



JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH

Southern Jewish Heritage

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Preserving the Past and Enhancing the Future

SPRING, 2021

Lische Became Louis and Yudel Became Ike: A Granddaughter's Ongoing Search For Answers

By Barbara Hermann

In the early 1900s how did my maternal grandfather, Lische/Louis Rosengarten, from Galicia in Poland (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), arrive in Hoboken, New Jersey, and resettle permanently in Memphis, Tennessee? How did my paternal grandfather, Yudel/Idel/Ike Miller, arrive from the Polish-Ukrainian-Belarus area around the same time period, and end up in Helena, Arkansas?

I started my search, a tedious process in pre-internet days, to answer these and other questions about my family's background. I knew that at the age of eight, my father, Ben Miller, along with his mother Bessie, had arrived at Ellis Island in December, 1920 aboard the Aquitania to join Yudel after years of separation.

In the library, I learned that the Aquitania was part of the Cunard steamship line. In the yellow pages of the telephone book, there was a toll-free telephone number for the Cunard line. I called to ask about their archives and was given the address of the contact person

at the University of Liverpool, where the archives were housed.

I wrote a letter to the university telling about a British sailor who had been very kind to my thin, terribly seasick eight-year-old father. The sailor had given him herring, thought to be a cure for seasickness, and had

taken him up to the bridge of the ship. I asked for a copy of any records they might have. Many months later I received a reply from the University stating that they "receive a large number of enquiries" and were unable to undertake a search on my behalf; however, the record that I needed was housed at the Public Record Office at Kew, Richmond, Surrey, UK, and if I were to visit, "the staff will show you how to set about



Ben Miller, age 8, with his parents Ike and Bessie Miller

identifying relevant material." Their polite letter has become an artifact in my files.

A few years later I went to an exhibit of American Art at Brooks Museum. As I was walking in the

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A New Logo!



A New Look!

President's Message



Did you know the year 2021 marks the 35th anniversary of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South? JHSMM was founded in 1986 by a small group, who were inspired by a conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society that had recently been held in Memphis. Harriett Stern, of

blessed memory, became the first president of the JHSMM, and under her watch the first edition of the JHSMM newsletter was published in September of 1987. Harriett wrote in her president's message that the purpose of the JHSMM would be to encourage study and research, provide educational programs and establish local archives.

I am happy to look back and see that JHSMM has met Harriett's expectations over the years. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, JHSMM has continued programming with the **Sumner Levine Speaker Series** via Zoom; these programs have been very well received with great attendance. The JHSMM Archives, housed within the Temple Israel Archives, are growing and our volunteers have a strong relationship with the Temple Israel archivist, Jen Kollath, ensuring the archives are available for research to the community. The JHSMM's **Southern Jewish Heritage** newsletter is a first-class research newsletter including articles about the Jewish history of Memphis and the Mid-South as well as current events.

In honor of our 35th anniversary, the Executive Board is excited to announce the following:

The Board voted to adopt a meaningful new logo of a deeply rooted Tree of Life with leaves and a Jewish star, representing our organization's ongoing commitment to preserving the past and enhancing the future. Read more about it in this newsletter.

The Sumner Levine Speaker Series will continue to provide meaningful programs via Zoom until it is safe to meet in person. Given the strong attendance at our Zoom programs, it is conceivable we may continue to offer some programs this way into the future. Further, we have developed and strengthened our bonds with other Jewish historical organizations and museums, to make available to our members a wider range of programs supporting our mission. Access to these programs is available from our website, www.jhsmem.org.

JHSMM has begun the first steps of a particularly im-

Jewish Historical Society of Memphis & the Mid-South

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*Of Blessed Memory

portant program of historical significance to the Memphis Jewish community. The Board is investigating the procedures, legal requirements and funding that would be required to digitize **The Hebrew Watchman** newspapers from 1925 to the present. In late 2019, JHSMM received the Scott and Donna Langston Archival Grant from the Southern Jewish Historical Society to begin exploring this digitizing project. More information will be announced as it develops.

I am truly honored to have the opportunity to lead JHSMM, its dedicated Board and its many devoted members as we continue "preserving the past and enhancing the future" of Memphis and Mid-South Jewry into our 35th year.

I would like to wish everyone a very healthy, happy, and peaceful 2021. Stay well and safe.

Lorraine Wolf

A New Logo!



A New Look!

Congratulations to us! The Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South (JHSMM) is celebrating its 35th anniversary. In honor of the event, we are introducing a bold, modern logo to reflect our ongoing commitment to preserving the past and enhancing the future.

Our logo evolved over about 8 weeks of discussing and refining our thoughts on who we are and what we stand for. After numerous revisions we are proud of what we have developed. Our new logo reflects who we are; a strong tree of the life of our community, firmly rooted in our collective past while spreading our leaves and forever reaching upward and outward. Cradled in the trunk of the tree, is our central tenet—our Judaism, represented here by the golden Star of David. The 3 layers of roots represent our depth of character and the progression of ancestors to our present moment.

The colors of the logo—blues with white and gold—have significance as well. Blue and white are the traditional colors of Judaism and are seen in the Israeli flag. Some consider blue to be the color of divinity—the sea and sky, while white is thought to be the color of tranquility—peace and calmness. Gold metals are often thought to be the symbol of divine and celestial light. Taken together we hope this logo with its strong colors, modern lines and important symbolism, will bring new energy and spirit into our organization as we go from strength to strength!

We were very fortunate to have the services of a professional artist, who chose to design the new logo for JHSMM as a pro bono project because she believes in our mission. Danielle Clemons is a New York based graphic designer and artist. She is an honors graduate of Washington University, where she was a Danforth Scholar and earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Communication Design. She currently works at Facebook where she partners with experts in government and private industry to create products and content that tackle complex social issues on the Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp platforms. If you have seen content related to mental health, bullying, Covid-19 support, and vaccines, or visited the Covid-19 Hub on Facebook, you have seen Danielle's work.

Prior to coming to Facebook, Danielle was a graphic designer at Droga5, named the Advertising Agency of Decade. While there, she worked on advertising campaigns for some of the biggest brands, such as CoverGirl, Chase Bank, Prudential, and Pizza Hut. Danielle contributes her talents to Jewish organizations on a pro bono basis when she can find the time and we were extremely lucky to have her services. She is also the niece of Past President Mimi Clemons and granddaughter of a loyal JHSMM member, Sara Clemons, of blessed memory. ☆

Connect With JHSMM

There are many ways to connect with JHSMM. You have received this **Newsletter** in the mail because you are a member of the Society. As a member, you are also receiving **Postcards** and **Emails** announcing our latest programs. Non-members as well as members can read about JHSMM on our **Facebook** page—our sincere thanks go to Lulu Abdun, who has redesigned it in keeping with our new logo and who updates it regularly. Articles about our upcoming programs are published in **The Hebrew Watchman**. Last but not least, our **Website**, www.jhsmem.org, is in the process of being revamped to reflect our “new look.” It will continue to be filled with interesting and useful information about Memphis and the Mid-South thanks to Dick Rubin, our webmaster. Please continue to support JHSMM with your membership. Our excellent programs will continue for now on **Zoom**, but we hope we all can enjoy them soon in person.

Sumner Levine Speaker Series

Sumner Levine, who passed away in 2014, was a past president of JHSMM and also of SJHS. He was a driving force behind the excellent programming that the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South has enjoyed. Sumner's wife Phyllis, along with their family, established a special Fund in his memory to help provide the necessary resources to continue bringing these quality programs to Memphis. Please consider the Sumner Levine Speaker Series Fund when you are planning to make a donation to honor or memorialize someone. We provide our programs to the community free of charge, and your donations will help us ensure that we can engage speakers who will be informative and entertaining. The Levine family's ongoing generous support is greatly appreciated, as are all donations to the Sumner Levine Fund.



RMS Aquitania, c.1920

hallway, I saw a screen with a silent documentary film of Manhattan, released in 1921. There were scenes of numerous sites in the city and then a scene of the port, showing a steamship arriving. You could see the tiny figures of the sailors, who seemed to be wearing winter clothing, running along the deck of the ship. As the ship came nearer the camera, the smoke cleared and the name Aquitania could clearly be seen on the side. By this time, the internet was available. I researched the Aquitania's history and learned that it had been returned to passenger service in 1920 after being used as a troop ship during World War I. The ship had made only two trips to New York in 1920—one in July and one in December. It is quite possible that the film I had seen was showing the ship as it was bringing my father and my grandmother to America. At least, I would like to believe that it was! You can view it on YouTube: "1921 New York City Documentary Silent Film 'Manhatta' 55254." The name "Manhatta" is from a poem by Walt Whitman.

Other things distracted me from research, as it has intermittently, but with the advent of the internet, I was able to continue the research more easily using AncestryLibrary.com and FamilySearch.org.

I have been attempting to create timelines for my grandfathers' arrivals in the United States and migration to Memphis. Their paths to citizenship turned out to be quite different. I have found the "List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States," the arrival record of my grandfather, "Yudel" or "Judel" Miller of Brest, Russia, who landed in New York in August, 1907. The passenger list for the ship, Kroonland, shows that he was a 27 year old shoemaker, had \$10, could not read or write English. His wife Vasi/Bessie was still in

Russia. According to his Petition for Naturalization, he returned home in 1911 to deal with "his mother's estate." I had been told by my mother that Yudel had actually come to the United States to work and send money home while his father-in-law took care of the family business, a tannery. When Yudel arrived back in Russia in 1911, he found that things had not gone well with the business, and the money was gone. My father was born in May of 1912.

Yudel—by this time he was calling himself "Idel"—came back to the United States, to Helena, Arkansas. He applied for citizenship in 1913, but the petition was dismissed "without prejudice" because the government said that, according to regulations created in 1906, the existence of a wife and child, an "anchor family," in his native country might indicate that he was not serious about being a citizen of this country, or that he might use his citizenship to sponsor an otherwise ineligible family member—ineligible for health reasons, for example.

Yudel/Idel finally became a citizen in 1916, but due to World War I, my grandmother, Vasi/Basha/Bessie Miller and dad, Chiel Bengian/Ben Miller were not able to join him until December, 1920. The picture documents the day that my father, age 8, met his father for the first time. My father's brother Meyer was born in 1921.

The so-far-unverified-story of "Why Helena, Arkansas" goes like this: My grandfather somehow arrived in Memphis after coming to the United States. He was working in a shoe repair shop in downtown Memphis. A young, disabled boy came in, said that he had lost his wallet and had no money to get back home to Helena. My grandfather took up a collection from people in the shop to give to the boy. A few weeks later, a doctor from



SS Kroonland as painted in 1903 by Antonio Jacobsen

Helena came into the shop and asked for Yudel Miller. The unnamed doctor said that a shoemaker was needed in Helena and “here are the keys to the shop.” However, in his Petition for Naturalization, Yudel said that he had left the port of Antwerp, Belgium, August 1, 1906, and had been living in Helena since August 14, 1906. This definitely does not match the 1907 passenger list or the lovely story! I have found, though, that my grandparents on both sides had a very elastic view of dates and ages. And it just occurred to me, after all these years, that this story might have been an attempt by my grandfather to appear to be a hero to his son or to present a lesson on a good deed being rewarded.

At the beginning of the Depression, the shoe repair shop was destroyed by fire. The insurance covered only the shoes. What remained were the shoe heels that had not been burned to ashes so the heels were counted and divided by two. After that, the family moved to Memphis, where my grandfather eventually went to work for Baron Hirsch Synagogue as a shammas.

My maternal grandfather, Louis Rosengarten, who was from Sedziszow, Galicia, Poland, had a much easier path to citizenship. He also had quite a sense of humor so apparently some of his stories also are a bit suspect. When his son asked about conditions at Ellis Island, he said, “What Ellis Island? I got off at Hoboken.” Actually, I researched that, and apparently it was possible to get off the ship there. But I have not been able to find any arrival documentation to verify his story either way. In a 1923 application for a United States passport, Louis states that he arrived in the United States in 1900 and became a citizen in 1902. According to the story told by my mother, he was in Chicago. There was an election. They needed voters. He said that the only English he knew was, “Yes.”

I was able to find a copy of a U.S. Department of Labor, Immigration and Naturalization Service registration card for Louis with the same date of naturalization as the one on the citizenship document that was passed down to me. It shows that he was living at 313 Maxwell Street in Chicago, and the name of the wit-

ness was “Human Safern.” The name “Human” cannot be found in any Ancestry or FamilySearch.org records! Unfortunately, the blank for “Date and port of arrival to U.S.” has only an X-mark.

According to another story my mother told me, her father Louis spoke English with a Scottish rolled “R” because he learned English while peddling in the mountains of North Carolina, where many Scots had settled. But my uncle, her brother Jerome Rosengarten,

described his dad as a “character” with a very dry sense of humor. Her other brother, Norton Rosengarten, wrote an unpublished story in the 1950s for the Reader’s Digest feature “My Most Unforgettable Character,” telling a different tale about Louis. My uncle Norton said that Louis peddled in the Midwest, and I can verify that Louis was in Chicago in 1902. Then, according to Norton, Louis was a vendor at the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904 and arrived in Memphis in 1905. But where was Louis Rosengarten between his arrival in the U.S. in 1900 and his naturalization in 1902? Was he wandering in the Blue Ridge Mountains?

At any rate, after he arrived in Memphis, he saw that there were several stores owned by Galicians—his landmen. He got a job at one and stayed. He married my grand-

mother, Anna Messinger, who was from New York City. I believe she came to the United States from Tarnow, Poland, around the age of 12. I found their names in the Manhattan marriage license index of January, 1911.

The search for information about my grandfathers has led down very interesting paths, some of which unfortunately proved to be dead-ends. In searching for the archives of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which had loaned Yudel Miller the money to pay for passage for his wife and child, I found the American Joint Distribution Committee web site, jdc.org, which has a set of records of Jewish immigrants who were sending money to their families in Poland and Russia, how much they were sending, and the addresses of sender and recipient. But that collection had no information about my grandfathers.

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Louis and Anna Rosengarten

Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth On National Register of Historic Places

More than 50 years ago, Memphis architect Keith Kays had a memorable meeting with the leadership of Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth. Ron Harkavy, the congregation's president, and his colleagues were there to hear Kays describe his vision for a new building to house the synagogue. Kays began his presentation and described a unique structure developed by noted architect Francis Mah.

"I talked for a little bit and made a presentation on the design," Kays said. "When I finished there was complete silence and a man stood up and said, 'Mr. Kays, I just have one question: If we approved this design, will we like it?' and I said 'Yes, you will,' and they did."

Fast forward from the synagogue's 1970 opening to the year 2020, and the building that Mah and Kays designed has achieved a very special recognition. On July 24, it was certified on The National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of the Interior. The honor calls Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth as significant for its place in American Jewish history and for its architecture.



The building, at 120 East Yates, the former home of the congregation, has been described in the past with terms ranging from "the purple spaceship" to "the disco shul." Perhaps not what one might expect from an orthodox congregation. It is unapologetically modernist in its design. That was something of a departure for houses of worship in the late 1960s. Mah in particular was inspired by the Hebrew bible, according to Lynnne Mirvis, a member of the congregation and co-vice president for programs of the Jewish Historical Society.

"Francis Mah became inspired with the tabernacles that were carried in the desert and the colors of scarlet and purple and blue and silver, so the walls of the interior of the sanctuary are all silver and the tapestry of the seats are scarlet," Mirvis said. "Those colors were very striking and were very different from what a synagogue looked like. It took your breath away, and it turned out to be a very inspiring place to pray because the silver walls actually reflected people in prayer. It was grand but yet very intimate."

The silver walls were actually made of the polyester film mylar to generate reflectivity, Kays said.

"For the design of the sanctuary itself, the idea was to make it a special space by using reflective mylar," Kays said. "That could help generate a sense of spirit, which I think it did, along with the colors like the deep purple, and the dark red, trying to make it a space that did not feel like it was enclosed. Ron Harkavy's wife, Iris, designed a wonderful tapestry for the opening of the Torah cradle.

"I think from the beginning Ron Harkavy articulated the reason they selected our firm was that they did

not want a traditional synagogue,” he said. “They wanted a synagogue that spoke to the people and would be unique. Working with the committee and with their enthusiasm, and Ron Harkavy telling us they didn’t want just another synagogue, they wanted something that was unique to their congregation and their orthodox traditions, which is what led us to basically designing the building.”

Many buildings vie for the National Register of Historic Places, but few are selected. In order to be considered, a structure must be at least 50 years old. About a year ago, Mirvis knew 2020 would make the synagogue eligible so she started researching what it would take to achieve the honor. She worked directly with Kelsey Lampkin, a historic preservationist with the Memphis Area Association of Governments.

“I wrote the application,” Lampkin said. “We determined it was eligible for listing and the commission and preservation office agreed. Its architectural significance is very different from other synagogues and their architectural styles. The historical commission looks at a lot of houses of worship wanting historic status, and it is one of a kind and that’s part of the joy of documenting. It really stands out.”

Lampkin said inclusion as a national historic place is significant for researchers and historians who study Memphis houses of worship and Judaism.

“The important aspect is that this history is documented, so if anyone wants to research Jewish history in Memphis, this document will remain in the state historic archives, with photos and descriptions. It’s very important documentation.”

This is not the first time Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth has been honored for its design. In 1972, the building won the Award of Excellence for Design of Interiors by *Architectural Record*, which noted it had “appeal... to our senses and to the emotions these senses inspire.”

For Mirvis, working on the application was truly a labor of love. She has strong memories of the synagogue from years praying and celebrating there with her family.

“This preserves our history and tells our story,” Mirvis said. “We need to have more beauty in the world, and this is a beautiful building. A congregation is made up of people, but a building sometimes ties us to the past and celebrations and our prayers and everything that we’ve experienced as individuals is in the walls of this building.”

The registry was also especially meaningful for Kays, whose long and storied career includes receiving the 2013 Francis Gassner Award for contributions to architecture in Memphis. When he and Mah designed Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth, Kays was a young architect who felt fortunate to work on a unique project.

“I don’t think there’s any honor that goes above this one,” Kays said. “Part of that goes back to the sense of community at that time, and the camaraderie. It was a very uplifting experience for me to work with those folks.”

This honor bestowed upon the building at 120 East Yates Road is bittersweet. The property was recently sold. While the congregation awaits a new permanent structure, they are currently sharing space on the grounds and within Baron Hirsch Synagogue.

This article is reprinted courtesy of *Jewish Scene Magazine*.

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In just randomly clicking on interesting titles in the Ancestry.com Card Catalog, I discovered the U.S. Industrial Removal Office Records (IRO), 1899-1922. The IRO was a committee originally organized by Rumanian Jews who had arrived earlier. It became an organization led by German-American Jews that helped any Jewish immigrant needing employment to relocate and find employment. From its beginning to its liquidation in 1922, the IRO relocated 79,000 Jews to more than 1,000 American towns and cities. Many of these immigrants were skilled: tailors, carpenters, painters, shoemakers, weavers, bakers, barbers, and bookkeepers. The IRO records are a treasure trove of letters to and from immigrants and reports on which immigrants were successful in their move and which were not. I found neither of my grandfathers’ names listed in the IRO records.

Although all this research has not yielded definite answers as to why my grandfathers ended up in Helena, Arkansas, and Memphis, Tennessee, the search has been, and continues to be, fascinating. ☆

Coming Attractions!

March 4, 2021, 9:30 am

(Presented by the SJHS and Bremen Museum of Atlanta)
"Extracted: Unmasking Antisemitism in Higher Education"
with author Dr. Perry Brickman

Sunday, March 7, 2021, 2:00 pm

"The Four Rabbis: Hear Their Stories"

A conversation with four outstanding young rabbis, who found their calling
to the rabbinate after growing up in Memphis:
Rabbi Rachel Bearman, Rabbi Karen Kriger Bogard, Rabbi Michael Danziger,
and Rabbi Jeff Dreifus. Moderated by Sally Rosenberg.

Sunday, April 13, 2021, 7:00 pm

(co-sponsored with the MJCC)

"Nobody Will Tell You This But Me: A true (as told to me) story"
with author Bess Kalb

See www.jhsmem.org, postcard, or email for Zoom information

