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Ongoing Involvement in Memphis Symphony Orchestras Began With Jewish Immigrants' Love of Classical Music

By Marjean Kremer and Harriet Stern

This is the first in a series of articles detailing Jewish involvement with Memphis Symphony orchestras. The authors have included by name persons whom they knew or believed to be Jewish and apologize for any who inadvertently have been omitted.

"Participation in all aspects of American classical music has always featured a disproportionate number of Jews," David Loebel, the current conductor of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra proudly pointed out in a recent speech at Temple Israel.

Maestro Loebel credits the development of American community symphonies and opera companies which began after the Civil War to two factors. The first of these, the industrial revolution, created a strong middle class with both the leisure time to enjoy and the financial ability to support classical music. The second was the wave of German immigrants, many of whom were Jewish, who brought with them their love of the great composers they left behind: Beethoven, Hayden and Wagner, to name a few.

Little is known about Memphis' first symphony orchestra founded in the 1870's. It, like the Memphis

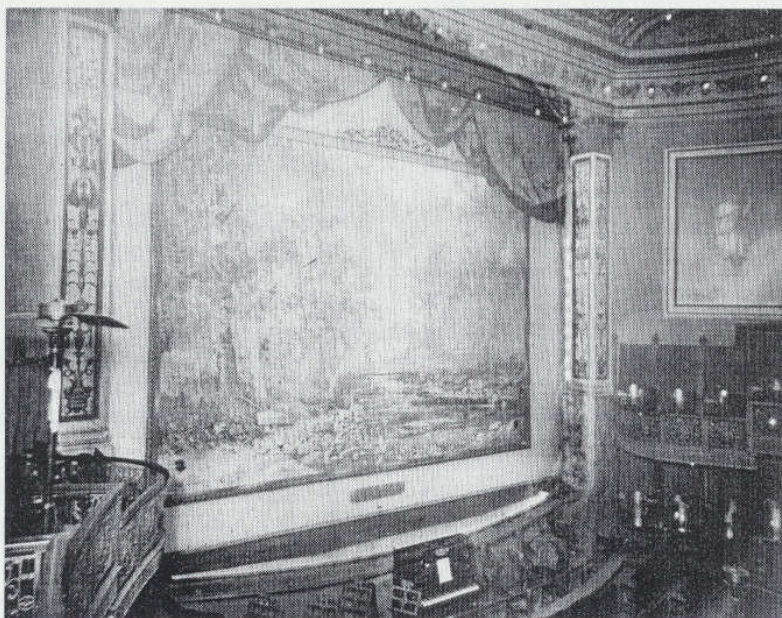
Opera House where it probably performed, fell victim to the Yellow Fever epidemics, which ravaged the city during that decade. Its musicians, many of whom were German immigrants, either died or fled, as did so many Memphians, to St. Louis.

In 1895 the Memphis Philharmonic Orchestra was organized with twenty-nine instrumentalists, a significant sign of the city's recovery from the devastating effects of the fever. It continued for more than a decade until its conductor's failing health triggered its demise.

The first orchestra with the name Memphis Symphony debuted at the Lyceum Theater in January, 1908, with

Jacob Bloom as conductor. Born in Germany in 1840, Bloom came to the United States at age 23, settling in Cincinnati. He chaired the violin department at that city's famed

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Stage of the Lyceum Theater where Jacob Bloom conducted the 1908 Memphis Symphony Orchestra. The theater was at the corner of Second and Jefferson.

Photo courtesy of Memphis/Shelby County Public Library.

President's Message



Max Notowitz

It is hard to believe that a year has gone by since I became president of the Jewish Historical Society. I took the job with slight apprehension, knowing that my physical condition was going to cause me some problems, but I was talked out of any doubts. I'm glad I listened and got a year's worth of experience that produced its own rewards in spite of some handicaps that I didn't count on. When I became president, I knew I was going to have to have knee surgery, but I didn't anticipate back surgery during the same term. Needless to say, I survived both.

The main thing is that the presidency was never vacant, due to the cooperation of some past presidents, officers, and board members who consented to do anything that I might have asked them or volunteered to do more. That was why the functions of the organization were never impaired, nor any program delayed or not held. Our planning, efforts, and the publicity have been excellent. The interest of the membership has been high, demonstrated by program participation as well as dues payments. It was rewarding to see that the average dues payment received was over 54% of the minimum dues amount.

We were fortunate to have had a diverse number of programs to present to the membership with something for everyone to enjoy, starting with the tremendous opening of the Marilyn and Jack Belz Judaica Exhibit at the Jewish Community Center. We all became aware of the wealth of Jewish art in their collection, selections of which were presented by Jack Belz at a reception. The exhibit was open at the Jewish Community Center for the whole month of September with Leonid Saharovici as curator.

Through the efforts of Dr. David Patterson, of the Bornblum Judaic Studies at University of Memphis, we were able to co-sponsor programs of high academic value. Although some activities and projects didn't quite materialize as we had anticipated, it wasn't through lack of effort on our part. Hopefully these things will be available in the future.

Through the untiring efforts of Sumner Levine, we will be hosting the Southern Jewish Historical Society Conference this fall, and I hope that many of you will help out by volunteering. We want to show off our hospitality by having the delegates enjoy themselves and go home with the feeling that we have done everything possible to make this a worthwhile conference.

As we approach a new fiscal year for the society, I hope that volunteers will continue their efforts to keep the society vibrant and goal oriented. I will do my best to continue doing whatever I can to help assure our success.

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**Of Blessed Memory*

JHS Annual Meeting and Election

Sunday, June 8, 2003
Memphis Jewish Community Center
7:00 pm

Speaker: Dr. Stuart Rockoff,
Goldring/Woldenberg Institute
of Southern Jewish Life

"Circuit-Riding Rabbis: How Old Customs Can
Meet Today's Challenges"

This issue is dedicated to the memory of

David Schneider

who originated the
Southern Jewish Heritage newsletter
and served as editor for fourteen years.

Conservatory of Music for more than thirty years. In 1872 a music festival was held in Boston with Johann Strauss, the younger, as guest conductor for a series of concerts. Bloom was one of the few musicians selected nationally to augment the Boston Symphony.

Shortly after the turn of the century, Jacob Bloom was brought to Memphis to perform in concert, first by the Wagner Club and later by the Beethoven Club. He was so favorably impressed with the city that when he retired, he and his wife moved here. Soon after his move to Memphis Bloom organized the Memphis Symphony with some fifty instrumentalists. Season tickets for the year's three concerts cost five dollars.

Professor Bloom continued to teach the violin in Memphis. His wife was a pianist whom he had met when she was just thirteen years old and a student at the Cincinnati Conservatory. They married five years later. Mrs. Bloom also continued her teaching career in Memphis. Their daughter Elsa (Mrs. Laurens Block), a talented pianist whose professional career was cut short by a bad back, became actively involved in Memphis' cultural life. The Blooms lived at the Parkview Hotel. One of Mrs. Bloom's relatives, Mrs. William Katzenberger, was a charter member of the Nineteenth Century Club.

Arthur Wallenstein succeeded Bloom as conductor in 1912. Two other conductors followed him during the decade. In 1921 the Memphis Chamber of Commerce music committee became sponsor of the orchestra, providing Memphis and the Mid-South with a fully professional symphony. Because of financial problems, in 1924 the union agreed to perform with amateurs. Still finding it impossible to support such an endeavor with tickets as its only source of revenue, this orchestra disbanded in 1926.

In April 1934 the Women's Auxiliary of the Auditorium Commission and the Memphis Federation of Musicians joined forces in a concert to determine whether there was sufficient interest in orchestral music to support a symphony. The "trial" concert, with sixty professional musicians, proved successful. Tickets were ten cents each. Featured soloist, Herbert

The Memphis Symphony Orchestra Association

Third Concert

Memphis Symphony Orchestra

JACOB BLOOM, Director

Memphis Choral Society

WALTER W. BOUTELLE, Director

SUITE FROM HENRY VIII German
Orchestra

"UNFOLD, YE PORTALS!"—Chorus from
"The Redemption" Gounod
LULLABY OF LIFE Leslie
Choral Society

SYMPHONY No. 8, B MINOR Schubert
Allegro Moderato
Orchestra

INTERMISSION, TEN MINUTES

OVERTURE—"THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR" Nicolai
Orchestra

"HAIL, BRIGHT ABODE"—March and Chorus
from "Tannhäuser" Wagner
"IT COMES FROM THE MISTY AGES"
(Epilogue from the "Banner of St. George") Elgar
Choral Society

GONDOLIERA (for strings) Saar
SLAVONIC DANCE Dvorak
Orchestra

Decoration by Mr. W. H. Englehart, for Idiewild Greenhouses

Last Concert May 5th.

Program from the Third Concert of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra Association,
Jacob Bloom, Symphony Director. (Memphis Symphony Archives)

Summerfield, performed selections from his own compositions as well as a Liszt concerto. Members of the Auxiliary included Mrs. Milton Binswanger, Sr., Mrs. Arthur Halle, Sr. and Mrs. Hardwig Posert, Sr.

The true predecessor of today's Memphis Symphony Orchestra was the Southwestern College (now Rhodes College) Orchestra, founded in 1938. The following year its conductor-organizer invited interested citizens to join. In March, 1939 the Memphis Symphony Orchestra—one-third student, one-third professional, one-third amateur—gave its first concert in the Goodwyn Institute. Tickets were one dollar for adults, fifty cents for students. Ninety musicians performed four concerts during the 1940-1941

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Look What's Coming to Memphis!

The Southern Jewish Historical Society's
2003 Annual Meeting and Convention
Park Vista Memphis (Formerly the Adam's Mark)
October 30-November 2

You won't want to miss these EXCITING programs!

Panel: "A Tale of Two Orthodox Synagogues"
Moderated by Dr. David Patterson, Bornblum Institute
Panelists: Rabbi Lawrence Zierler, Baron Hirsch
Rabbi Joel Klein, Chabad Lubavitch
Sidney Katz, Cooper-Margolin Day School

"Southern Jewish Women"
Moderated by Phyllis Lefler
Mark I. Greenberg, U. of South Florida
Jennifer Stollman, U. of Mississippi

Panel: "Southern Music and Southern Jews"
Moderated by Steve Whitfield, Brandeis University
Panelists: David Less
David Loebel
Daniel S. Mariaschin

"Say it With Food": A Culinary Tour of the Jewish South
Featuring Joan Nathan, TV Personality
and Cookbook Author
With Marcie Cohen Ferris
Moderated by Cathy Kahn, SJHS Past President

"Parallel Lives: Growing up Jewish and Black
in Mississippi"
Moderated by Dr. Stuart Rockoff
Gene Dattel, New York, NY
Clifton Taubert, Tulsa, OK

Jewish History of Memphis and the Mid-South
Moderated by Harry Danziger,
Rabbi Emeritus, Temple Israel
Cornelia Wilhelm, University of Munich
Patricia LaPointe, Memphis/Shelby County
Public Library

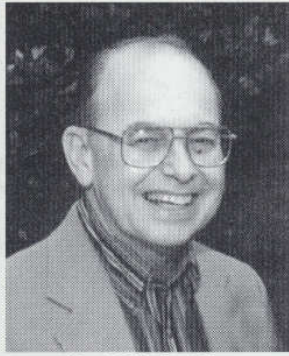
Plus: Shabbat Dinner at Temple Israel
Lunch featuring recipes by Joan Nathan
Cocktails and Klezmer Music at Beth Shalom
Banquet at Baron Hirsch

Plan to Attend!
Watch for
further details!

In Memoriam: David Schneider, 1926-2003

A chronicler of Memphis Jewish history, an insurance executive, a collector par excellence, a mensch and a good friend...

By Leonid Saharovici



David Schneider

The Memphis community, the Jewish Historical Society, his family and friends lost on February 12, 2003, an outstanding human being who touched many souls during his lifetime. His death has evoked a large outpouring of gratitude and admiration for his achievements.

David Schneider was born in 1926 in Knoxville, Tennessee, to a family of two young immigrants who came from Poland to the United States to escape pogroms and persecutions and to build a new life for their family. He grew up during the Depression in the South, where his parents struggled to raise their two children and to make a living in their small grocery store. From their parents the children learned the “*aleph-bet*,” and David’s first language was Yiddish spoken with a Litvak-Southern accent.

David’s father, J.J. Schneider, was an admirer of Yiddish literature and Jewish art, and he taught David his first Bible stories. He shared information about Shalom Aleichem and other Yiddish writers as well as news about Israel from his Yiddish newspaper, *Der Tag*. David’s older sister, Helen Schneider Silver, a talented free-lance journalist whose articles appeared in major Jewish publications, once wrote, “Thanks to the foresight and dedication of our parents we gained a strong Jewish identity in a very non-Jewish environment.” David’s father also had a beautiful voice, having studied in Vilna, “the Jewish Jerusalem of Lithuania,” to be a *chazan* (cantor) just as his father was in the village of M’yadl. David recalled that from his father he inherited his appreciation for music in general and *chazanut* in particular.

After serving two years in the Navy, David met the love of his life, Rita, to whom he was happily married for 54 years. They had three children and two grandchildren. Shortly after David graduated from the University of Tennessee (his blood ran orange for the rest of his life), his lifelong friend, Frank Robinson, invited him to come to Memphis and join the Margolin family’s new mortgage company. He worked with dedication for National Mortgage Company for 33 years and created and developed a successful insurance agency for one of the largest private mortgage companies in the U.S.

He was vice-president of the National Insurance Agency.

David and his sister Helen had a genuine love for Jewish history. In their parents’ home they learned how to thread the warp of Jewish history into the woof of southern American history. David was especially interested and involved in preserving Memphis Jewish history. He was a charter member and a past-president of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South and the first editor, serving for 14 years, of its publication, *Southern Jewish Heritage*. The publication of this newsletter was a labor of love for David. It reflected his strong belief that history should be written with accuracy and objectivity about important personalities who provided the charisma and leadership so much needed for the progress of our community, and at the same time about the lives of lesser-known people who brought their more modest contributions to the well being of the community and society in which they lived. He wanted generations to come to be able to learn and to tell their children, from informed sources, about Jewish life in Memphis and the Mid-South.

David Schneider collaborated closely with Selma Lewis and helped her edit and publish a large collection of biographical sketches of Memphis Jewish leaders. Equally important to David was to research the lives of ordinary people who were sources of inspiration to others. Jewish peddlers in the South, the *Shammass* of a congregation, Jewish operators of small stores and businesses, and life in small rural communities surrounding Memphis were subjects explored and documented by David in the newsletter. He inaugurated a remarkable column entitled “Making History,” in which he wrote about people and events that were shaping Memphis Jewish history. During his presidency of the society he organized major public events including the very successful conference, “Our Fathers - the Doctors, Jewish Leaders in Memphis Medicine,” under the chairmanship of Dr. Tom Stern.

David was a passionate collector and aficionado of early American and Israeli numismatics and medals, insurance memorabilia, family history, recordings of music, and more. He was dedicated to reuniting in his collections beautiful

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artistic and valuable historic objects that were appreciated by specialists. In his eulogy at David's funeral Rabbi Lawrence Zierler said, "David was a collector par excellence who understood very well the meaning of a limited edition. Indeed he was a rare mint. Like a *Ner Tamid*, he was a force of constancy and dependability in the lives of family and friends. His glow was never diminished or abstracted by the vicissitudes of life."

David's unquenchable love for Israel and his devotion to Zionism characterized his entire life. In the last two years of his life, being very sick and foreseeing the tragic end, he took his family twice to Israel, thus fulfilling a lifetime dream.

For almost half a century, David was a devoted member of Baron Hirsch Congregation and a proud member of its choir. His love for music was also reflected in his regular attendance at performances of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra and Memphis Opera. He liked all kinds of good music of every genre, and gathered a large collection of records, CD's and cassettes by the greatest musicians in the world. In the last months of his life, when his pain was excruciating, the few moments of joy were when he could listen to his favorite artists.

Welcoming Shabbat in the Schneiders' home was quite an experience. The best china and silver decorated the table, and after Rita and the girls blessed the candles, David sang the Kiddush using the melody of the song

"The Flower that Shattered the Stone," from a ballad by John Denver, his favorite troubador.

David Schneider had a gift for putting others at ease and a generosity of spirit that knew no boundaries. He was always ready to help someone in need, and there were countless occasions when he performed acts of *chesed* for so many people, modestly and with no interest in self-aggrandizement. His death left a large void for his family, friends and colleagues.

On a personal note, I want to share excerpts from a letter handed to me at David's funeral by Beverly Gardner, his secretary for many years. David had dictated it to her shortly before he passed away and asked her to deliver it to me after his death.

"To my dearest friend Lulu: It is so difficult to think in terms of leaving you, Lulu, my dearest friend, and your lovely wife Friderica. May Hashem bless you and your entire family. We have done many excellent things together, particularly through the Jewish Historical Society. This work has brought us close together over the years because we have a mutual understanding and desire to retain the Jewish history of Memphis. I love you for all the work you have done, but probably most of all for getting the children of our community involved. I pray to Hashem that you will be able to continue your work on behalf of Jewish history and the remembering of the Holocaust. With all my love, your dearest friend, David."

David Schneider made this world a better place to live, and I will forever keep his memory alive.

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season. During the war, the violin section was all female.

Jewish musicians in addition to Summerfield included professionals Ike Kahn, viola, and Francis Wolfe, cello. Amateur violinists were brothers Emmanuel and Henry Moskowitz, Max Nemetz, and Kurt Susskind. They were joined by Summerfield's brother Arthur, flute; newlywed Henry Dinkelspiel, clarinet; and Eugene Goodman, French horn.

Dr. Louis Levy was president of the symphony's board of directors

for its first three years and again in 1945-1946. Charter members included Dr. Jack Goltman, Max Nemetz, Hardwig Posert, Sr., Mrs. Elsa Block, Ike Kahn, Abe Lapides, Fred Lewing, Miss Elsa Meister, Emmanuel and Henry Moskowitz, Joseph Pearlman, Mrs. Hardwig Posert, Sr. and Francis Wolfe. Bernard Cohen, Ben Goodman, Jr., Mrs. Norman Isenberg, and William Jasspon were named to the board in 1941.

Despite the best efforts of its leadership, the orchestra collapsed

from debt in 1946. Ike Myers was named board president that year but unfortunately could not stem the financial flow. Members of the board overseeing the orchestra's demise included Jack Goldsmith, Mrs. Arthur Halle, Sr., M.A. Lightman, Sr., Abe Plough, Aaron Scharff, Sr. and Mrs Alvin Weil.

The authors wish to thank Mary Block Blair, Lena Block, Sam Block, Jr., Polly Cooper, Helen Dinkelspiel, Carolyn Sternberger, Barbara Block Zwick, AND the wonderful staff in the Central Library's Memphis Room for their assistance.

A History of the Jews of Southeastern Arkansas:

Building of Temple Meir Chayim in McGehee Fulfilled Longtime Dream

The Jewish community of the extreme Southeastern part of Arkansas, incorporating Chicot, Desha and Drew counties, has been present for over 150 years. The earliest Jewish settlers arrived in the area with literally "what they had on their backs." They had no families and were total strangers with no connections whatsoever. Many were foreign born and spoke broken English. Yet, within a relatively short time through hard, honest and intelligent work, they became an important part of the mainstream of their communities, joining the ranks of the most respected leaders politically, financially, and in the participation of civic affairs.

Early Residents

In 1856, Emanuel Hoover arrived in Grand Lake, Chicot County, where his cousin Simmon Weiss was already an established merchant. Hoover began to peddle merchandise, covering the counties of Chicot, Desha, and Drew. In 1862 he enlisted in the Confederate Army, serving in West's Battery under Faries' Battalion, Polignas' Division. West's Battery never surrendered, but upon learning of General Lee's surrender, simply disbanded and walked home. After the war, Hoover lived for a time in Collins, Arkansas, where his two children, Lillian and Samuel, were born. He eventually settled in Arkansas City.

Gus Waterman arrived in Dumas, Arkansas, in 1875. He was a merchant and served as Postmaster of Dumas from 1882-1887. One of his sons, Julian Waterman, became dean of the law school of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, where the law building was named Waterman Hall in his honor.

In 1885 Samuel Marks opened a mercantile business in Arkansas City and was very successful, employing five clerks in his store. He was secretary of the Arkansas City Waterworks Company as well as of the Arkansas City School Board. Marks moved to St. Louis because there was no place where he could attend worship services or where his children could receive a Jewish education.

Abraham Dreidel moved to Arkansas City in 1891 to work for Marks in his store and remained in his employ for several years. He then entered business as the senior partner of the firm Hoover and Company, a partnership consisting of Dreidel, his brother-in-law Samuel Hoover and Henry Townsend. The firm was very successful, operating confectionary stores in Arkansas City, Dermott, and Warren. Abraham Dreidel served as mayor of Arkansas City for seven of the years between 1902 and 1911. In 1907 he served as state senator for the 17th Senatorial District in the 36th Session of the General Assembly. He was the first Jewish state senator of Arkansas.

Samuel Wolchansky arrived in Arkansas City in 1895 and entered into the dry goods business. In 1906 he moved his business to McGehee, where it continued to prosper. In addition to this business he had extensive farm holdings and then added to his enterprises a cotton gin.

In 1897 Charles Dante arrived in Dumas, where he became one of its leading citizens. In business he was very successful, operating large stores of various types, farming vast acreages and operating a cotton gin. He loved

Dumas and cooperated fully in all civic improvements by giving unselfishly of his time, knowledge and resources. In 1949 the Dumas Chamber of Commerce initiated a new program to honor a man who had contributed the most to the progress of the town that year. Not only for his efforts in 1949, but also for his many years of previous service, Charles Dante was named Dumas' first "Man of the Year."

Isadore Pinkus entered into the dry goods business in Portland, Arkansas, in the late 1800's and was there only a short time before moving his business to Dermott, where he remained. He was always deeply involved in all projects to improve his community.

In the early 1900's more Jews moved into this section of Arkansas. Among them were Harry Brown, Joseph Cohen, Eli Dante, Morris and Sam Dessent, Sam Epstein, Isadore Friedman, Adolph and William Hamburger, Herman and Isadore Marcus, Dave and Sol Myer, Max Schwartz, Morris Walton, Joseph Weisman, Leo and Sam Wolff, William Wolff and Louis Zeno.

McGehee's First Automobile

In 1906 Isadore Freidman purchased McGehee's first automobile, a Stanley Steamer bought in Pine Bluff for the sum of \$500. In the process of driving the car back to McGehee, it broke down at Tillar and Freidman was forced to make the remainder of the journey by wagon. It took several months to repair the car, but it finally reached McGehee. Freidman was one of the original group who, in October, 1927, organized the McGehee Chamber of Commerce and was its first president.

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A Growing Jewish Population

After World War I, the Jewish population of the area again grew with the arrival of Sam Abowitz, Abe Abroms, Morris Cooper, Martin Dreyfus, Charles Fleisig, "Freidy" Freidman, Henry Hamburger, Ben and Dave Marcowitz, Sam Nussbaum, Ralph Raphael, Harry and Max Roby, A.L. Ruskin, Joe Selz, Joe and Mike Shach, Phillip Shack, Bernard Tanenbaum and Abe Zeno.

Possibly the greatest economic contribution affecting the growth of this section of the state by its Jewish community was made by Sam Abowitz, Charles Dante, Adolph and William Hamburger, and Sam Wolchansky. This was in the period following the 1927 flood, the effects of which were still very much in evidence as the devastation had been

the most severe in the state. Before a recovery could be made, the Great Depression of 1929 occurred and lasted until the late 1930's. Money was extremely scarce and a loan from the usual lending agencies such as banks was almost an impossibility. Most farmers were classified as very poor risks, not possessing the required collateral because they had lost everything in the flood.

Collectively these few Jewish men furnished hundreds of farmers with everything necessary to continue their farming operations. Without this

assistance many of these farmers, some of whom became the area's most respected and successful, could not have continued to farm, and the agricultural community would have been seriously crippled with its future growth set back by years.

The Need for a Temple

There was one major problem for which this Jewish community had found no solution. Because their numbers were small and they were widely scattered, they had no place in which

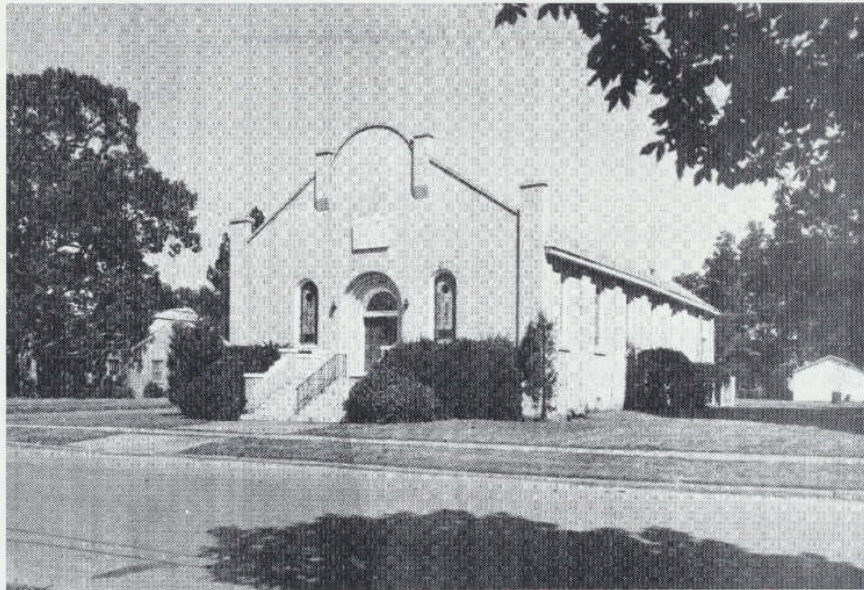
attending grew each year, and soon it became impossible to accommodate all of them in the Dante home. The services were then held in a hall on the second floor of the Dermott movie theater building. The arrangement continued until 1927, when Eli Dante moved to Louisiana.

Services were then held in the Henry Hamburger home in McGehee and in the Isadore Pinkus home in Dermott. Later all the places for services were consolidated and were first held in the Missouri Pacific Booster Hall and then

in the St. Paul Episcopal Church Sunday School building, both in McGehee, with Dave Myer or Sol Myer conducting the services. Mr. and Mrs. Dave Myer also conducted a Sunday School for the children.

Mrs. Joan Hamburger then undertook the task to improve upon the situation. This was described as follows in a book

entitled *My Scrap Book*, by Rabbi Morris Clark of Temple Anshe Emeth in Pine Bluff: "One Monday afternoon, while I happened to be at home, the door bell rang. My wife ushered into my study a pretty, young little woman who said shyly, 'Rabbi Clark, this is Joan Hamburger of McGehee, Arkansas, and I want to ask you a big favor. We have in McGehee and vicinity some 15 children and need a Sunday School. We also want to hold Sunday afternoon services. If you would come to us and be our Sunday Rabbi,



Temple Meir Chayim, McGehee, Arkansas

they could worship as a group or educate their children in the Jewish faith. The nearest Temple was in Pine Bluff, a distance of over 50 miles.

In the early 1920's, Eli Dante of Dermott invited all the Jewish families in the area to come to his home for High Holy Days services. Dante conducted the services, as he was the most qualified, and food was prepared and served by Mrs. Eli Dante, Mrs. Esther Cohen, Mrs. I. Pinkus, Mrs. Ruth Abroms and others. These women also found places of lodging for those who found it necessary to spend the night. The number

Continued on Next Page

we would make it well worth your while. We would pay you \$50 a month and your car expenses.' I don't have to tell you I accepted the offer. The shy Joan Hamburger left my apartment with a very happy smile on her face." This arrangement lasted a short time, after which the Myers again conducted services and taught the Sunday School.

Late in 1946 Dave Myer suggested at a B'nai B'rith meeting that the Jewish community of the extreme southeastern part of Arkansas build a Temple, to be located in McGehee. The idea grew rapidly; Myer was elected chairman and Bernard Cohen secretary and treasurer of the group. A building committee was selected with William Hamburger and Sam Wolchansky as co-chairmen.

A worse time to begin construction could not have been chosen. World War II was just over and the nation's resources, all of which had been geared to the war efforts, had not yet fully returned to the production of materials for civilian use. Everything used in construction was in short supply, even such common items as nails and lumber.

Sam Wolchansky donated two lots located on South Fifth Street in McGehee for the site of the Temple. However, the group was not satisfied with the location, desiring a more central location. Adolph and William Hamburger then obtained by a trade with the McGehee Church of Christ the two lots upon which the Temple was built, donating them to the Temple. The lots donated by Wolchansky were later sold and the proceeds placed in a building fund.

Temple Meir Chayim

The Temple was to be named Beth Chayim in honor of Dave Myer. Later the name was changed to Temple Meir Chayim, in memory of Sgt. Herbert M. Abowitz, who died in action in Italy in

World War II. The entire Southeast Arkansas Jewish community not only contributed funds generously, but also obtained donations from other communities both in and out of the state of Arkansas. Many methods were used to raise funds. One of the most successful was the raffling of an automobile, which at that time was very hard to obtain.

No architect was employed. The building was designed by the building committee, who made many trips to inspect other Temples and churches, with Sam Wolchansky drawing the plans from their combined ideas. He was on the construction site every day, arriving with the first workman and leaving with the last. Every board and brick placed in the building was supervised by him and if it was not up to his exacting standards it was removed and replaced.

The Temple was of Gothic architectural design, constructed of buff brick. The sanctuary was designed to seat 150 persons on red velvet theater-type seats. Included in the building were an educational unit of Sunday School rooms, a recreation hall and a modern kitchen.

In the sanctuary ten identical stained glass windows were given by various members as memorials to loved ones. Directly behind and over the altar was placed a tablet of the Ten Commandments flanked by the lions of Judah, which originally belonged to Temple B'nai Sholom at Bastrop, Louisiana. This Temple was erected in 1882 and its use was discontinued in 1920, when the Bastrop congregation merged with the Monroe congregation. On the outside front wall directly over the door of the Temple another tablet of the Ten Commandments was placed. This was originally part of Temple Beth El Emeth in Camden, erected in 1872, one of the first four Jewish Temples in

Arkansas.

In 1947, shortly after the completion of Temple Meir Chayim the congregation hosted a dinner in honor of the Building Committee. At this dinner Sam Wolchansky was presented an inscribed watch for the job he had accomplished in the building of the Temple. William Hamburger was honored by being elected the first president of Temple Meir Chayim and was praised by all for his tireless efforts in obtaining the necessary building materials. In 1949 at the end of Hamburger's tenure as president, he was presented with an inscribed silver goblet.

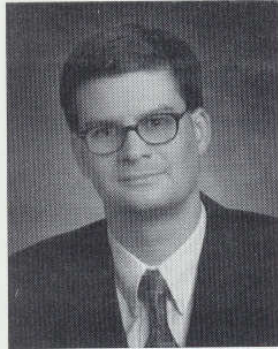
Temple Meir Chayim was dedicated Sunday, May 1, 1949, with Rabbi Ira E. Sanders of Little Rock delivering the dedication sermon. Also participating in the Dedicatory Service were Rabbi Walter Kaelter, Hot Springs; Rabbi Tibor Fabian, Belleville, Illinois; Rabbi Ernest Grey, Fort Smith; Reverend Theo T. James, president of the McGehee Ministerial Alliance; and Rabbi Morris Clark, Pine Bluff. That night a banquet was held at the Greystone Hotel, with the congregation's president, A.L. Ruskin, presiding and Rabbi Morris Clark as the principal speaker.

Temple Meir Chayim continues to exist today, supported by a handful of Jews who still live in the area and by former residents who live elsewhere but remain as associate members.

This is an edited version of an article which appeared in a booklet published in 1978 by the Desha County Historical Society. The original author was E.M. Dreidel, now deceased, whose maternal grandfather, Emanuel Hoover, is mentioned at the beginning of the article. Joan Hamburger, also mentioned in the article, now lives in Memphis. Many thanks to her daughter, Betty Hamburger Green, for sharing this history with the Jewish Historical Society.

Dr. Stuart Rockoff To Speak at JHS Annual Meeting

“Circuit-Riding Rabbis: How Old Customs Can Meet Today’s Challenges”



Dr. Stuart Rockoff

The Annual Meeting and Election of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South will be on Sunday, June 8, 2003, at 7:00 pm at the Memphis Jewish Community Center with Dr. Stuart Rockoff as guest speaker. Refreshments will be served after the program.

Dr. Rockoff was born and raised in Houston, Texas, and graduated from Wesleyan

University in Middletown, Connecticut, in 1991 with a B.A. with honors in history. He received his Masters in U.S. history from the University of Texas at Austin in 1995. In 2000 he completed his Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Texas with a special emphasis on immigration and American Jewish history. He has taught several history courses in American ethnic and Jewish history at UT-Austin, UT-San Antonio, and Central Texas College. In June of 2002, he moved to Jackson, Mississippi, with his wife and one-year-old daughter to become the director of the history department at the

Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life and the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, where he is working to preserve and document the history of southern Jews.

The past few decades have been a period of tremendous change for Jews in the South. Today many Jews throughout the region face great challenges as their communities fade in numbers. These problems are not new. Ever since Jews have lived in the South, they have worried about preserving Jewish traditions and handing them down to their children. Jewish communities have arisen and then disappeared; however, in some ways southern Jewish life is stronger than ever, though it has shifted away from small rural market towns to bustling sun-belt cities like Memphis and Atlanta. Yet even as these communities experience tremendous growth, leaders worry about declining Jewish literacy and affiliation. Dr. Stuart Rockoff will offer a historical perspective on the changing face of southern Jewry and will suggest how the ideas of the past hold potential solutions to the problems of today. From circuit-riding rabbis and educators to a new standard curriculum, old ideas may be the best way to address the problems of Southern Jews today.



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