



Jewish Historical Society of Memphis & The Mid-South

Founded in 1986

163 Beale Street

Memphis, TN 38103

NEWSLETTER
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Message

from our President

Nothing gives me more pleasure as your president than the enthusiasm and dedication of our Board of Directors. Their faithfulness, good counsel, and willingness to work at tasks large and small are what makes our continued existence and progress possible.

I welcome back to the Board, Laura Spiegler, Elias Goldsmith and Lester Sewel. Their re-election assures that they, along with our other invaluable Board Members now completing terms of office, may continue their devoted efforts to the growth of our society.

To this exceptional group we have two excellent newly elected Board members, Gloria Felsenthal and David Schneider. I commend them to you all.

Gloria, our new secretary, has assumed the position that was her father's, Eric Cornell, of blessed memory, who had earned our deep respect and affection. His spirit will continue to be with us as Gloria follows in his footsteps. Gloria is an active member of Temple Israel Sisterhood and has just completed a term of office on the Board of the congregation. With an M.A. in English from Rhodes College, she teaches an S.A.T. prep course at White Station High School and tutors the same privately. Her husband, Eddie and three sons, all Princeton men, are descendants of early settlers of Brownsville, Tennessee - a first family of West Tennessee.

David Schneider, who has been elected to a three year term as Director, has already distinguished himself as our newsletter editor and happily for us will continue that responsibility. David hails from Knoxville where his boyhood experiences in his father's grocery were so meaningful that he has created in his den a mini replica of a shelf section, complete with merchandise from earlier days.

David and his wife, Rita, and two daughters moved to Memphis in 1956. Their son, Michael, was born in Memphis. David is Vice President of National Insurance Agency, Inc., an affiliate of National Mortgage Company. He is an active member of Baron Hirsch Synagogue and has been a choir member for over thirty years. An avid collector, his interests range from insurance memorabilia to a beautiful collection of State of Israel medals and coins.

It also gives me great pleasure to thank you for my re-election and the opportunity to serve this organization another year. I look forward to increased membership and expanded activities in the coming year.

Harriet Stern



NOW IS THE TIME FOR ...

A HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF MEMPHIS

We Jews, who are "the People of the Book" understand the need to be aware of our own history. For much of our existence we have had to be concerned with the anti-Semitism that has pervaded a large part of world history, in many places and throughout many times. To refute the lies that have been and continue to be perpetrated in some quarters, it is essential that we, at least, understand our heritage. The strength to lead a good life relies, in part, on the recognition that we stand on the shoulders of men and women whose lives were important in the history of the world, of the United States, and of Memphis, Tennessee.

Numerically we are a relatively insignificant part of the whole city, but for many reasons we are a significant minority. In many fields of endeavor, the mark we have made belies our small numbers. In some instances, it is a fact that the contributions of Jews have been included in other instances when comprehensive histories of the Jews have been written that incorporated international, national, or regional areas. But locally, little has been recorded of Jewish history.

I believe it is urgent that we begin to gather the important information about the history of the Jews of Memphis. Much is already irretrievable. Before we lose any more of our elders, who can fill in the gaps and tell us the stories of the past, we need to make a start. We need to conduct oral interviews so we can record in their own words the memories that are in their hearts and minds.

In addition to oral interviews, there should also be a search for written records of past events. Library research will be important, but a diligent plea must be made for people who have documents relating to the past to come forward and make them known. We can learn little from documents that are hidden away unread in the bottom of a cabinet. Let us bring them into the light of day so they can reveal us to ourselves.

Continued on page 3

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MEMPHIS HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

for the past several months, I have been involved with a project that holds every special significance for me - interviewing survivors of the Holocaust who reside in Memphis. As the daughter of survivors, there were so many gaps in my own history, and the untimely early death of my parents, meant many questions would go unanswered. I was determined that while we were fortunate enough to have many survivors still with us, their histories would be recorded and documented. As others who are involved with oral histories, I felt an obligation to have the events of the victims rather than the prospective of the perpetrators.

My desire to conduct oral histories coincided with a grant being provided to the Center for Southern Folklore, through the generosity of the Belz Foundation. Judy Peiser, the Executive Director of the Center for Southern Folklore, contacted me and we began the process of setting up interviews.

To enhance my knowledge, I visited the Center for Holocaust Studies and Documentation in Brooklyn. I met with Prof. Yaffa Eliach, the center's dynamic director, and her staff. After a crash course ranging from the rationale for remembering and documenting to the technical aspects of interviewing survivors, I really felt ready to proceed with the oral histories. The questionnaires used as a guideline were developed at the Center for Holocaust Studies and the Second Generation Group of Massachusetts. The questions were designed to elicit a picture of life in Europe prior to WWII, as well as the war experience, and rebuilding life after the Holocaust.

The interviews have provided rich descriptions of a vibrant Jewish life, both religious and secular; scholarship from the shtetel to the magnificent synagogues of Lodz; large family units visiting each other for the Jewish holidays; and of course the sanctity of the Shabbat. The interviews have presented a diversity of experience from prosperous family businesses to living in poverty. We explored in detail the ghetto period, the liquidation of the ghettos; movement from labor to concentration camps; liberation, the D.P. camp experience and coming to the U.S. We recorded incident after incident of how these survivors managed to cope on a daily basis, and what they attribute their survival to. To date, seventeen survivors have been interviewed. There are approximately fifty five more survivors to be documented. In addition to the oral histories, the survivors have shared precious photographs and other memorabilia with us. A photo and slide presentation of some of this material was recently shown at the annual Yom Hashoah commemoration. This project has potential for great expansion, as there is a need to document the testimony of liberators, and other survivors who live in the communities close to Memphis.

The response from the survivors and their families has been so positive. They have opened up their hearts and homes. I hope the educational value of recording these most important histories will be evident for many generations to come. It has really been a team effort - Judy Peiser and I

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100 YEARS OF FAMILY HISTORY

A recent article in the Baltimore Jewish Times covered a family celebrating 100 years in America. It was complete when 120 members of the family gathered in Baltimore, some coming from as far away as England, Spain, Mexico and all parts of the United States to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the family's immigration to America. This prompted some discussion among several of our members and we would like your help in locating any Memphis families whose roots go back 100 years in the Memphis area. First, we would like to document information about these families for our archives, publish some information in our newsletter and hopefully have some formal celebration or presentation highlighting these families.

If your family goes back a hundred years or more in the Memphis area or if you know of a family that does, please call Mr. Leonid Saharovici at 682-0103. Also, if you have any ideas or thoughts about this type project, we will welcome your suggestions.

doing the interviewing; Michelle Friedman
assisting with the technical aspects as a Media
Associate for the Center For Southern Folklore;
and Jenny Reisman doing the difficult job of
transcribing our tapes.

Rachel Shankman, Project Director
Memphis Holocaust Oral Histories

The Jews of Memphis -- 1860-1865

By 1860, the beginning of the period being considered in this brief essay, the Jews of Memphis had a burial ground, a philanthropic organization, a women's relief association, a synagogue of seventy or eighty members, a fraternal order, and a literary society. Since Memphis suffered relatively little damage during the Civil War, Jewish life continued as a new congregation and other institutions were established.

B'nai Israel (Children of Israel) Congregation was formed in 1853. The congregation worshiped in rented halls and in 1858 leased a bank building at Main and Exchange, which it converted into a place of worship, seating 150 men and 46 women. In 1860 the congregation purchased the building and by 1864 the debt to outsiders had been paid in full. By 1863, 87 members were contributing \$4,000.00 annually to support the congregation.

Despite war time conditions, the congregation had made some progress. During the first five years of the congregation's history, there was no permanent religious leader. It was not until December 1858, that Jacob J. Peres accepted the call to serve the congregation. The relationship between the congregation and Mr. Peres (he was not a rabbi though Temple Israel lists him as its first rabbi) was one of constant conflict. He was dismissed in August, 1860. Succeeding Mr. Peres was Rabbi Simon Tuska who served the congregation for ten years.

The dismissal of Mr. Peres was probably the motivating reason for the formation of Beth El Emeth in 1861. There are conflicting accounts of the number of members who resigned from Congregation Children of Israel referred to as German. The number who organized Beth El Emeth called Polish was small. In the latter part of 1862 there were between 55 to 60 members. The congregation thought of itself as strictly Orthodox. In advertising for a cantor, we read, "Minhag Polen Orthodox." L. Alexander seems to have been the first president, who was succeeded by J. J. Newman in 1863. Peres' place in the congregation is difficult to determine. The first spiritual leader was probably Rabbi E. Markenson who was elected December 17, 1861. On January 1, 1862, Beth El Emeth consecrated its new synagogue on Jefferson, where it probably worshiped until February, 1866, when it moved to second and Monroe.

Congregation Children of Israel and Beth El Emeth were the only two congregations in Memphis during the years 1860-1865.

Though a Hebrew School had been established in 1858, it did not satisfy the needs of the Temple congregation. In January, 1863, action was taken to organize "a school for all branches." Within six months the school was established and several articles in the newspapers praised the school. By June, 1864, enrollment reached more than one hundred, representing many denominations. It is to the credit of the Temple that despite its relatively small membership and limited financial resources, it created an opportunity for education among the people of Memphis at a time when the normal life of the community was interrupted by the War.

Even before any synagogue was established, the Jews had ground for burial purposes which was purchased in 1847 by Joseph I. Andrews. In 1860 he deeded the property to Congregation Children of Israel. In September, 1863, Beth El Emeth advertised in the newspapers for one or two acres of land that would be used for burial purposes. In the list of Shelby County cemeteries there was no mention of any owned by Beth El Emeth Congregation.

In June, 1859, Euphrates Lodge Number 35, (now Sam Schloss Lodge) was chartered by the Grand Lodge of the Order. The Lodge sponsored social functions, rendered humanitarian services, and paid fitting tribute to the memory of the war dead. Despite the Civil War, the Lodge in the spring of 1865 had 167 members.

During the latter part of 1864 the "United Hebrew Aid Association" was organized with a board of seven members. This association was formed because the Hebrew Benevolent Society organized twenty-four years earlier was unable to cope with the demands for help during the war years. The Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society (formed in 1855) was engaged in patriotic work of a humanitarian nature. This Society made generous contributions to the soldiers' hospitals.

Another organization formed during the years 1860-1865 was the Memphis Club. Membership of the Memphis Club included men of all shades political and religious opinions, and all ages and countries. In June, 1864, it had about two hundred members. It sponsored a dramatic and literary club in addition to providing sociability among its members.

The Jews of Memphis though small in number, about a thousand, in 1863 sought to retain their Jewish identity and perpetuate and promote their religion and cultural heritage. Obviously in a brief essay it is impossible to adequately describe the Jews of Memphis during the period being considered.

Rabbi James A. Wax

Archives-continued from page 3

Some of the work is fun, some is tedious but it is a real delight to ponder over photographs of a generation ago, noting the changes that time has brought about. There is the confirmation class of 1913; what luck to find two members who can tell us all the names of the people.

Then we found that there was a group of Church ministers and social workers some twenty years before MIFA. There has been no investigation into this organization to know its purpose but it does indicate there might have been a forerunner to MIFA. At one time Rabbi Ettelson was the president of this group.

We hope that these records will not just be boxed and set aside to collect dust. There should be programs planned around events of the past. Hopefully some one will devise a guide for teaching the history of the Jews of Memphis.

We may be able to put together a slide presentation that can be used by other organizations or congregations.

In time we hope to have exhibits that will inspire our community with pride in Memphis Jewish heritage and the history of Temple Israel.

Shirley Feibelman

It has been written that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

It asks too much of our societal institutions or their members to rely on memory or recall. The best evidence - sometimes the only source is in the records which can be preserved.

History is gleaned from many sources - organizational minutes, personal correspondence, certificates of birth, death, marriage and other reliable data which tell or indicate the events in the lives of people or community. Not all such material is relevant or worthy of archival preservation; it is the task of those entrusted with such records or memorabilia to evaluate and determine. This skill can be developed by study and experience. A prime qualification is an association with the institution and community whose history is being preserved.

Temple Israel decided about a year ago that too much time had passed, too much of its history was lost. A committee was formed and after some months of organization the work was begun.

For those of us who are working on this project it is a rewarding experience. We have barely begun but we already have 65 acid free document boxes of records. So far we have been working on materials that we have found at the Temple.

Some of the things we have found out are that in 1926 the Temple budget was \$30,000 and Mr. Joseph Newburger gave \$12,000 to build an annex on the building.

We found out that in 1925 there were 398 children in the religious school and a mothers class of 102.

We have many of the confirmation programs and parts spoken by the confirmants dating back to 1925.

Continued on page 4

HISTORY - Continued from page 1

The history of the city of Memphis began in 1820; the history of Jews here dates from 1840. Thus a written history of local Jewry is an ambitious project, covering a relatively long period of time. Within it some attention should be given to the historical context of events, which had an impact on Jewish life. It should include exploration of the following questions, among others: From where did Jewish emigration come? Why did Jews emigrate? How was Memphis chosen as their destination? What were early occupations, ways of life, religious practices, social customs? What have been their sorrows, joys, contributions? How has life changed for the Jews during their residence here?

The philosopher George Santayana warns that we ignore history at our peril when he says: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." In order to move forward, to make progress as a people we need to understand from whence we came. The history of our lives, collectively and individually needs to find expression so that we can study and enjoy its meaning and richness. From many origins we have come together to form one community, blended with, but also distinct from the community as a whole. It is a valid and worthy idea to learn about our forebears and to preserve our heritage.

Selma Lewis

In 1986 Louis Lettes, while a student majoring in history at Princeton University, visited Natchez, Mississippi, as part of a thesis project. Louis, son of Jane and Art Lettes, was engaged in research on the diminishing small Jewish communities in the Deep South. Natchez served as a case study, from which he drew some general conclusions as well as some projections of the future fate of this and similar communities. His thesis, "On the Verge of Extinction: Small Jewish communities in the Deep South", is excerpted here, with his permission.

This community," a Natchez attorney told Lettes, "is one of the oldest Jewish communities in the land and was in fact a charter member of the Reform movement. At one time it had a very large membership that filled its beautiful sanctuary, but now is in a state of demise and, not unlike other communities, faces a certain and inexorable extinction." This Lettes observed for himself when he attended the Friday night service. Temple B'nai Israel, established in 1845, was at that time reduced to only 32 members from a membership of 141 in its prime in 1906. Served by a student rabbi coming from HUC once a month, it had seen the demise of its last full-time rabbi ten years earlier. On this Friday night, eight members gathered for worship under the leadership of a local businessman and President of the congregation. His wife, who lit the Sabbath candles, was a fundamentalist Christian. There was no music and little Hebrew in the service. To his surprise, Lettes found this to be as "religious" a service as he had attended anywhere else in his life. Even so, he could see that a few dedicated members were tending a flickering flame in a congregation which was a shadow of its former self.

The city of Natchez itself had also suffered a decline. At the beginning of the Civil War, it had been the largest and wealthiest city in Mississippi, having flourished in the cotton plantation economy and the steamboat trade to become a center of commerce and culture. The handsome ante-Bellum mansions and plantations houses which are now a tourist attraction, serve as reminders of a former glory.

Jewish settlement in Natchez, as elsewhere in the South, began when Jewish peddlers, having amassed enough savings, established small stores which would sometime thereafter usually develop into substantial businesses. This passage from peddler to small shopkeeper to substantial merchant marked the steps on a road of opportunity that were followed by Southern Jews in each successive migration. The immigrant peddler Lettes explains, filled a niche in the Southern economy between landowning aristocrats and poor white farmers, neither of which had access to a class of merchants, tailors,, or cobblers. In addition the Jewish peddler provided the same services to blacks in an unprecedented fashion both before and after Emancipation. "The Jewish peddler befriended blacks, posed no threat to the poor white farmer, and catered to the tastes of aristocrats while at the same time fitting into his milieu as a white Southerner."

Beginning typically with a burial society, the

continued on page 5

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Natchez-continued from page 3

Jews created structures of religious and communal life in their communities. Early in the history of Natchez, ten or more Jewish peddlers convened from the countryside to observe the most important festivals. An Orthodox congregation existed early but went out of existence. B'nai Israel dates back to 1845 when the former burial society was revived as a Reform congregation. Its first meeting place was in the upper floor of the Fire Engine House. Lettes suggests that Reform Judaism was particularly congenial to Jews of the South who were a small minority amid their predominantly Christian neighbors. Reform Judaism enabled them to remain Jewish while becoming Americanized and interacting as full members of the community.

In fact, Jews, out of proportion to their number influenced the well-being of their communities. As Eli Evans has stated, "Jews in the South are different from Jews in the North in that we are a part of Southern history." In Natchez and elsewhere Jews took major roles in civic affairs. Jews of Natchez served on the board of Alderman, as mayor, and as officers of the Garden Club, the Rotary, the Country Club and the Protestant Orphanage.

Interaction between Jew and non-Jew was almost without exception mutually beneficial and outwardly amicable. Despite certain few incidents of violence, such as the Leo Frank case, the brunt of active prejudice in the South was borne by Blacks and Catholics. Jews did little to rouse the animosity of their neighbors. In fact, Lettes suggests that the pressure to conform and to assimilate threatened Jewish life more than anti-Semitism, of which he found almost no evidence. During Reconstruction Jewish merchants were members of the Cotton and Merchants Exchange.

It was the role of the Jews in the Reconstruction period that proved to be another unique contribution of Southern Jewry. When the Civil War devastated the Southern economy with a death blow to the plantation system and slavery, Jews who had opened stores before the war found themselves in an especially favorable situation. The pre-war economy was centered around a cotton factoring system connected to farm supply stores. During Reconstruction, the economy shifted to center around general stores set up by large-scale wholesale merchants. Jews were in a position to become involved in this trend as peddlers, small merchants or large city wholesalers. They now provided credit to farmers and became indispensable to the recovery of the South. Although there were economic fluctuations, the situation remained favorable until the Southern economy changed again in the first half of the 20th Century to a more industrial economy. Most Jews in the South had belonged to the merchant class whose family businesses provided basic needs in an agricultural economy. These businesses were

less integral to the industrial economy and the Jewish population began a migration from the smaller communities.

This out-migration, however, took place for other reasons besides the economic. The decision of Jewish youth to move to larger cities resulted as much from their own changing ambitions as from changes in the economy. The typical Jewish family encouraged sons to seek greater accomplishment in the professions and quality education at major colleges within and out of the region. The sons of merchants, grandsons of peddlers took these opportunities. As Eli Evans put it, "...the story of Jews in the South is the story of Fathers who built businesses to give to their sons who didn't want them." Incidentally, this is also true of non-Jewish youth in the same circumstances, but the impact is less in the Christian community than in the Jewish one where numbers were fewer to begin with. The overwhelming competition from chain stores also played a role, but not as significant as the fact that "the emphasis on education has drawn youth out and the lure of the professions has drawn them away."

In the current situation of demise of the small Jewish communities of the Deep South, Lettes sees a couple of trade-offs. On the negative side, as he was told in 1986, "of 36 communities in Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Western Tennessee, 24 have less than 100 Jews and 21 of these have no full-time rabbi." Most congregations consists of older people. The more positive side is that the larger communities to which Jews have moved have been strengthened. These are mainly communities which can offer strong economies and educational and professional opportunities. In these centers Jewish population has remained or grown. Jackson and Hattiesburg in Mississippi are cases in point.

Another trade-off Lettes points out has to do with intermarriage. The pressure to conform and the likelihood of intermarriage have been strong in the smaller communities. But there are many instances, as with the wife of the President of the congregation in Natchez, indicating that the non-Jewish spouse has helped to maintain Jewish life.

The Jews of the 19th Century left their children a legacy of respected positions in the economy of the South, a structured religious foundation of synagogues and religious organizations, and a respected position in the predominantly Christian communities. In today's demise of the small communities, Lettes sees hope and strength in regionalism - regional Sisterhoods, and the Henry S. Jacob's Camp. Jews of Natchez can draw on these regional supports as they attempt to maintain a Jewish life. Their example for others is that of successful interaction with their neighbors and religious commitment in the face of adversity.

Harriet Stern

MEETING UPDATE

On Thursday evening, May 5, the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South held its regular meeting at the Memphis Jewish Community Center. President Harriet Stern welcomed the group who had come to hear our guest speaker, Dr. Stephen Benin and to participate in our annual election.

Dr. Benin, director of the Bornblum Judaic Studies at Memphis State University lectured on, "Jews, Christians and the Bible, an Historical Overview". Dr. Benin outlined many interesting facts concerning early Christianity and its relationship to our Bible and Hebrew commentaries. Having had the opportunity to study at the Vatican Library, Dr. Benin talked about the Judaic exhibit from the Vatican Library at Brooks Museum. He gave us many interesting comparisons of the text and took us on a verbal tour of the exhibit, preparing us to better understand and appreciate our visit to the museum. After his fascinating lecture, Dr. Benin accepted questions and comments from his enthusiastic audience.

In the business portion of the meeting, the following officers and board members were elected: President, Harriet Stern; First Vice President, Leonid Saharovici; Second Vice President, David Schneider; Secretary, Gloria Felsenthal; Treasurer, Abe Schwab. Re-elected directors were Elias Goldsmith, Jr., Lester Sewel, and Laura Spiegler.

President Harriet Stern expressed her thanks to all and concluded the meeting with plans for continued hard work and growth for our society in the coming year.



JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY of
MEMPHIS & THE MID-SOUTH
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