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Preserving the Past and Enhancing the Future

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The Stein Saga: From Peddler to Prosperity In Three Generations

by Marcia Levy

If you think this is just another typical story of a poor, struggling Jewish immigrant who comes to America and makes good, think again. Everyone's story is different with its unique twists and turns. This story begins in the Eastern European Pale of Settlement with a man who considered America a godless place and forbade all of his children from ever going there. The story includes a theft, a forgery and a shooting, and culminates in the establishment of a department store chain operating almost 300 stores in 30 states with about \$1.36 billion in annual revenue.

Chaim and Chasha Stein and their fourteen children lived in the village of Amdur (now called Indura) in the province of Grodno. Grodno was in an area which had been disputed for centuries, at various times falling under the rule of Poland, Lithuania, and finally Russia. Toward the end of the 19th century, the czarist government began to issue severe discriminatory laws against the Jews, leading to a series of pogroms. The village of Amdur had about 2,000 inhabitants, of whom about 90 percent were Jew-

ish. Although the Jews there always lived with the possibility of violence, Amdur was miraculously spared from any pogroms.

Unlike some of his Jewish neighbors who lived in wooden houses with dirt floors, Chaim Stein was not poor. He owned a thriving bakery business in a brick building with family living quarters above the shop. Because he was prominent in his community, he was loyal to the czarist regime; nevertheless, like all the Jews in Amdur, he faithfully observed religious and dietary laws. There were several synagogues in Amdur, the largest being the great *shul*, which was built in 1882 and is still standing. The Jewish population of the town vanished long ago, having left by choice or otherwise, and the great *shul* is now in disrepair and used as a warehouse.

Chaim had once traveled to the United States, but upon his return said that Jews in America did not observe the Sabbath or follow other religious laws; thus he forbade his children from ever going there. His oldest son Sam was born in 1882—the



Great *shul* in Indura (formerly Amdur) as it looks today

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President's Message



Reflecting upon my term as president of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South, I feel obliged ask this question: During the past year, have we, as an organization, accomplished our purpose as stated in our bylaws? That purpose is as follows:

1. The collection, presentation, exhibition, publication, dissemination and interpretation of material of every kind having reference to the settlement, history and life of the Jews in Memphis and the Mid-South.

2. The promotion and encouragement of education, research and study of the history of Jews in Memphis and the Mid-South and in relation to American and world history.

I believe I can answer the question with an emphatic "Yes." Regarding collection, we have continued, in collaboration with Temple Israel, to interview persons in the community for our Oral History Project. These new interviews, as well as previous ones, are being digitized for better access and long term preservation. In addition, an inventory of our entire archives is now being conducted to enable us to learn how to best utilize these materials.

Through the Sumner Levine Speaker Series, we have presented a diversity of programs which have been open to the community. Our Exodus Project and exhibition, led by **Lynnie Mirvis**, was a great success, and attendance at our programs has continued to increase. We have continued the publication of two full-color newsletters during the year.

Our website was redesigned, and more information was added, to reach out not only to our members but also to those outside our community who may want to use it for research purposes. We displayed "Pictures From the Past" on our website and at meetings in an effort to identify the individuals in these photos. We are also in the process of developing a Program Archive on the website, to provide a list of our past programs in addition to the current ones.

None of this could have been accomplished without an outstanding board. It is difficult to give each of you the thanks you deserve, but I'll try. Kudos to Program Chairman **Joy Wilk** and her committee for planning, publicizing and handling the details of eight outstanding programs during the year. Joy kept going like the Energizer Bunny, even with a fractured hip! Membership Chairmen **Phyllis Levine** and **Bryna Woodman** sent out bills and maintained membership records—our membership numbers increased by approximately ten percent this year. Treasurer **Ben Sissman** handled our finances and even ventured east of Highland a few times to take care of our banking. **Lorraine Wolf**, Corresponding Secretary, sent thank you letters to all members who paid above the minimum dues and to those who contributed to the Sumner Levine Speaker Series Fund.

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*Of Blessed Memory

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Although we had no elected Recording Secretary, **Leslie Landau** and **Joyce Lazarov** filled in and took minutes at board meetings. More Kudos go to Webmaster **Dick Rubin**, who truly is a master when it comes to computers, and to **Ron Perel**, who sent monthly email notices of our programs to our membership. Just because we're a Historical Society doesn't mean we're not electronically up to date! Archives Chairmen **Freda Brode** and **Barbara Hellman** worked diligently with our Oral History and Pictures from the Past Projects. A special thank you to all board members, for your input and excellent attendance at board meetings.

Finally, thanks to our entire membership for your support of the Jewish Historical Society and for acknowledging the importance of "*Preserving the Past to Enhance the Future.*" It has been an honor to serve as your president.

Marcia Levy

STEIN, *continued from page 1*

same year as the building of the great *shul*. As was the tradition in many families, Sam Stein's father expected his oldest son to remain in Amdur and take over the bakery business. Unfortunately, at the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War, Sam, then twenty-two years old, was conscripted into the Russian Army. Jewish conscripts and others who were considered "undesirables" were generally placed on the front lines and used as cannon fodder, so their survival chances were slim.

After completing his military training, Sam requested a furlough, which was granted. He returned home, with no intention of going back to the army. He asked his father to help him get to America, but Chaim stubbornly refused. Sam knew that his father had a notary-type seal essential to validate travel documents. With his mother's help, he broke into his father's desk, stole some money and travel documents which he forged. The next day, when he discovered the theft, Chaim reported his son to the Russian authorities, but Sam was already well on his way to the Russian-German border. Despite the danger of being apprehended as a military deserter, he managed to make it to the port of Hamburg, where he purchased a ticket in steerage on a Trans-Atlantic ship destined for New York. He arrived at Ellis Island on January 5, 1905.

Sam had \$43 in his pocket, sufficient to survive for his first few weeks in New York. For several months he worked for a cousin as a messenger, earning barely enough to cover his living expenses. He disliked both his job and the city. Determined to build up some savings, he walked whenever he had letters or packages to deliver instead of using the dimes he was given for subway fare. Eventually he had saved enough to leave New York, and although he had no family or acquaintances in Memphis, Tennessee, that is where he first chose to go. For a brief time he peddled costume jewelry in Memphis, carrying his pack through the city and surrounding areas while always hoping to find better opportunities. Once he had saved enough to move on, in late 1905 or early 1906 he took a packet boat down the

Mississippi River and traveled to Greenville, Mississippi.

In Greenville, Sam found a thriving Jewish community. By 1870, 25-30 Jewish families primarily of Germanic background had settled there. Russian Jews soon followed, and by the time Sam arrived, construction had begun on the Hebrew Union Temple, serving the largest Jewish congregation in Mississippi. Sam

quickly became aware that the Jews of Greenville were involved in all facets of the general community: as business owners, plantation owners, members of civic organizations, and as local politicians. Greenville seemed to offer all the opportunities that Sam was seeking.

He began peddling jewelry and other merchandise, first on foot and later with a horse and buggy which he was able to purchase. A major setback occurred when he was traveling his regular route between Greenville and Vicksburg. Two men jumped him, shot him in his right arm, and stole his merchandise, resulting in a stay of several months in the hospital. Looking for a safer way to peddle his goods, he set up shop on the street in Greenville and sold his

wares out of a suitcase. A friend suggested that Sam open a permanent store and offered to finance his stock; thus, the original "Sam Stein's" was born in about 1908.

A few years later he met and married Fannie Aarenzon, also a Russian immigrant. They had four children—Jake, Joseph, Sadie Lee, and Bernard—and became naturalized U.S. citizens in 1912. Like every business, Sam Stein's had its ups and downs. Because the economy in Greenville and environs was dependent primarily on the price of cotton, whenever that price fell, it adversely affected the local merchants. Sam's clientele consisted of working people, both black and white, such as tenants and sharecroppers who worked the large farms around Greenville. In 1920 there was a major recession, but somehow he managed to pay his debts, and even expand into a larger space. Further disaster struck the area during the massive flood of 1927, when a levee broke and the Mississippi River inundated the entire Delta. Boardwalks were built down Green-



1. Sam Stein.

Sam Stein

(Photo courtesy of University of Tampa Press)

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ville's two main streets, and within two weeks, Sam Stein's had reopened for business.

It came as a shock when, having survived numerous hardships, the seemingly invincible Sam Stein suffered a massive heart attack and died on February 23, 1933, at the relatively young age of fifty. The local paper, the *Daily Democrat-Times*, titled an editorial "A Man of Courage" and referred to Sam's death as "a distinct loss to the community."

Sam Stein's untimely death at the height of the Great Depression left his family bereft, not only of a husband and father, but also of a viable plan to sustain the business. Fannie Stein had helped in the store but only as a salesperson who waited on customers. The oldest son, Jake, who was just 21, had worked in the store after school, but had no management experience. He did, however, have the advantage of being well-known in the community as a "local hero" because when he attended Greenville High School he was the star player on the football team. He went on to play football at the University of Alabama, but unfortunately suffered injuries and left college after one year.

His own popularity, combined with the excellent reputation that his father Sam had established in Greenville, enabled Jake to enlist the aid of suppliers and bankers so that he could learn on the job. A week after Sam's death a full-page ad in the *Daily Democrat Times* announced "Sam Stein's Administrator's Sale," listing bargains such as men's overalls for 47 cents and ladies' pumps, straps, and oxfords for 88 cents a pair. The sale was such a success that Fannie was evidently able to convince Jake and his younger brother Joe that they could carry on the business. Their sister Sadie left college and came back to Greenville to help in the store as well.

Meanwhile, the Stein dynasty began to increase

in number. Jake married Freda Grundfest, whose father Morris owned a country store and cotton acreage in Cary, Mississippi. Joe married Jane Wexler, who was the second queen of the Natchez, Mississippi Pilgrimage and whose mother was one of the founders of the

Pilgrimage organization. Sadie married Julius Sherman, who had recently moved to Greenville from Pine Bluff, Arkansas. The expansion of the family made it difficult for a single store to support three families, so in 1936, Joe opened Jay's, which sold more upscale women's clothing and shoes. In 1937, the youngest brother, Bernie, joined the



The Hebrew Union Temple in Greenville, Mississippi

business after he graduated from high school.

Following in his father's footsteps, Jake Stein became active in the community and was elected a city councilman. In 1943 he resigned this position to enlist in the Army, joining his brother Bernie who had previously volunteered for the Army Air Corps. This left their brother-in-law, Julius Sherman, to hold down the fort at Sam Stein's until they returned home. Greenville had begun to change after World War II, as had the entire Delta. The labor shortage during the war had led farmers and cotton growers to turn to machines and herbicides as replacements for field workers. Many of these workers ended up leaving the South or moving to larger cities to find jobs. When Jake and Bernie came back to Greenville, they realized it would be necessary to attract a new customer base.

This challenge was met with the opening of a new Sam Stein's several blocks away from the old location, managed by Julius Sherman and Bernie Stein, who had married Carolyn Levy from Lima, Ohio. The new store carried higher quality merchandise and targeted a more upscale, white middle-class clientele. Jake managed the store in the original location, which became a bargain outlet and was renamed Stein's Self-Service Store or "The Big S." Although Jake had some non-family members as

sales clerks, only family members controlled the cash registers. Jake's mother Fannie, who became known as "Mama Stein," had never learned to read English and her register was often out-of-balance—sometimes if Jake or Fannie needed a little cash, they just reached in and took \$10 or \$20 without leaving a debit slip.

Jake Stein still made time for his civic involvement—he headed the Chamber of Commerce and also affirmed his commitment to Judaism as president of the Hebrew Union Temple and fundraising chairman of the United Jewish Appeal. The business continued to grow, and a new, expanded, block-long store was built. It was Freda Stein's brother, Dave Grundfest, who came up with a new name. He mentioned a man from Arkansas who had opened a discount store called Wal-Mart, and suggested calling the new store "Stein Mart."

The citizens of Greenville had benefited from a history of religious tolerance and better race relations than other towns in Mississippi; however, in 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court issued its ruling that segregated schools were unconstitutional, racial tensions began to flare. The White Citizen's Council was organized to oppose integration. Fearing repercussions if they did not join, many Greenville business owners paid their dues, but Jake Stein refused to do so. He had always treated his black customers with respect, and they felt comfortable shopping at Sam Stein's.

In the early Sixties, civil rights activists moved into Mississippi, primarily to assist blacks in registering to vote. In Greenville, a new group emerged, the Delta Ministry, which began to protest racial discrimination and set forth a series of demands. Despite the fact that Jake Stein had already begun training two blacks for jobs as cashiers, Stein Mart was the primary target of the Delta Ministry's demonstrations and picketing. It

was a difficult and hurtful time for the Steins, but Jake tried to carry on business as usual. By the fall of 1965, the protests finally died down.

Eli Evans, in his book *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South*, wrote: "Yet the story of Jews in the South is the story of fathers who built businesses to give them to their sons who didn't want them." Such was not the case with the Stein family. Jake Stein had groomed his son Jay to be his successor, and Jay was receptive to fulfilling his father's wish to ensure the future of Stein Mart.

Jay attended public schools in Greenville through his sophomore year in high school. His parents then decided to send him to a prep school, and he transferred to the Bolles School in Jacksonville, Florida. After graduating, he went to New York University, which offered a major in retailing. Students were allowed to attend classes and gain practical experience through internships. Jay learned about retailing at Saks Fifth Avenue and about

manufacturing at Union Underwear, whose brand was Fruit of the Loom. Anxious to begin his career, Jay did not complete the NYU program and returned to Greenville.

Jay had inherited his father's entrepreneurial instincts. His vision was to expand Stein Mart beyond

the borders of Greenville, but Jake was not amenable to changing the way he had done business for more than thirty years. Father and son held very different operating philosophies and often fought "like cats and dogs." Nevertheless, Jake continued to share his merchandising experience with Jay and introduced him to the many contacts he had made over the years. At one point they met a senior executive of Saks Fifth Avenue and negotiated with him to buy Saks's surplus items in bulk at a favorable price. These were sold at Stein Mart at



Jay Stein in the linen department of a Stein Mart store



Robyn Helzner Returns!

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Memphis Jewish Community Center



Through entrancing Ladino songs, stories and images, Helzner magically transports audiences to the heart of Jewish Spain. Her captivating presentation brings to life the once flourishing Jewish communities of Toledo, Córdoba and Seville. In exploring the resurgence of a modern Jewish presence in Spain, “A Key to the Casa” celebrates the remarkable resilience of the Jewish people. Lyrics to the songs are projected so everyone can join in the singing. A stunning vocalist and vivid storyteller, Robyn Helzner radiates a passion for Jewish music and culture.

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discount prices for as much as ninety percent off the original prices at Saks. The Saks Sales at Stein Mart became a shopping phenomenon in Greenville, even attracting people from surrounding states to scoop up the bargains.

When Jay first suggested that he wanted to open a Stein Mart store in Memphis, Jake felt certain it would fail and refused to give his permission. Jay finally prevailed, and they consulted Herbert Lichterman, a Memphis friend of Jake’s, to recommend a location. An empty retail space on Summer Avenue was suggested, and the success of that Stein Mart quickly led to store openings in Nashville, Louisville, Little Rock, and beyond.

Recognizing the need to attract more management talent if the company were to continue growing, in 1984 Jay opted to relocate their headquarters to Jacksonville, Florida. In 1992, Stein Mart went public with its shares listed on the NASDAQ Stock Exchange. Jay Stein stepped down as CEO in 2016, but still serves as chairman of the board.

Sam Stein started his business career in America selling jewelry from a peddler’s pack. He could never have imagined that this inauspicious beginning would evolve into the vast retail empire that Stein Mart has become. ☆

The primary resource for this article was the book “Stein Mart: An American Story of Roots, Family, and Building a Greater Dream,” by David J. Ginzel, published by the University of Tampa Press, Tampa, Florida, 2004.


Stein Mart

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Photos from The Exodus Project - April 2, 2017

Photography by Al Streicher and David Mirvis



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Francine Brown; Allan Hayden; Jackie Mandell

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**Voting on this slate will take place at
our program meeting on May 21.**

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