

Almost nightly, young people flock to The North End, a restaurant and bar where one can sip an imported beer and feast on the polished displays of memorabilia. The restaurant has attracted so many customers that its owner recently opened another restaurant next door to catch the overflow.

Though only across the street, the other eatery is generations apart. Here, at the beginning of the end of Main Street, stands a three-story brown brick building with barely readable, painted advertisements peeling from its walls. Below the large Dr. Pepper insignia printed on the yellowed plastic sign hanging in front are the words "Abraham's Deli."

Behind a glass counter, Jacob Abraham, the deli's owner, methodically slices meat for sandwiches. Occasionally, he wipes his hands on his white apron and sidles over to check the potato chip rack. A paper hat covers most of the hair on his head. Farther down the counter, his wife Rosa Lee adds up or-

ders on a slip of paper, then rings them up on an outdated cash register.

The 70-year old owner has stood behind this counter every day for nearly 30 years. His wife has been there longer. She was born upstairs and raised on this corner.

The Abrahams have held on to the deli so tenaciously simply because "we like it here."

Customers like it here, too. Whether for a morsel of Pinch history or a taste of Abraham's Hungarian meatball sandwich made with his grandmother's recipe, almost a hundred people each weekday enter Abraham's deli for breakfast or lunch. Some customers have frequented the deli for over two decades.

The deli's three part-time employees are as loyal as the customers. One has worked there 20 years and another for 16 years. The only explanation Abraham offers is, "It's a good life. We're very satisfied."

A bottle of Watkins liniment, wide watch bands and a pair of work gloves displayed on the wall behind the register are clues to the deli's past. "People say you can find just about anything in here, if you look hard enough," says Abraham. Thirty years ago the deli was a corner grocery for locals and country folk who came to the Pinch to shop.

Gradually, the neighborhood was shoved out as downtown expanded into Pinch. The apartment buildings were replaced with the Cook Convention Center, a highway bypass, and finally an electrical substation across the street from the deli.

Construction workers with empty stomachs came to the store asking for sand-

wiches. For the next several years, the Abrahams earned their daily bread making lunches.

Once the construction was completed, the laborers were replaced by downtown professionals with more discerning tastes. "They'd come in and ask for a special sandwich or a special beer," Abraham said.

Soon the beer cooler was stocked with Foster's from Australia, Guinness from Ireland, and Moosehead from Canada. When Rosa Lee's brother Morris closed his tiny liquor store next to the deli, the Abrahams expanded and added a few tables.

Looking back, Abraham confesses, "There haven't been any hard times. Just work hard and you don't have any hard times."

Abraham doesn't like to think about the future. "If I can work, I will." But as the lunch rush dies and Rosa Lee and the other helpers leave, Abraham leans against the counter wearily. "I'm tired now--dead on my feet," he says slowly. "I smoke cigars and do everything wrong, but I take vitamins. They're the only things keeping me going."

Abraham may need more than vitamins to weather a new wave of change in the Pinch district. Beyond the substation across from the deli, the long arms of cranes lift metal beams and heavy trucks pour the concrete foundations for the Great American Pyramid. The Pyramid threatens to drown the deli in a flood of music clubs, restaurants, and tourist shops.



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