



# SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

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*The Sumner Levine Speaker Series presents . . .*

## **Encore! By Popular Demand! Robyn Helzner** **“Back in the U.S.S.R.”** **The Struggle to Free Soviet Jews**

**Sunday, May 22, 2016, at 2:00 PM Memphis Jewish Community Center**

Last year Robyn Helzner presented a fascinating program, *Kreplach and Dim Sum: Yes There are Jews in China* for the Jewish Historical Society. This program was so well received that the Society is bringing Robyn back for an encore with another program in her repertoire, *Back in the U.S.S.R.: The Struggle to Free Soviet Jews*.

The historic struggle to free Soviet Jews comes alive in this powerful multimedia presentation of songs, stories, pictures and video. Robyn shares her experiences as an activist in the Soviet Jewry Movement, and chronicles the American Jewish community's remarkable efforts to assist Jews behind the Iron Curtain.

Robyn has a singular reputation for bringing Jewish music to uncommon locales. She performed underground concerts for Jews and refuseniks in the Soviet Union. During the period of Glasnost, she was the only American artist invited to appear in sold-out concerts in Moscow and St. Petersburg as part of the Soviet government's first officially sanctioned Jewish cultural tour in over fifty years. The moving story of her experiences was broadcast on the Public Television special, *Chanukah—a Celebration of Freedom*.

You won't want to miss Robyn Helzner's magical and moving performance. All Jewish Historical Society programs are free of charge and open to the community.



JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH - FOUNDED IN 1986  
6560 POPLAR AVENUE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38138

# President's Message . . . .



As my year as President is drawing to a close, I have been reflecting on my own Jewish history and one major regret.

I simply adored my grandparents, and even though we never lived in the same city and we didn't have Facetime or Skype, we were very much in touch. We even wrote letters!

We had annual mini-reunions, but when I knew that my grandmother was in seriously declining health, I summoned my courage to drive for the first time on the highway and take my children to see her.

The highlight of that trip was Grandma sitting in a chair with all of us sitting on the floor around her as she told us her story of coming with her sweetheart (my grandfather) on the boat from Poland. It is one of my most treasured memories and one tinged with regret. I didn't record it.

And now you know how this story relates to our Jewish Historical Society. We are recording history through our wonderful Archives Committee, headed by Freda Brode and Barbara Hellman. Along with the members of their committee, they are preserving the history through fascinating interviews with members of our Jewish community.

This year, because of the vision and creative efforts of Lynn Mirvis, we were awarded a "Fedovation" grant from Federation that enables us to record interviews with our Memphians who came to us from the former Soviet Union. A very special part of this project is the inclusion of seventh and eighth graders to assist with the interviews. We hope that this will awaken a love of historical preservation in these young lives and that they will become a part of the future of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South. Also, our deepest gratitude to the wonderfully knowledgeable and helpful Jennifer Campbell and Temple Israel for giving our recorded interviews a place to reside.

My deepest thanks to our Program Vice Presidents, Marcia Levy and Madelyne Daneman, for a terrific year and we are all quite excited about our final program on May 22 at the MJCC. Robyn Helzner, who delighted us last year with *Kreplach and Dim Sum, Yes There Are Jews in China* will return with her program *Back in the U.S.S.R: Jews of the Soviet Union*. Robyn, a Cantor from Washington D.C. is a triple treat, entertaining with video, story and song.

My gratitude to Cathy Kessler for serving as our Recording Secretary for many years and to Lorraine Wolf for becoming our first Corresponding Secretary and sending our letters of gratitude to those who support our organization. Great job, ladies.

And now to two wonderful men. Jerrold Graber has

## Jewish Historical Society of Memphis & the Mid-South

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\*Of Blessed Memory

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been a most conscientious Treasurer and has kept everyone happy by paying our bills and keeping our records straight. Herb Notowich, our Membership Chairman, has done a fabulous job updating our records with help from his able assistants, Marilyn Notowich and Phyllis Levine. Herb, you've been a big help to me.

Please remember our Sumner Levine Speaker Series Fund when you are making donations so that we can continue our policy of bringing excellent speakers to our community at no charge.

Lastly, I thank you for the privilege of serving as your President and look forward to working with our President Elect, Marcia Levy, next year.

Preserving the Past and Enhancing the Future is my personal mission statement for our organization. Let us move forward together to continue on this path and introduce it to future generations.

*Joy Wilk*

# The History of Hillel at the University of Memphis

by Harry Samuels

In 1953, the Hillel Society as it was called, was founded at Memphis State College and was housed in a small room on the second floor of the Student Center. Aaron Slutsky was the first president; Howard Greenberg, vice-president; Betty Evensky, secretary; Werner Berg, treasurer; Herbert Blumen, parliamentarian; and Harold Berg, sergeant-at-arms. There were forty members with no executive director but according to Herman Goldberger, it functioned with the help of AEPi Fraternity.

In 1954 it received some notoriety when thirteen young men opted to compete with a number of fraternities in an intramural softball tournament. They could only compete as a fraternity so they styled themselves the Hillel Jewish Fraternity. The members of the team were Herb Notowich, Al Burson, Charles Plesofsky, Morris Weiss, Herb O'Mell, George Klein, Ed Moskovitz, Gordon Stamm, Monte Wener, Charles Wexler, Bernie Weinman, Marvin Polsky and Jerry Wilednik.

They won the tournament, but the other teams couldn't understand how a bunch of Jewish guys could play such good softball. Herb Notowich felt it was because they had been playing together for years in AZA.

During the early 1960s, Hillel, with George Shendelman as chairman of the first Advisory Board and representing B'nai B'rith, rented its first off-campus house on Mynders. National Hillel, which was founded in 1923 at the University of Illinois, was sponsored by B'nai B'rith until the 1990s.

The executive directors of the Memphis Jewish Community Center loaned their assistant directors to serve as Hillel directors. It was a good deal for Hillel

since there was no charge for their services and each of them, beginning with Andy Fox under Paul Schwartz and Marty Kraar and Norman Olshansky under Ira Steinmetz, possessed Masters Degrees in social work with majors in guidance and counseling.

During those early days programming consisted solely of parties. It was understood that Hillel was more than parties, but it was felt that if the organization served only as a means of bringing Jewish college-age men and

women together to socialize, this would be enough.

By the mid-sixties the facility was sold and Hillel lost its lease. Just as Abraham and his family had been four thousand years earlier, the members of Hillel became nomadic Jews wandering from one rental facility to another, never knowing from one year to the next where they would be housed. One year when they were desperate and with very little funding, Bishop Dozier, the Catholic Bishop of Memphis who was very sup-

portive of the existence of a Jewish presence on campus, offered to accompany others who supported this goal to Federation to seek funding for a facility.

When National Hillel fell upon hard financial times and B'nai B'rith was forced to eliminate even the minuscule funding for most small local chapters, the Hillel Advisory Board appealed for support to the Jewish Welfare Board (Memphis Jewish Federation) under the direction of Jack Lieberman. Lieberman apologized for the fact that, in view of the small number of students being served, they could only allocate \$1,400 the first year. But the group soon began attracting more people



**THE WINNAH!** Hillel, Jewish fraternity on the Memphis State campus, is the 1954 winner of the men's intramural softball championship race. Pictured are front row (LEFT TO RIGHT) Gordon Stamm, George Klein, Herbie Notowich, Herbie Omell, Monte Wener, and Albert Burson. Second row (LEFT TO RIGHT) are Charlie Plesofsky, Marvin Polsky, Eddie Moskovitz, Jerry Wilednik, Bernie Weinman, Morris Weiss, and Charlie Wexler.

Please see HILLEL, page 4

and receiving more funding. They were able to hire a director, and a group of students were sent to a leadership camp at Starlight, Pennsylvania, to begin developing future student leaders. Soon Hillel began asking the Memphis Jewish Federation not only for program support but for a commitment for a permanent location.

One day a National Hillel representative from St. Louis came to advise the group that they were not in compliance with Hillel's requirement that only registered students could participate. Some students were dating college-age men and women who were not currently enrolled at school and the group did not wish to lose them as members. Additionally, the Naval Air Station at Millington was still operating and every six weeks there were one or two college-age men in attendance. Since there was no USO within the Jewish community, some felt an obligation to allow the young men to participate. The authorities at the Naval Air Station even provided bus service for the men.

About this same time a sympathetic man in St. Louis purchased the furnishings of the old Statler Hotel and sent a truckload of tables, lamps, chairs and even carpeting all with the letter "S" prominently displayed. It was decided that it would be a good time to change the name from Hillel to The Jewish Student Union.

Every year representatives appeared before the allocations committee of Federation for operating funding. This was always approved, but a request for a permanent facility was always rejected due to a lack of funds.

It was understandable inasmuch as Federation had the needs of all the other agencies in Memphis to consider as well as the needs of Israel, which was impacted by the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War. In addition, there were enormous demands stemming from mass immigration, which required housing and attendant so-

cial infrastructure. Also, there were the needs of Jews living in sixty other countries where a monthly food package meant the difference between life and death.

But the advocates for the Jewish Student Union knew that its program would not realize its full potential until a permanent facility was established.

After several

requests and their rejections, Raymond Shainberg, who chaired the allocation committee for Federation, called requesting one additional presentation and request. It was approved unanimously. Ronald Harkavy, who was president of Federation at the time, appointed Rabbi A. Mark Levin to chair a committee of one-hundred individuals representing every segment of the Memphis Jewish community to determine the campus needs of Memphis and whether or not a permanent facility should be established. Its final recommendation was positive since the Jewish Student Union would serve as the eyes, ears and voice of the entire Memphis Jewish community and would help combat assimilation and the impact of various cult groups by strengthening the students' allegiance to their faith and the support of Israel.

Now to find a facility. It became immediately apparent that even if it were possible to obtain an existing house that was realistically priced, close to campus and



with sufficient parking, the cost of bringing it up to code would be prohibitively expensive, making it much more practical to build a new facility. But there did not seem to be any lots for sale.

One day Morris Fogelman called to see if it would be possible to establish a local chapter of the American Friends for Hebrew University. Fogelman was a leader in the Memphis Jewish community and an early president of the Memphis Jewish Community Center. While dividing up lists of potential board members for the new Hebrew University board he was advised that after many years, the Federation had approved funding for a facility for the Jewish Student Union, but that it was difficult finding a building site. He offered to arrange a meeting with Dr. Gene Smith, the finance chairman of the school and the one who had helped establish the university's Fogelman School of Business. Three weeks after that meeting, Dr. Smith called to say the university had been offered a site. "We would like to use it for additional parking, but if you wish it for your purposes, you can buy it," he announced.

When Fogelman inspected the site he agreed it would be ideal. He immediately made a commitment toward its purchase and agreed to solicit others. Soon there were checks for one and one-half the cost of the lot which were presented to Federation with the understanding that they would pay for the facility and would permanently fund the program. The benefactors who made the commitment for the purchase of the property

were: Phillip and Sarah Belz, Louis and Sylvia Kirschner, the Lit family, Dr. Gerald and Susan Rosen, Morris and Mollye Fogelman, the Lichterman-Loewenberg Foundation, the Newburger family, Harry and Flora Samuels, the Goldsmith Foundation, Ira and Barbara Lipman and the Skip Pepper family.

Jim Lindy offered to do the architectural work and Michael Weiss the construction all at their cost. At the dedication the building on December 2, 1984, Rabbi Cantor David Skopp carved and affixed the mezuzot to the doors.

In 2004 it was determined that when a prospective student or his parents checked the Jewish components of a school, they were more likely to understand the word Hillel than the Jewish Student Union. And since Hillel had continued to provide program support during its long history, it was decided to change the name back to Hillel. In 2009 in recognition of his valuable contribution, the name was again changed to the Morris S. Fogelman Jewish Student Center at Hillel of Memphis.

Over the years the group has been blessed with outstanding directors. For the past eight years, Sherry Weinblatt has brought the institution to new heights. She established "The Yiddish Cup" as a significant income producer to supplement its annual allocation. With the influx of a significant number of Jewish students attending Rhodes College, she continues to reach out to that segment of the Memphis Jewish college students as well as to all college age students in the city. ✧

## Photos from the Past Project

The Photos from the Past project, sponsored by the Temple Israel Archives and the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis, seeks to identify persons and events in old photographs. Project Co-Chairs Freda Brode and Barbara Hellman, with the assistance of other volunteers, have cataloged and identified countless negatives and photographs commemorating Memphis Jewish community events through the years. Once identified, the photographs are added to the Archive's database where they can be accessed by researchers.

The Photos from The Past committee is asking community members to please help identify any of the unknown persons in the photographs or give details of the events in the posted photographs found on the JHS website—[www.jhsmem.org](http://www.jhsmem.org). The photographs are updated monthly.

## Help Urgently Needed

Do you enjoy the articles in the *Southern Jewish Heritage*? In order to continue this publication, the Jewish Historical Society needs a volunteer to serve as editorial assistant for our newsletter. Duties will include: suggesting topics for articles, researching and writing articles, and working with others who can write articles. We print only two issues per year and there is a wealth of material available in the Archives and in the Memphis Room of the Main Library.

Also needed is a volunteer to send out group emails notifying our membership of monthly programs. This requires only a few minutes a month. Please call Marcia Levy at 754-0629, or email [bilmar56@bellsouth.net](mailto:bilmar56@bellsouth.net) if you can help.

# Rosenwald Schools Provided Better Education for Black Students in South

by Russell Strauss

In the early twentieth century, the Supreme Court ruling of Plessy vs. Ferguson had supported the existence of separate facilities, both educational and otherwise, for blacks and whites. In much of the South, African Americans were disenfranchised and could do little about the inequality that existed between the educational systems provided for the two groups. In most states, school boards provided more than five times the funding for white schools than they did for black schools. One Jewish philanthropist, Julius Rosenwald, tried his best to reverse this course of educational inequality.

Rosenwald, the son of German-Jewish immigrants, was born in 1862 in Springfield, Illinois, just a few blocks from the Abraham Lincoln residence. He learned the clothing business from relatives in New York City. He then returned to Illinois where, with a cousin, he co-founded the clothing business of Rosenwald and Weil, which became a major supplier for a rapidly growing mail order distributor called Sears and Roebuck. When Alva Roebuck left the company in 1893, Rosenwald and his brother-in-law Aaron Nusbaum purchased Roebuck's share of the company.

Rosenwald later purchased Nusbaum's share and became a full partner with Sears. When Sears resigned the presidency of the company in 1908 due to declining health, Rosenwald became president of the corporation, a position he continued to hold until 1924 when he was appointed chairman of the board. He held that position until his death in 1932.

In 1906, Rosenwald became friendly with Paul Sachs of Goldman Sachs Inc. The two began to discuss the social situation in America and what could be done to improve education for African Americans. Sachs introduced Rosenwald to several black leaders including William H. Baldwin and Booker T. Washington. Washington asked Rosenwald to serve on the board of directors for his Tuskegee Institute, a position that Rosen-

wald held for the rest of his life.

In 1917, Rosenwald established the Rosenwald Fund "for the benefit of mankind." Unlike other endowed foundations, which were designed to fund themselves in perpetuity, the Rosenwald Fund was intended to use all of its funds for philanthropic purposes. As a result, the fund was completely spent by 1948. Over the

course of his life, Rosenwald and his fund donated over \$70 million to public schools, colleges and universities, museums, Jewish charities and black institutions. Although institutions in Chicago and across the country benefited from this fund, much of the money went to the building of nearly 5000 schools in fifteen Southern states. Funds also were used to build teachers' homes and shop buildings at hundreds of other schools.

The Rosenwald schools were a participatory program based on a system of matching grants that required white school boards to commit to maintenance and black communities to aid in construction. By

1932, one-third of all African American children in the South were attending Rosenwald schools. Studies indicate that these schools had a significant positive effect on such factors as school attendance and overall literacy.

Most Rosenwald schools were small. The largest generally had classrooms for six teachers. Smaller schools had a single room or two rooms. Records indicate that in Shelby County, Tennessee, more than 50 Rosenwald schools or Rosenwald supplementary facilities were built. Looking over a list of these schools, one can find many school names that still exist today. Arlington, Cordova, Geeter, Manasses, Melrose, White Station and Woodstock are just a few of the schools that still exist in a much larger and more modernized form in the county.

Other schools are harder to locate. It would take a county historian considerable effort to locate the



Julius Rosenwald

*Continued on next page*



*"The horrors that are due to race prejudice come home to the Jew more forcefully than to others of the white race, on account of the centuries of persecution which they have suffered and still suffer."*

*—Julius Rosenwald, 1911*

schools of Bolton Bottom, Hayes Grove, Log Union, Lucinda, Mt. Sinai, Noah's Chapel or Prosperity. There is no doubt, however, that during the early twentieth century, the Rosenwald schools were an important factor in the education of black students in what is now the Memphis metropolitan area. In 1927, Rosenwald received a special gold medal from the William E. Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement in Race Relations for his contributions to the education of black youth. ☆

## The Cairo Rosenwald School, Sumner County, Tennessee

Located in the unincorporated community of Cairo, the Cairo Rosenwald School is one of three extant Rosenwald schools remaining in Sumner County and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Built in 1922-23, the school served African American children in grades one through eight for over thirty-five years.

The Cairo African American community received financial support to build the school from the Julius Rosenwald Fund in 1922. The Rosenwald Fund required the community to demonstrate its commitment to the school by providing a portion of the building funds. The Cairo African American community raised seven hundred dollars in support of the school. The Julius Rosenwald Fund contributed five hundred and the Tennessee public school fund supplied seven hundred dollars.

The architectural plan for the Cairo School is the standard Rosenwald Fund one-teacher school design, with a gable-end entrance, double-hung sash windows, weatherboard siding, and a stone foundation. The interior has a single room with two cloak closets flanking the central entrance at

the south end and a platform built across the north end. Attempts to make the building similar in facilities to the county's white schools occurred after World War II. The building was wired for electricity, and in 1951 running water was installed.



At that time, officials located a sink and two drinking fountains on the school's platform. It also contained a refrigerator and stove and became a place to teach home economics and to prepare lunches for the students. The platform could be separated from the classroom with folding wood doors when necessary. Before the construction of the school's water pump, students carried buckets of water from a neighbor's house

across the road from the school.

The school closed in 1959 due to mandated consolidation, but the building remained an important social center and community landmark for African American families. After its 1996 listing in the National Register, the community transformed the school into a local African American history museum. The building underwent a major restoration in 2008-2009. ☆

## Proposed Slate of Officers 2016-2017

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and all Past Presidents

## Bring A Friend to Our May Program

On May 22 the Jewish Historical Society will bring an outstanding speaker, Robyn Helzner, to Memphis. You've received this newsletter because you are a member of the Society; therefore, you are aware of the excellent programming we provide to the community year after year.

The only way we can continue to present high quality programs is with the help of our membership, who support this organization through dues, as well as through donations to the Sumner Levine Speaker Series Fund. We believe that many more people would like to become members of the Jewish Historical Society if only they knew more about us.

Please help spread the word by inviting your friends to our May meeting. They will be entertained by Robyn's songs and fascinating stories, and we hope they'll be inspired to join the Society. Only our members receive these newsletters, plus advance notification of every program.

Visit our website, [www.jhsmem.org](http://www.jhsmem.org) to learn more about all our important projects. They are possible because of you. Thanks for your continued support.

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