

MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY

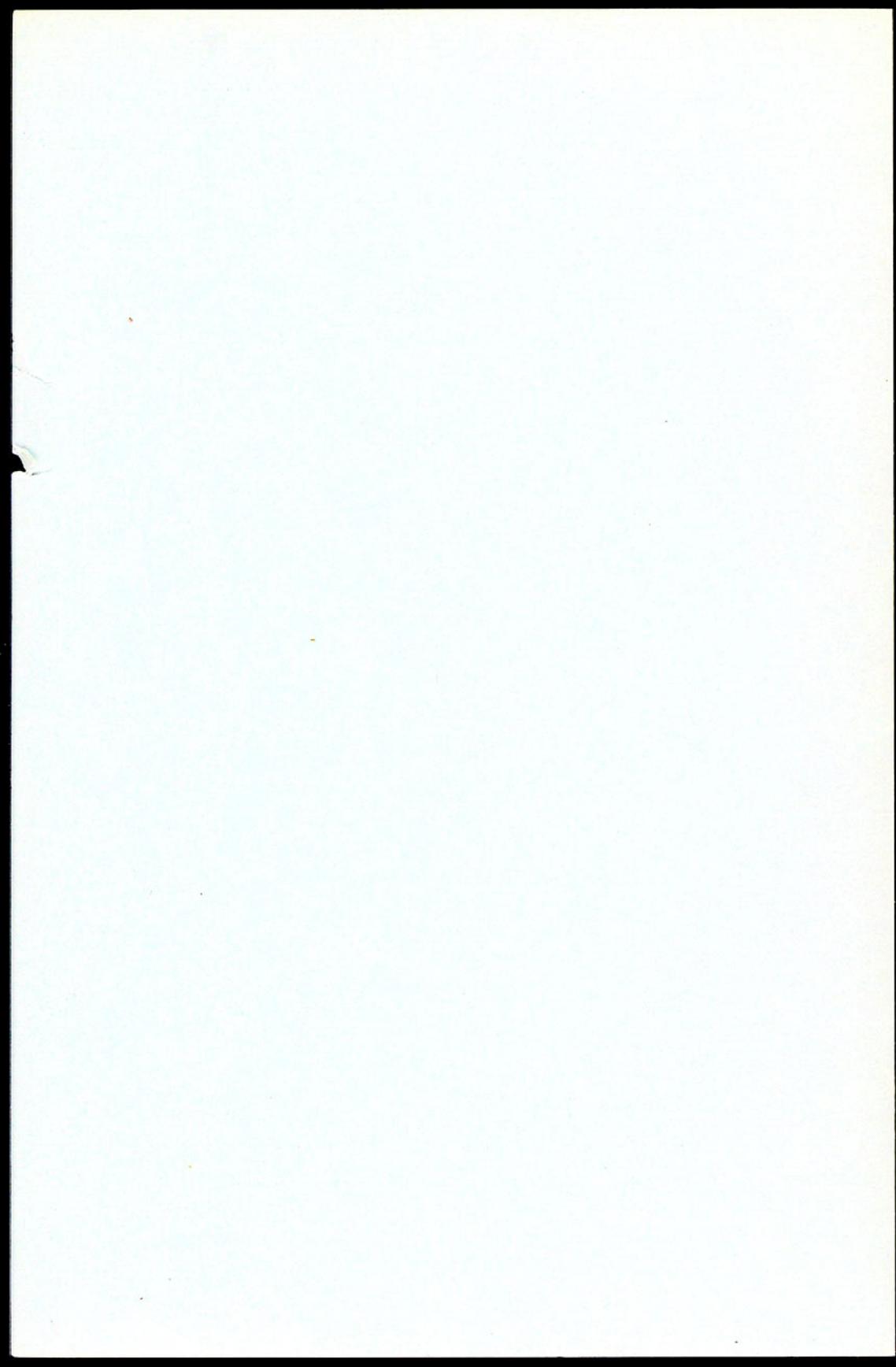


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MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY

... אשר ישאלון בניכם מחר את אבותם ... (יהושע ד:כא)

When your children shall ask their parents in time to come . . .

Joshua 4:21

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The Jewish Historical Society of Michigan, founded in 1959, promotes the study and research of Michigan Jewish history, publishes periodicals, collects documents and records which are deposited in the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library, and commemorates sites of Jewish historical significance.

Categories of membership in the Society include Life Member (\$100), Sustaining (\$25), Contributing (\$15), Regular (\$10). Inquiries regarding membership should be addressed to Cynthia Brody, Membership Chairman, 20990 Constitution Road, Southfield, Michigan 48076; (313) 352-6501.

When you are in the forest, sometimes it is difficult to see the trees. So it is with our individual relationship to Michigan Jewish history; it is all around us; yet we find it difficult to gather it and make it part of our present permanent record of past events.

There is no shortage of historical subjects for those who are willing to write of Jewish history in Michigan. There is hardly a town or city in all Michigan that has not felt a Jewish presence at some time in its history, however small that Jewish element might be. But how do we find the records of these early Jewish inhabitants?

We do not expect to find another dozen pioneer types of the precise mold of Ezekiel Solomon - although this writer had the good fortune and surprise of having one of his Episcopalian friends tell him that he was a direct descendant of Ezekiel Solomon! (Which he *was*.) But we can look to the beginning of this century, and for the last 3 decades of the 19th century — and not only are records available to those who are willing to look; there are still living family members who can speak with some authority of their parents and grandparents. Their knowledge of people and events simply *must* be preserved.

The preparation of oral history need no longer be a matter of a parent's relation of facts to a child - whose memory of those parental words is not always accurate. Use of a tape recorder is so common - and so simple - that anyone who can organize his thoughts into questions can develop an interview with a senior member of his family into a chapter of oral history. Transcription into a written document can come later!

In future issues of MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY, we hope to present a format for an interview that will at least create a framework for a personal history. We plan to outline sources of historical material in public records, congregational records, records of social organizations; the "gold mines" where historians find and verify the facts that make history.

Historians are often complainers; they always have the same comment when some senior member of the community passes on: "Too bad I didn't get around to asking him about his family, the little town where he was born, the years his father was the sheriff . . .". Rather than repeat this complaint, can we not do today what we know *must* be done *today*, lest it be too late tomorrow? When your children shall ask their parents in the time to come . . . what will the answer be?

GEORGE H. GOLDSTONE

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING

The Annual Meeting of the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan
will be held on Sunday, June 1, 1986, at 12:00 noon at
Congregation Beth Achim
21100 West Twelve Mile Road, Southfield, Michigan

Speaker: DR. TODD ENDELMANN
of the University of Michigan

Subject:
"The Use and Abuse of Jewish History"

Luncheon Reservations:
Please call Evelyn Noveck at 661-1642

THE ALPENA JEWISH COMMUNITY

By Rabbi Robert Laymen

Alpena — a city of 12,214 — snuggles on the shore of Thunder Bay in northeastern lower Michigan, partially protected from the storms of Lake Huron by a sheltering peninsula. The lumbering industry that brought it into existence as a mill town in 1858 had been preceded by a trading post, where in accordance with typical enterprise of the time, whiskey was traded to Indians for fish and furs.^{1, 2} Today, the commercial base of Alpena and Alpena County rests on the mining of limestone and gypsum; the manufacture of cement; and paperboard products. A Jewish traveler driving by on U.S. 23 is apt to wonder if there is a Jewish community here; and if there is one, what its origins may have been.

In most northern Michigan cities, a disastrous fire is part of its local history. Alpena is no exception, its frame structures having been totally destroyed in an 1872 conflagration. Few local records of Alpena's origins survived; and in none of them, for the period from the town's founding until after the Civil War, do persons identifiable as Jews or bearing obviously Jewish names appear. A commercial building built by George N. Fletcher, one of the town's original proprietors, was acquired and occupied by Julius Myers in 1867, and thereafter known as the "Myers Block".³ Myers, a clothier, employed three sons, Isaac Myers, Morris Myers, and Moses Myers, as clerks. Whether Julius Myers was the town's first Jew is not certain; Morris Alpern, when interviewed in 1958 at the age of 88 years (all spent in Alpena, the town of his birth), identified his father, Emil Malsh, as the first Jewish resident. Malsh opened a saloon, but because there was a very strong and militant temperance movement in Alpena at the time and saloon-keepers were in disrepute, he decided to enter a more respectable trade, and set up a clothing business. Emil Malsh died in 1873, when his son Morris was only three years old; and because the town still lacked a Jewish cemetery, he was buried in the municipal (Protestant) cemetery. His remains have never been re-interred in the Jewish cemetery later established. Not long after the death of Emil Malsh, his widow married another early Jewish settler, Casper Alpern; and her children, Millie and Morris, adopted Alpern as their family name.

Casper Alpern left Koenigsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad in Soviet Russia), arriving in Houston, Texas, during the Civil War, where he joined the Confederate Army. Following the war, he went to Mobile, Alabama, then came north and settled in Harrisville, Michigan, thirty miles south of Alpena. After a brief stay in Harrisville, he moved to Alpena and set up a clothing store. This business proved so prosperous that he began lending money to local fishermen; and when they failed to pay their debts, he assumed control of their businesses. Alpern left the garment business to become a retail fish merchant; and because his business was located on the waterfront, he also became Collector of Customs. His stepson, Morris Alpern, carried on the business, and expanded it into a wholesale trade as well.^{4, 5}

ROBERT LAYMEN is the Rabbi of Beth Tikvah - B'nai Jeshurun Congregation, a synagogue located in the Philadelphia suburb of Erdenheim. He is a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and as a student rabbi, served Temple Beth El, Alpena, during the summer of 1957 and 1958, as well as during the High Holy Days of those years. MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY is happy to have obtained a copy of the manuscript to which he committed his observations and research of that period.



Julius Myers
Pioneer Alpena Merchant
and First President of the
Hebrew Benevolent
Society (1875),
predecessor of
Temple Beth El

Another early Jewish settler was Judah Cohen, who came to Alpena in 1872. He escaped Polish army conscription, settling in Chicago, where he lived at the time of the great fire of 1871. While there, Cohen (whose name was originally Kischner) became acquainted with a tailor from Oscoda, Michigan, fifty miles south of Alpena; and left Chicago to work for that tailor. He found working and living conditions to be poor in Oscoda, and hearing that Alpena lacked a tailor, Cohen moved there and opened a tailor shop, first located in a rented store within the Myers Block.⁶ In a store adjacent to the Myers Block was Jacob Levyn, a cigar maker, who came to Alpena in 1872 after previously residing in Detroit and St. Louis, Michigan.⁷ The Myers Block, located at Second Avenue and Water Street, where the Peoples' State Bank now stands, burned in 1876 and the loss of the building, uninsured, was stated to be \$3,000. Julius Myers also lost \$9,000 in goods, \$3,000 of which was covered by insurance; while Levyn's cigar factory next door suffered a loss of \$5,000, with only \$1,500 insured.⁸ The tenacity of these pioneers in staying in business is almost beyond belief.

In the 1880's, lumbering in Alpena was at its peak. Indeed, Michigan led the nation in lumber production from 1870 to 1890; and it is not surprising that the lumber industry created a local prosperity that drew more Jewish merchants to the town. Ed Kositchek relates that his father, Carl Kositcheck, came to Alpena in the 1880's, setting up a clothing business.⁹ The majority of Jewish stores and businesses were located along Second Avenue in the downtown district, and along streets radiating from it, especially along the Thunder River, down which logs were floated to the mills. Of the approximately 45 Jewish adults listed in the Alpena City Directory of 1887-8, about twenty were engaged in the clothing business or some related field, either as proprietors or as clerks. Isaac Cohen set up a clothing business around 1886; then sent for his family and helped them get started in the same business. The directory lists David and Morris Cohen as clerks for Isaac; a sister, Leah, and Rachel Cohen as milliners, and Sarah Cohen as a clerk for Leah. Other milliners were Isaac and Rosalie Tumim, Rosalie being the twin sister of Casper Alpern.

Still another clothing merchant who appears to have been quite prosperous, if the size of his newspaper advertisements is any indication, was Harris Greenbaum, who employed Samuel Greenbaum as his clerk. Tailors included Isadore and Judah Cohen (not related to Isaac Cohen), David Horwitz, and Bernard Kramer. Bernard Wolff and Max Jasspon were also clothing merchants, and Joseph Friedenbergl served them as a clerk. Jacob Levyn employed Isadore and Pincus Roth and Emil Lichtenstein in his cigar-making firm; while another cigar factory was operated by Abraham L. Maser. Jacob Alpern, Abraham Exstein (Epstein?) and Simon Goldberg are listed as peddlers. Other businesses operated by Jews between 1870 and 1900 included confectionery, harness-making, sporting goods, notions, dry goods and stationery. These businesses were operated respectively by Rachel Berger, Edward Kositchek, Harry Horwitz, Harris Netzorg and Samuel Gumbinsky (later Gumm), and Herman H. Wittelshofer.¹⁰ After 1900, these varied business pursuits were supplemented by the scrap business, engaged in by Uriah and Samuel Steinborn; Charles Blumeno; and Jacob Feitelberg, among others. Reuben Orman was probably the only Jew who dealt in the food line. For a full generation, there appear to have been no Jewish professional people in Alpena other than Julius Myers' daughters, Julia and Rebecca, who were employed as school teachers. The general economic status of the early Jews of Alpena, so far as can be judged by the occupations in which they engaged, was definitely middle class.

The pattern of expansion in the small Jewish community was typical of that found wherever Jews fled the restraints of the old world for life in America; an individual or a couple, once they had settled in Alpena and established a business, would then send for relatives, and get them established. As a result, there were hardly any Jews in Alpena who did not have some relative living in town or nearby. The same situation exists to this day.

During a period of two decades, from 1920 to 1940, a major business in Alpena was a ladies' dress factory, known as The Alpena Garment Company. Founded in 1920 by two entrepreneurs from Detroit named Cunningham and Randall, it engaged a Jew from New York City, Morris Schmelzer, as vice-president and general manager. The company became known as the largest manufacturer of popular-priced women's dresses in the world, shipping the amazing total of 7 million dresses annually at peak production. With its main plant in Alpena, branches were established in Rogers City, Onaway, and Cheboygan, as many as 1,600 employees being on the payroll. Schmelzer resigned and returned to New York in 1936; but during his relatively brief stay in Alpena, was highly regarded, and suggested as the Democratic nominee for mayor; an honor he declined because of business responsibilities. A few years later, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union came to Alpena, its organizers being identified as "A. Plotkin, Joseph Zuckerman, and Thelma Goldman" in the local press. After a seven month campaign, the ILGWU prevailed in an NLRB election; and the company faced demands for a closed shop and wage increases amounting to \$200,000 a year. These demands were refused by the company; and a bitter 16 week strike followed. A union contract was ultimately signed, but meanwhile, competitors had taken over most of the company's business, and the operation foundered, being liquidated in July, 1940.¹¹

Jewish Community Organization

The first traceable Jewish organization in Alpena was the Hebrew Benevolent Society, organized August 7, 1875, at an informal meeting "held by the Hebrews

of this place for the purpose of establishing a Benevolent Society and also procuring means for buying a burial ground." Initial officers included Julius Myers, President; S. Rosenthal, Vice-President; David Rodman, Treasurer; H.H. Wittelshofer, Secretary; Theodore Knoch, S. Maser, and Jacob Levyn, Trustees.¹² By September, 1875, the cemetery had been purchased.

But the group did not stop with the acquisition of a Jewish burying ground; they next appointed a committee to obtain a charter for the society, and to investigate the expense of hiring a room in which to hold regular meetings. Minutes of the Society meeting of March 25, 1877, indicate that the room would also be used for holding "Prayer Meetings in the following Holy Days" (Passover). The minutes disclose that there were violent disputes during the meeting;¹³ and while the nature of the disputes was not put into writing, it may be suspected that the conflict resulted from a difference in religious beliefs and practices. The divergence of Orthodoxy and Reform was clear, even then.

Further minutes relate that a lawyer was engaged to draft a constitution for the group, to be sent to Lansing in application for a state charter (for which the lawyer was to receive the magnificent fee of \$3.00). At the same meeting, fees for strangers worshipping in Alpena on "Roush Ashono" and "Yom Akepur" were set at \$3.00 a person.¹⁴ By-laws were adopted, one article providing: It shall be the duty of the Society to take care of its sick. In case of sickness of a member, the secretary will notify two members to watch with the sick. During continuance of the sickness, the secretary will notify two members in rotation. Any member not able to watch on the given night must furnish a substitute".¹⁵ All of this in a tiny Jewish community! Sabbath services were held occasionally, if not regularly. Services were conducted by the officers and selected members, although in 1885, a cantor was engaged for the High Holy Day services, his name not appearing in the minutes. Hyman Buchalter is shown to have served as rabbi of the small congregation beginning in 1885.¹⁶ He also served for several years as rabbi of Temple Beth El, the presently existing congregation, which was organized in 1888,¹⁷ and granted a state charter as a religious corporation in 1890.¹⁸

Rabbi Buchhalter came to Alpena from Detroit, and reputedly owned his own place of residence, which he sometimes used for private study sessions. He earned between \$500 and \$1,000 annually, but was not reimbursed for any of his personal expenses. He acted as shochet, and was provided facilities for the slaughtering of animals and the purveying of kosher meats in Bradford's butcher shop on Second Avenue. It appears that there were no provisions in the congregation's budget (if one existed) to cover the rabbi's salary, and that his livelihood depended on collections taken up among the members. There is little written record in Alpena of Rabbi Buchhalter's stay there to corroborate the statements of the interviewees.¹⁹



Establishment of Temple Beth El

The Jews of Alpena, like those in Jewish communities for centuries past, have made it a primary concern to provide a place of burial for those whose time on earth has passed. It is therefore not at all surprising that a cemetery was purchased as a communal concern. Once that was done, the Hebrew Benevolent Society took up the performance of charity; and only then did they organize a synagogue. At the time of organization, the new congregation was known as Beth Tefelo; but once it formally separated from the Society and acquired a corporate existence, it adopted the name "Temple Beth El".²⁰

The organizational meeting of the new synagogue was held on Sunday, October 19, 1890. Not only did the group adopt their articles of incorporation and by-laws; they also made arrangement for purchase of a frame building on White Street in Alpena which is still in use by the congregation. The purchase price was \$1,100.²¹



Funds for the purchase of the synagogue building were raised through collections from the Jews in and around Alpena; and it is said, with some degree of uncertainty, that several non-Jews contributed to the fund as well. The building originally was built on wood posts, without any solid foundation. The members promptly added a stone foundation, a basement, and concrete steps. Inside, softwood floors were replaced with hardwood, with carpeting in the aisles. Several stained glass windows replaced those of plain glass. Wooden pews were installed, and a railing around the carpeted bimah. A large desk on the bimah serves as a lectern and pulpit. The Ark is set into the wall, protected by sliding wood panels, in front of which there is a red velvet parochet. A simple Ner Tamid of iron and frosted glass, illuminated by a red electric lamp, hangs above the Ark. In the rear of the building are two rooms, one for storage, the other as a study for the rabbi.

Religious Observance in the Community

Those minutes of the Hebrew Benevolent Society which have been uncovered make quite clear that the Society was Orthodox in major composition, and in ritual observance. Minutes indicate that there would be seating for women "on one side of the west corner of the hall". Minutes also report the appointment of a committee to purchase a stove and wood, "and also to get somebody to make fire on Saturdays". Hyman Buchalter, the first rabbi, was Orthodox; but following his brief stay, a strong divergence of opinion existed over whether the new Temple Beth El should follow Orthodox practice, or adopt Reform ritual. The main protagonists, according to Edward Kositchek, were Julius Myers, who was Orthodox, and Jacob Levyn, a staunch advocate of extreme reform. According to Noah Cohen, an accommodation was reached, after 1891, by holding Orthodox Sabbath services early in the morning, and modified Reform services later in the morning. On the High Holy Days, each faction had its own service (although it is difficult to see how a day-long Yom Kippur service could be held in the same hall by two separate worship groups - *Ed.*). Some compromises were obviously made. During the 1890's mixed seating became the rule. Although an organ was presented to the congregation, it was rarely, if ever used; and there was never a choir.

Like other tiny Jewish communities, Alpena's Jews have had typical difficulties in obtaining the services of a rabbi. Over the years, Sabbath services were held with greater infrequency. Beginning after World War I and until 1942, the congregation obtained rabbinical students from the Hebrew Theological Seminary in Chicago to conduct services for the High Holy Days. In the latter part of this period, student rabbis were obtained from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati; and beginning in 1954, student rabbis from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City have also served the congregation.

Not the least of Temple Beth El's problems has been the religious education of its children. While Hyman Buchalter served as rabbi in the 1880's, he taught children privately. Efforts to organize and maintain a religious school were unsuccessful, there never being enough young children to warrant its establishment. Then, in 1943, at the suggestion of the first "summer rabbi" - rabbinical student Robert Bergman, from Hebrew Union College - parents and other members agreed to teach classes on Sunday mornings from October until May; while during the summer months, education was in the hands of the visiting rabbi.

The temple is affiliated with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform), and its sisterhood is affiliated with the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (Reform). But a strange paradox exists: The student rabbis now come from a Conservative Jewish seminary; and the congregation uses an Orthodox prayerbook for both Sabbath services (when held) and High Holy Day services. No commitment has been made either to the Seminary or to Hebrew Union College (or to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations), perhaps because of the difficulty in obtaining student rabbis from one year to the next. Temple Beth El has preserved its options!

Jewish Women's Organization

It was not until December 1, 1907, that women of the Alpena Jewish community formed their own organization - the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society. Its stated purpose was to aid the sick and the needy - an objective to be supported out of dues in the amount of ten cents per week! But whist parties, a Purim Ball, a Thanksgiving fair, and other fund-raising projects apparently collected enough to help pay for renovations to the temple, a new fence for the cemetery, and other projects. This continuing support of the temple intimates what ultimately occurred: a re-organization of the Ladies' Benevolent Society into the Temple Beth El Sisterhood, which took place in 1944. In December, 1947, the Sisterhood affiliated with the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (Reform).

The Temple Beth El Community Center

Considering the very small Jewish community, one might expect it to be satisfied with its existing temple, old though it is. But in 1948 and 1949, the congregation considered plans for expansion. It was thought that the basement might be renovated for a social hall; or a wing might be added to the building. But when a house just around the corner on Second Avenue became available, it was purchased in February, 1950, for \$3,500,²² the funds being obtained through the efforts of the Sisterhood and several large contributions from members of the congregation. The building has been renovated to serve as a social center, and as a summer residence for the summer rabbi and his family.

Jews In Civic and Professional Life

Politics has not been a fertile field for the small Jewish community. The first Jew to serve in an official capacity was Casper Alpern, who served two terms as a member of the city council in 1895-97, an elective post. His step-daughter, Millie Alpern, served as clerk in the Probate Court from 1888 to 1922. Isadore Isackson, the only Jewish attorney in Alpena, served as Circuit Court Commissioner, as a member of the School Board, and as Chairman of the Zoning Commission. Isackson came to this country from Latvia as a young child with his parents, Samuel and Celia Isackson, and has practiced law in Alpena since 1923.

Local physicians include Dr. Harold Kessler, a pediatrician; Dr. Jack Ramsey, a cardiologist and general practitioner; and Dr. Stuart Cohn, a general practitioner.

The American "Shtetl"

The Alpena Jewish community did not grow and spread out as did the Jewish communities of larger, growing cities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While not encompassed by the walls of a ghetto, it was and is a small unit, engulfed by a massive Christian environment. Nonetheless, it has adapted to changing times, and has preserved its identity for over a hundred years. But like a rock along the beach of Thunder Bay, although the waves of a century have passed over it, it still stands as an anchor and a beacon for those loyal families keeping the faith.

Residents Interviewed by the Author

In tracing the history of the Alpena Jewish community, Rabbi Leyman ran into extraordinary difficulties. Adequate written records were lacking; minutes of Temple Beth El more than 10 years old had simply disappeared, and no one knew of their whereabouts. The local daily newspaper, *The Alpena News*, did not have a file on the Jewish community, and all issues of the newspaper and previous newspapers antedating 1912 had been destroyed by fire. No one had kept letters or diaries which could shed light on the early years of the Jewish community. Available sources dealing with the general story of Alpena had hardly any reference to Jews in them. The best written sources were the respective minutes of the Hebrew Benevolent Society, the Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society, and Temple Beth El Sisterhood. While oral interviews with older members of the community are not always dependable, several older residents were most helpful. These interviewees, along with a brief biographical sketch, were:

1. Edward Kositchek - a retired harness-maker and dealer in sporting goods, who arrived in Alpena at the age of 18 and had lived there for 63 years at the time of the interview in 1958. He was born in Bohemia. His wife, Yetta, age 85, had lived in Alpena for 48 years.
2. Morris Alpern - age 88 at the time, had lived in Alpena all his life, having been born there in August, 1870. Formerly in the wholesale and retail fish business, he had been retired since 1925. His sister, Miss Millie Alpern, aged 89, was then the oldest Jewish resident of Alpena.
3. David Levyn - a retired jeweler, and also a native of Alpena. He was then 80 years old, and had lived there most of his life.
4. Mrs. Arthur Fivenson (nee Lena Steinborn) was born in the Kurland sector of Russia, and had been brought to the United States at age 1. She came to Alpena via Bay City, and had lived there for 64 years. Her husband had assumed control of his father's scrap metal business.
5. Noah Cohen - age 79, was born in Alpena, the son of the town's first tailor. He himself is a retired tailor; and except for an absence of 12 to 14 years has lived in Alpena all his life.
6. Jack Steinborn, born in Chicago, moved to Alpena as a boy, then returned to Chicago for 25 years, returning to Alpena in 1941, where he operated a dry-cleaning establishment with his brother, Irving Steinborn.
7. Fred Trelfa - a non-Jew - is a native of Strathroy, Ontario, but had lived in Alpena for 63 years at the time of the interview in 1958. He was then Secretary-Treasurer of Fletcher Paper Company, and Alpena's unofficial historian. Rabbi Leyman felt most fortunate not only to interview him, but to gain access to a number of old newspapers and documents in his possession.

Reference Footnotes

- ¹ Catton, Bruce Michigan, a History. Norton & Co. (1976)
- ² William Boulton, *Complete History of Alpena County*, (Typewritten copy, ca. 1876).
- ³ David Oliver, *Centennial History of Alpena County, Michigan*, Argus Printing House (1903) p. 80
- ⁴ Interview of Rabbi Robert Leyman with Morris Alpern, July 10, 1958.
- ⁵ Interview with Fred Trelfa, August 5, 1958.
- ⁶ Interview with Noah Cohen, July 20, 1958.
- ⁷ Interview with David Levyn, July 15, 1958.
- ⁸ Oliver, op. cit., p. 135
- ⁹ Interview with Ed Kositchek, 1958
- ¹⁰ Alpena City Directory, 1887-88, R. L. Polk Co.
- ¹¹ Alpena News, clipping file examined by Rabbi Leyman
- ¹² Minutes of Hebrew Benevolent Society, Aug. 7, 1875
- ¹³ Ibid, March 25, 1877
- ¹⁴ Ibid, April 1, 1877
- ¹⁵ Constitution and By-Laws, Hebrew Benevolent Society, pp. 3-5
- ¹⁶ Alpena City Director, Vol. 1, p. 126. Rabbi Buchhalter is better known as the founder of the Division Street Talmud Torah, a predecessor of today's United Hebrew Schools of Detroit.
- ¹⁷ Minutes, Hebrew Benevolent Society, August 5, 1888
- ¹⁸ Labor Journal, Alpena, October 25, 1890
- ¹⁹ Interviews with Morris Alpern and Noah Cohen
- ²⁰ Labor Journal, op. cit.
- ²¹ Records of Alpena County Register of Deeds
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ These observations were made by Rabbi Laymen in 1958; they have not been updated at time of publication - Ed.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Rabbi Laymen's original paper on Alpena Jewry was edited by George H. Goldstone, of the editorial board of MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY. The Society is grateful to Rabbi Laymen for his permission to use and to edit his work, and hopes that his example of a student rabbi's deep interest in the area he was serving may encourage future rabbinical students to explore the history of other Jewish communities.

We are likewise most grateful to Jerry Bayer, of Southfield, Michigan, for taking the photographs of Temple Beth El; and to Naomi Buchhalter Floch, of Southfield, and Rodman N. Myers, of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, for corroborating information on their respective grandparents, Rabbi Hyman Buchhalter and Julius Myers. The photograph of Rabbi Buchhalter is from the Archives of Congregation Shaarey Zedek; that of Julius Myers from an etching belonging to the family of Rodman N. Myers.

EARLY SITES AND BEGINNINGS OF CONGREGATION BETH EL, DETROIT, MICHIGAN

By Irving I. Edgar

Editor's Note: This is the fifth of a series of articles written by the author for MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY dealing with the eight sites where Temple Beth El, Michigan's first Jewish congregation, has made its spiritual home. The author, Irving I. Edgar, M.A., M.D., has long been engaged in the private practice of psychiatry in the metropolitan Detroit area; is a past president of the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan, and a past editor of this journal.

Site V: The Washington Boulevard Temple

As the second half of the 19th century moved forward, Detroit was growing fast, both in size and in population; and the number of Jewish families increased accordingly. Moreover, these Jewish newcomers almost all sought affiliation with Congregation Beth El.¹ As a result, the Rivard Street Synagogue, acquired in 1861, became too small. After only six years, the congregation "found itself again compelled to seek new and commodious quarters."² As the *Israelite* put it, "Soon the [Rivard Street] Synagogue became too small and was too far out of town, so that they wanted a new temple."³ After committees were appointed and available sites and buildings inspected, it was decided that "the church home of the Tabernacle Baptist Church at the southwest corner of Washington Avenue [now Washington Boulevard] and Clifford Street,"⁵ offered the best purchasable property for their own needs. Although they thought at the time that the location was quite distant from the center of Jewish population, the members wisely realized that a new place of worship must provide for the needs of the future, as well as of the immediate present.⁶ Happily, a church offered for sale in the very heart of the city was available for purchase.⁷

Negotiations were begun between the committees of Congregation Beth El and the trustees of this Tabernacle Baptist Church; and after several such meetings, it was finally agreed to purchase the property and furnishings from the Baptists for a gross sum of Sixteen Thousand dollars;⁸ [According to Irving I. Katz, in his *Beth El Story*, the amount was Seventeen Thousand dollars.⁹] The transfer was consummated on March 19, 1867. The gentlemen most directly responsible for the beginning and successful issue of the negotiations with the Baptist Congregation were Messrs. Martin Butzel, Chairman of the Committee; D.J. Workum, President of the Congregation; and L. Lambert, I. Kaufman, S. Rothschild, H. Freedman, S. Schloss, Simon Heavenrich, Israel Van Baalen, and M.C. Fecheimer. The success of their work meant the beginning of a new and glorious epoch in the history of Congregation Beth El.¹⁰ Indeed, Beth El was to remain at this site for fully thirty-six years.

The structure, as shown in the accompanying photograph, is of Romanesque Revival architecture. It is described in the *Israelite* as "60 by 90 feet, a good strong brick building, with a fine front yard, which makes a good appearance." After \$10,000 was spent in repairs and refurbishing, so the *Israelite* continued, "It looks now beautifully painted in fine fresco, with furniture of black walnut and crimson cushions, the Ark in the style of the New York temple, with two



Temple Beth El - Washington Avenue and Clifford Street
1867 - 1903

chandeliers of seven lamps, precisely as in the Cincinnati temple, pulpit, reader's table and all surroundings in a very fine style. The building itself is high, airy, with windows on four sides, and decorated in the best taste. The seats are arranged in family pews. There is but one gallery for the organ and the choir . . . The basement is furnished for school-rooms, although it is not well constructed for the purpose, it having neither light, nor room and air enough".

The *Detroit Free Press* of August 31, 1867, apparently feeling that a report on the interior of a synagogue would interest its readership, contained the following description:

"Just within the middle of the altar rail is the desk for the scrolls of the law when in use. From this rise semi-circular steps, upon the fourth of which, in rear of the first desk, is that of the minister, and upon either hand stands a highly ornamented candelabrum, each with the seven candlesticks bearing lighted candles. Upon the summit of the pyramid of steps, which are carpeted with crimson, stands the "Ark of the Covenant", enclosed by double columns on each side and concealed by a crimson veil in front, heavily ornamented with gold. The columns support an arch, beneath which is a circular stained glass window, upon which are represented the two tablets of stone bearing the ten commandments in the Hebrew tongue. The veil of the ark also bears an inscription in the same characters. High above the Ark suspends from the ceiling a lamp, where within a blood-red globe burns the "perpetual light". The five distinct colors used in the ornamentation, viz.: orange, blue, red, purple and green, are shown in the circular openings above the windows, and also in the highly gilt and embroidered coverings of the five books or scrolls of the Mosaic law".

It took several months to prepare the new synagogue properly for occupancy, and it was not until Friday, August 30, 1867, that the dedication of this Washington Avenue Synagogue occurred.¹¹ The dedication was an elaborate and beautiful one, and the *Detroit Free Press* in the article cited above, gave considerable space to describing the interesting ceremonies of the occasion:

During yesterday afternoon was witnessed the interesting and . . . unusual exercises of the dedication of a Jewish Temple. The church edifice, on the corner of Washington Avenue and Clifford Street, recently purchased by the Congregation Beth El, has been renovated and fitted up for the purpose, and was yesterday solemnly dedicated according to the rites of the Jewish faith.

The article goes on to describe all the arrangements within the Synagogue for this event; and further goes on to describe the procession, led by

"thirteen damsels in number, Misses Barbara Hirschman, Clara Amberg, Fanny Hart, Sarah Van Baalen, Caroline Rosenberg, Rachel Van Baalen, Annie Simons, Sarah Joseph, Sarah Hirsch, Louisa Van Baalen, Minnie Rindskoff, Cecila Sloman and Hannah Labold all bearing wreaths and bouquets of flowers and followed by members of the Congregation bearing the five scrolls of the law"

The article continues, in great detail not only describing the ceremonies involved, but also quoting almost fully the sermon of Rabbi Eppstein, as well as the part played by Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, founder of American Reform Judaism, who had come from Cincinnati. The article ended by stating that "the exercises concluded with the usual Divine service of Sabbath evening."¹²

The *Israelite* (September 6, 1867, Vol. - 14. p.6.)¹³ wrote a more concise account of this "dedication of the Temple Beth El Detroit, August 30." (1867) It begins with a very short summary of the history of Temple Beth El and then describes the ceremony itself in praiseworthy terms:¹⁴

"The whole service came off in the very best style, highly honorable to all connected with the arrangements and fully satisfactory to the large Congregation, among whom we noticed the citizens and Clergymen of nearly all denominations in this city, the adjutants of the Governor, and other officials."

As already noted, the Congregation remained at this site for over thirty-six years. In that period, great progress was made in every field of the development of Temple Beth El as a true Reform Jewish Congregation, with numerous changes and innovations dictated by the needs of the times.

Rabbi Eppstein continued as the spiritual leader of the Congregation for only a short time thereafter, resigning his post in the early months of 1869. But during this short period, he published his "*Confirmants Guide to the Mosaic Religion*." This small book has the historical distinction of being the first book of pure Jewish interest published in the State of Michigan,¹⁵ and the first Jewish textbook printed in Detroit. It is likely that even before it was published (1868), it was used by the first Temple Beth El Confirmation Class in 1867.¹⁶ Rabbi Eppstein writes in the ¹⁷ introduction:

"It is with the greatest of pleasure that the Author inscribes this little volume - his maiden attempt - to the members of the Beth El Congregation, as a slight expression of gratitude for repeated acts of kindness received at their hands; and to Messrs. B. Prell, D.J. Workum, H. Freedman, S.L. Knoll, L. Lambert, M. Malsh and M. Erman, the honorable School Board of the

same Congregation, as a testimonial to the interest and fidelity with which they have cared for the instruction of our precious children, indulging at the same time the hope that the truth herein explained may contribute some little towards the attainment of the object which the Board has in view."

The resignation of Rabbi Eppstein necessitated seeking a new Rabbi, but the Congregation could find no one then in the United States suitable and available for the position. They therefore sought such a man in Germany. They found their new rabbi in the person of Dr. Kaufmann Kohler, of Furth, Bavaria. He was highly and warmly recommended at the time by well-known European and American scholars, including Rabbis Geiger, Einhorn, and Lilienthal. Dr. Kohler came to the United States in the early fall of 1869 and preached his inaugural sermon in German, entitled, "The Qualities of a God-called Leader of Israel," on September 4th of that year - becoming the sixth Rabbi of the Beth El Congregation.



Rabbi Kaufman Kohler,
at age 26,
upon his arrival
in Detroit in 1869.

But Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler remained only two years in Detroit, following which he took on the spiritual leadership of Temple Sinai in Chicago, Illinois, in October, 1871. During that short tenure, he succeeded in getting the Beth El and Shaarey Zedek Congregations to form The Gentlemen's Hebrew Relief Society (later Beth El Hebrew Relief Society), Detroit's first centralized Jewish philanthropic agency.¹⁹

There followed other Rabbis to Beth El's pulpit and leadership in what appears to us today as much too quick succession.

Rabbi Emanuel Gerechter became the seventh Rabbi of Beth El in November, 1871, serving the Congregation until May, 1873. During his short incumbency, he changed the language of instruction in Beth El's Religious School from German to English in 1871. Also in April, 1873, arrangements were concluded with Woodmere Cemetery for the exclusive use of the North Section F, by members of Beth El and their families.²⁰

Rabbi Gerechter did not leave Beth El immediately; he remained on in the capacity of teacher, cantor, and reader of the Scrolls of the Torah for the Congregation until November, 1874, after Leopold Wintner assumed his post as the eighth Rabbi of Congregation Beth El in May 1873.

Rabbi Wintner remained with Beth El over three years, giving his farewell sermon on August 5, 1876. During those years it is of historic note that Dr. Wintner, on invitation, preached at the Church of Our Father (Universalist) in May 1876, he being the first Detroit rabbi to preach in a local Christian church.

So once again, Beth El found itself without a spiritual leader, and having great difficulties in finding a rabbi in the United States of the high calibre they wanted. Again, they sought such a man in Germany; and they found him in the person of Dr. Heinrich Zirndorf, Rabbi and teacher in Munster, Prussia. Dr. Zirndorf was especially suitable, not only for his scholarship and his authorship of a number of books and publications, but also because of his facility in the English language, acquired by him during an extensive stay in England as preacher and teacher.²² Thus Dr. Heinrich (Henry) Zirndorf became the ninth Rabbi to occupy the pulpit of Congregation Beth El. He arrived in Detroit in September, 1876, and began his rabbinical duties on the High Holy Days of that year. During his stay at Beth El, Dr. Zirndorf established the Temple Library (1878). The year previous, on July 4, 1877, he participated in ceremonies at the cornerstone laying of Congregation Shaarey Zedek Synagogue at St. Antoine and Congress Streets; and in February, 1882, participated in the dedication of this new synagogue. During the same month and year, Dr. Zirndorf helped organize the Hebrew Ladies' Auxiliary Relief Society (later known as The Hebrew Ladies' Sewing Society) to assist Russian-Jewish immigrants in Detroit.²³

Rabbi Henry Zirndorf remained with Temple Beth El close to eight years (1876-1884), after which he became Professor of History and Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, leaving the rabbinate of Beth El vacant; but not for long. In November, 1884, Rabbi Louis Grossman became the tenth rabbi of the congregation. He had been graduated in the 1884 class of the Hebrew Union College and was the first such American-trained rabbi to serve the congregation, giving his inaugural sermon on December 6, 1884. He remained the rabbi of Beth El for about fourteen years (1884-1898), during which Rabbi Grossman endeared himself to his congregation in many ways. The congregation grew. Rabbi Grossman organized the Emerson Circle, a society for the promotion of general culture, (August 9, 1885). The following year (May, 1886) he organized the Beth El Alumni Association (now The Young Peoples Society). In October, 1889, Rabbi Grossman published his book entitled *Judaism and The Science of Religion*; and in April, 1890, a paper on "Maimonides", which Dr. Grossman had read before the Philosophical Society of the University of Michigan, was also published. In addition, he organized The Woman's Club of Temple Beth El (which later became The Jewish Woman's Club of Detroit) and still later, in 1925, The Detroit Section of the National Council of Jewish Women.²⁴ In the early part of 1894, there was published *Hymns, Prayers and Responses*, by Dr. Grossman and Francis L. York, the then Temple organist; and in September, 1895, Dr. Grossman's sermons were published in pamphlet form under the title "*The Jewish Pulpit*". Dr. Grossman also opened a school for the training of religious school teachers (1897); and the year previously, he had taken a leading part in securing elimination of *Reading From The Bible* as part of the curriculum in the Detroit Public Schools.²⁵

In October, 1898, Dr. Grossman resigned, having accepted the call to become associate rabbi of B'Nai Yeshurun congregation at Cincinnati, with Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, founder of American Reform Judaism; indeed, a position of great honor and responsibility. Soon thereafter, (November 30, 1898), Rabbi Leo M. Franklin, of Temple Israel, Omaha, Nebraska, an 1892 graduate of the Hebrew Union College, became the eleventh rabbi of Congregation Beth El, a position he would occupy for practically the rest of his lifetime, with honor, success, and almost endless accomplishments. He remained the rabbi of the congregation for forty-two years before his retirement, when he became the rabbi emeritus.²⁶ Rabbi Leo M. Franklin served only a few years at the fifth site of Congregation Beth El. His long services as rabbi continued in the first structure built as a synagogue for Temple Beth El, designed and planned by the internationally famous Detroit architect, Albert Kahn. This building - *Site VI* of Beth El - was located at Woodward Avenue and Eliot Street, and is presently occupied by the Bonstelle Theatre of Wayne State University.

Returning again to other developments and events that took place in this *Site V* period - the era of the Washington Avenue Synagogue - it is obvious that Congregation Beth El grew and progressed in all areas. Most important was the fact that the membership of the congregation increased from seventy families in number (1866), to one hundred eighty-one (181) in 1900²⁷ during this thirty-six year interval.

During this era, (in January, 1869, to be exact), *The Hebrew-German-English Day School* was terminated, since the City of Detroit had instituted the free public school system in 1867. In its place, a religious school was formed, meeting after public school hours in the school rooms of the Washington Avenue - Clifford Street Synagogue. Shortly thereafter, (November 1871), English replaced German as the language of instruction,²⁸ indicating the progress of Americanization that had taken place since the arrival of these Jewish immigrants from Germanic States at Mid Century (1848-1850). This same process influenced the older generation as well, so that English soon replaced German in sermons from the pulpit.

Other changes in this direction at the time, included: (1) adoption of a new prayer book for the High Holy Days, - the *Minhag America*, to replace the *Minhag Ashkenaz*; (2) official affiliation with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (September 28, 1873); (3) adoption of the new Union Prayer Book as the ritual for Sabbaths (September 22, 1895); and (4) numerous other changes, all tending toward Reform, even to the detail of prohibiting the wearing a head covering at religious services, this being "the last aggressive action that was necessary to [stamp] the congregation as absolutely and uncompromisingly pledged to uphold the Reform movement."²⁹

As the congregation grew in numbers, there was again discussion of the need for a new and larger Temple, so that as early as January, 1893, the sum of \$3100 was raised for such a purpose. Previous to this, they had raised money for a new organ, so that "In December, 1876, the new organ was bought for Eleven Hundred and Fifty Dollars . . ."³⁰

It is also recorded³² that in September, 1892, during the Festival of Succoth, an exhibit was arranged of the farm products of a Jewish group of farmers known as The Palestine Colony, near Bad Axe, Michigan. "This was the first display of farm products raised by Jews ever shown in the United States"³². The exhibit was incidental to the desire of Beth El to help the Jewish Palestine Colony, which was in serious financial trouble at the time, and in danger of losing its lands.³³

In December 1894, "Beth El assumed the responsibility for the maintenance of several beds at the Children's Free Hospital for the Jewish poor, a project which continued for many years."³⁴

As already mentioned, Rabbi Leo M. Franklin was inaugurated as spiritual leader of Beth El, January 27, 1899. During the next four years at the Washington Avenue Temple, he accomplished much. In November, 1899, he organized the United Jewish Charities by the amalgamation of the Hebrew Relief Society, Jewish Relief Society, Self-Help Circle, and Hebrew Ladies' Sewing Society, out of which ultimately developed the Jewish Welfare Federation in 1926.³⁵

It was not until October 10, 1900, that Congregation Beth El made the decision to actually build a new Temple. On April 5, 1901, a site at Woodward Avenue and Eliot Street was purchased for this purpose.³⁶ Additionally, the congregation celebrated its 50th Anniversary, for which event a "Semi-Centennial History of the Congregation" was published, written by Dr. Franklin.³⁷ Rabbi Franklin also instituted and issued the first *Temple Bulletin* (March, 1901), which has continued until the present day. In that same year, (November, 1901), Dr. Franklin became the editor of *The Jewish American*, Detroit's first English Jewish Weekly. Finally, April 23, 1902, there was an impressive cornerstone laying ceremony for the new synagogue building of Temple Beth El. On January 24, 1903, the first services were held in the fine new structure, thus ending the era at the Washington Avenue synagogue, which had seen so much progress - and commencing another and fruitful chapter in the progress of Beth El at its Sixth Site, under leadership of Rabbi Leo M. Franklin that was long to continue.

Author's Note

Publication of *A History of Congregation Beth El, 1850-1900*, by Rabbi Leo M. Franklin during the Washington Avenue era of the congregation stands out as a historic achievement in itself. Beth El's membership in 1900 was well aware, and rightfully proud, that their congregation had been in existence a full half century. It had grown and prospered along with its individual members. They expressed their firm conviction at the time that Congregation Beth El stood out "sturdy after its fifty years of heroic struggle in behalf of progressive Judaism."³⁸

To commemorate the Semi-Centennial (1850-1900) of its existence, the congregation appointed an Historical Committee to formulate a history of the Temple. They were sure that such a "history of an individual congregation that has lived through all the struggles of the early days, and come out victorious, as a champion and a leader of the Reform movement, may be regarded as a valuable contribution to the contemporary history of American Judaism."³⁹ While this committee consisted of three members, it was the then new Rabbi, Leo M. Franklin, who actually wrote the history while the congregation was still at its Washington Avenue site.

From a Michigan Jewish history standpoint, the publication of this history of Detroit's Beth El is of prime importance. It was the first formal historical account of Michigan Jewish history, although it is limited to the one congregation, Beth El, during the years 1850-1900. And Rabbi Leo M. Franklin may be rightfully considered the first chronicler of Michigan Jewish History. Both this author and the late Irving I. Katz, author of "*The Beth El Story*," have made extensive reference to Rabbi Franklin's work; he was truly one of the giants of Michigan Jewry upon whose shoulders we now stand.

The Travels of the Ark

The beautiful and formal Ark which impressed reporters at the dedication ceremony of the Washington Avenue synagogue of Temple Beth El in 1867 has had a continuing history of its own. When Congregation Beth El left its Washington Avenue temple behind in 1903, a new Ark, with beautiful carved wood sliding doors, was the centerpiece of the sanctuary at Woodward Avenue and Eliot Street. It is in use today, in the Maas Chapel at Beth El's present site in suburban Bloomfield Township. But the old Ark - with its sumptuous marble columns and arch - was not abandoned. It was given to Congregation Beth Tephilath-Moses in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, and was dear to that congregation's worshippers for some 74 years.

In 1977, Beth Tephilath-Moses constructed a new house of worship, of contemporary design, with insufficient ceiling height on the bimah to accommodate the structure that had been erected in Beth El some 90 years before. Knowing that the old Ark was a gift of Beth El, their officers offered it back to Beth El - for use, or such disposition as Beth El might think appropriate.

The late Irving I. Katz, then Executive Secretary of Temple Beth El, made its availability known; and a request for it came from Temple Beth Or, in Raleigh, North Carolina. It was then carefully dismantled, shipped to Raleigh, and re-erected on the bimah of Beth Or.

Dr. Richard C. Hertz, Rabbi of Temple Beth El (now Rabbi Emeritus) traveled to Raleigh, where he participated in the re-dedication of this sacred symbol, now well into its second century of holy service!

G.H.G.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Congregational records show:

1850 - 12 members

1855 - 25 members

1860 - 40 members

1865 - 60 members

² *A History of Congregation Beth El (1850-1900)* by Rabbi Leo M. Franklin, and Adolph Freund and Adolph Sloman, members of the Historical Committee, Winn & Hammond. Detroit, Michigan, 1900. pp. 30-31.

³ *The Israelite*, Vol. 14, p. 6. 1867. Reference to a "fine front yard" is puzzling to anyone examining the photograph of the synagogue and its site. - Ed.

⁴ *History of Congregation Beth El (1850-1900) op. cit.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *The Beth El Story* by Irving I. Katz. Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1955. p.80.

¹⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹¹ *The Beth El Story, op. cit.* p. 80.

- ¹² A copy of this *Detroit Free Press* article appears in the Appendix of *The Beth El Story, op. cit.*
- ¹³ A copy of this *Israelite* article appears in *The Beth El Story* Appendix.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Eppstein, E., Minister of Congregation Beth El Detroit, Mich. F.A. Scholer, Book and Job printers, 90 Woodward Avenue. 1868. See also: *The Beth El Story*, by Katz, Irving I. p. 83.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Katz, Irving I. "Jewish Education at Temple Beth El 1850 - 1871, *Michigan Jewish History*, Vol. 8. No. 2, p. 27. See also *The Beth El Story, op. cit.* p.80.
- ¹⁸ *A History of Congregation Beth El (1850 - 1900) op. cit.*, p. 35.
- ¹⁹ *The Beth El Story, op. cit.*, p. 84.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 85.
- ²¹ *Ibid.* p.87.
- ²² *A History of Congregation Beth El, (1805-1900), op. cit.* pp. 40-41.
- ²³ *The Beth El Story, op. cit.*, pp. 88-90.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 92.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 94.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 116.
- ²⁷ Congregational records show:
 1866 - 70 family members
 1875 - 80 family members
 1880 - 102 family members
 1885 - 84 family members
 1890 - 117 family members
 1895 - 138 family members
 1900 - 181 family members
- ²⁸ *The Beth El Story, op. cit.*, p. 84.
- ²⁹ *A History of Congregation Beth El (1850-1900) op. cit.*, p. 48.
- ³⁰ *The Beth El Story, op. cit.*, p. 85.
- ³² *Ibid.* p. 93.
- ³³ Like most such Jewish agricultural colony efforts, they ultimately failed.
- ³⁴ *The Beth El Story, op. cit.*, p. 94.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 95-96.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ *A History of Congregation Beth El, (1850-1900) op. cit.*, p. 9.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.* P. 10.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² *Ibid.* This included "Messrs. Schloss, Heavenrich, Blitz, Butzel, Press, Labold, A.J. Franklin and Sloman; and Mesdames Strauss, Freedlander, and Silberman."
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*

Photographs from Archives of Temple Beth El.

THREE-DIMENSIONAL JEWISH HISTORY

By George H. Goldstone

It is a trite saying that "One picture is worth a thousand words". When the history of Michigan's Jewish communities has been compiled, the authors have always sought photographs of the houses of worship that are the mark of a permanent Jewish community; and sometimes they have succeeded. Readers of MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY have enjoyed many photographs of Michigan synagogues, some of these photos having been taken while the structure was put to religious use, others long after, when the building was being used for other purposes.

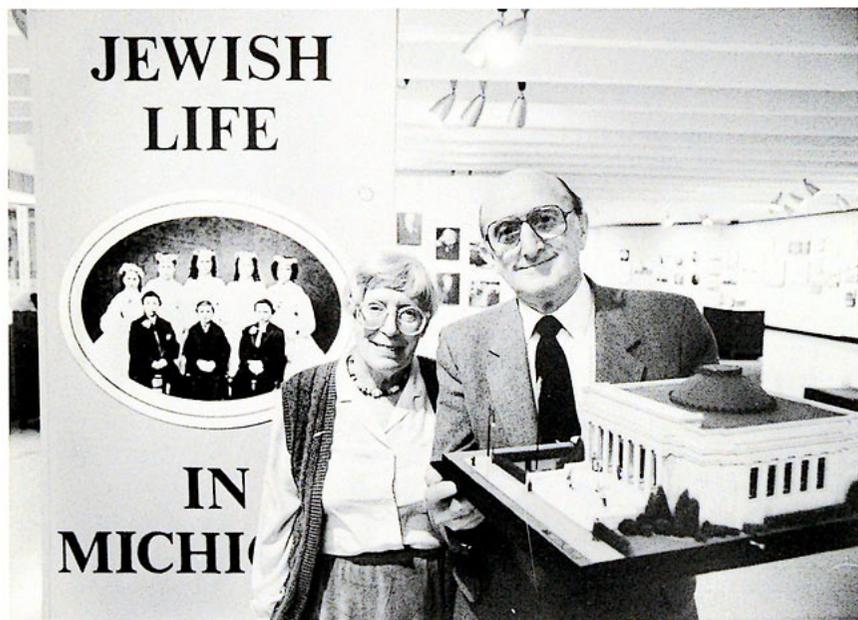
But here in Michigan, we have been fortunate to have in our religious community a unique person — Aid Kushner, of Oak Park — who for many years has constructed models of not only Michigan synagogues, but of famous synagogues, past and present, all over the world. Aid has constructed 80 such models, over a dozen of them representing synagogue structures in Michigan. These replicas, built to 1/8 scale (1/8 inch to 1 foot), have been exhibited all over the United States. Even better than photographs, they teach Jews of their historical past.

There are six models of structures housing Aid's own congregation, Temple Beth El, of Detroit (including its current temple in Bloomfield Township, Oakland County). Another six models show the structures of Congregation Shaarey Zedek; and there are models of Temple Beth El in Traverse City, Temple Jacob, in Hancock, and the Detroit site of Temple Israel. As time affords, and when suitable photographs are available to him, Aid plans further models. The models are built both from his own sketches, and from photographs. In some cases, Aid says, a model made to exact scale is pronounced "unrealistic" by a viewer familiar with the actual temple structure in days long gone by. This is attributable to the typical viewer's perception of a building that he or she saw from ground level, thus generating an exaggerated idea of the height, size, and proportion of the structure. He sometimes varies his models from true scale to make up for what the viewer remembers.

Materials are varied, particularly as to ornamentation and accessory structures. Lights on lampposts may have been pearls on his wife Miriam's jewelry; furnace filters and sponges become trees and shrubbery; wrapping paper, playing cards, and pictures of oriental rugs from Sears catalogs have been transposed into stained glass windows, while plumbing supplies have re-emerged as synagogue domes. Miniature figures, typically imported from Europe, are dressed in period costumes and repainted to add a personal character to the displayed structure. All of these are assembled on the kitchen counter of his home in Oak Park.

How, one might ask, did Aid Kushner embark on his artistic career as a maker of model synagogues? As Aid tells it, he was once recovering from the flu, when his wife suggested to him that he make replicas of all the buildings in which his congregation, Temple Beth El of Detroit, had been housed since its founding in 1850. This gave a new dimension to the retirement years of this genial and gentle person who, for many years beginning in 1934, was trainer of the Detroit Lions professional football team, as well as an appliance salesman for Sears. As he jokingly says, "It has kept me out of the poolroom!" Indeed it has; as this is

written, Aid is planning a trip to Omaha, Nebraska, where he will exhibit a number of synagogue models, including famous European synagogues no longer in existence, but re-created by Aid in miniature. Seldom does he display the models to any large group when he is not told by some viewer, "My family came from there; my ancestors must have worshipped in *that shul*".



Model of Temple Beth El, Woodward and Gladstone Avenues, Detroit, displayed at Detroit Historical Museum by Aid Kushner and his wife, Miriam Kushner, Archivist of Temple Beth El.

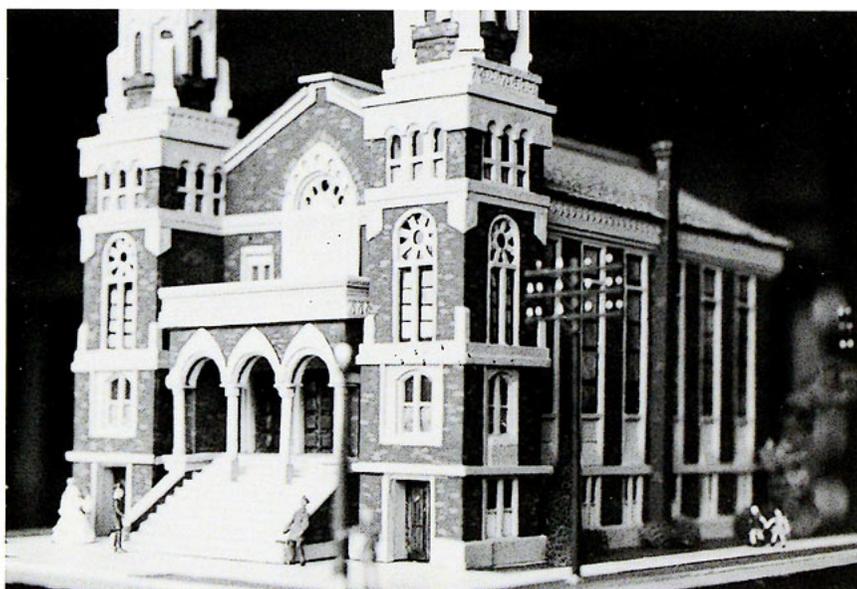
Besides his models of religious structures, Aid has created others of special interest, including a model of the early British fort at Detroit, and the home of Harry S. Truman. The latter model is in the Truman Museum, in Independence, Missouri.

Born at Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, on May 26, 1911, the son of Jacob and Bessie Kushner, Aid is married to Mariam Kushner (born Miriam Edwards). Together they serve as the archivists of Temple Beth El. They are justly proud of their two sons, both Reform rabbis. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner serves Temple Beth El, in Sudbury, Massachusetts, while Rabbi Steven Kushner serves Temple Ner Tamid, in Bloomfield, New Jersey.

SHAAREY ZEDEK SYNAGOGUE MODELS

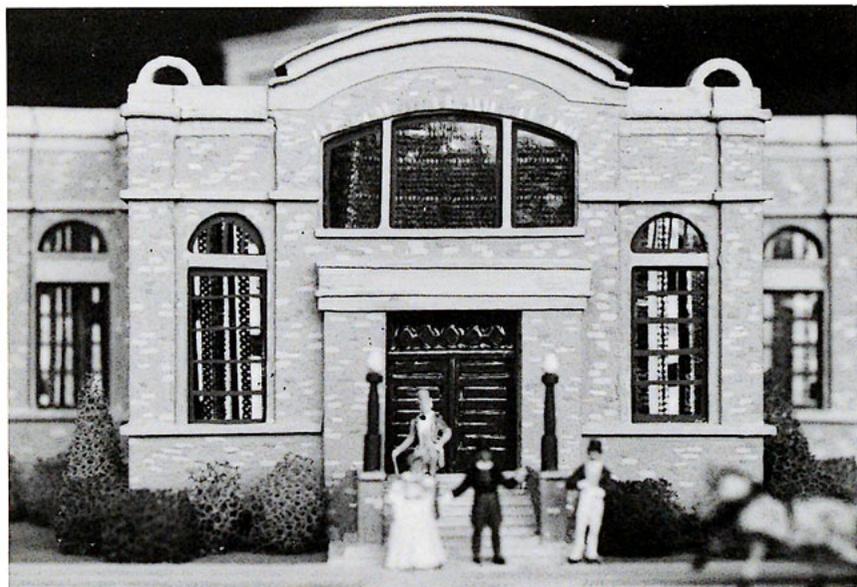


Congress & St. Antoine Streets
1865-1877

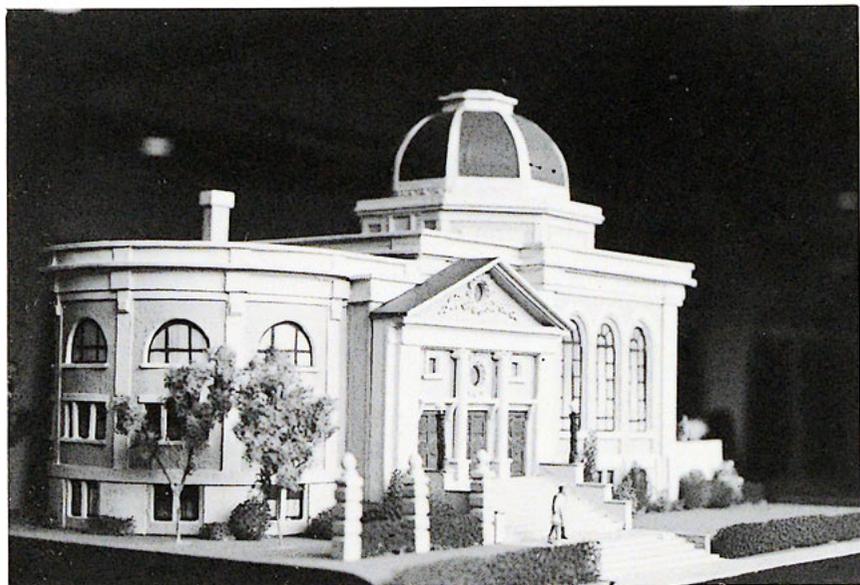


Congress & St. Antoine Streets
1877 - 1903

SHAAREY ZEDEK SYNAGOGUE MODELS



Winder Street
1903 - 1913



Willis and Brush Streets
1913-1930

SEYMOUR SIMONS

The Engineer Who Became a Composer

By George H. Goldstone

The name of David W. Simons - "D.W." - was well known to the Detroit Jewish community at the beginning of the 20th century. Coming to Detroit in 1869 from Kalwarya, in Russian Poland (near Cracow), he achieved a prominence in Detroit such as few Jews in the city have since attained. From beginnings as a junk dealer, he progressed into paper manufacture, real estate, building and banking. Active in his synagogue - being president of Shaarey Zedek continuously from 1908 to 1920 - he also served as treasurer of the United Jewish Charities, and was a leader in many facets of Jewish community life. A prominent Mason, he was honored with the 33rd Degree. He served the City of Detroit, which had adopted him as he had adopted it, as President of the Public Lighting Commission and as an elected member of Detroit's first nine-man council.

Readers of MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY have already read of his son, Charles C. Simons - a distinguished jurist¹. But another son - Seymour Broudy Simons - achieved equal prominence as a composer and band leader, building a musical career worthy of historical notice.

Seymour B. Simons - born in Detroit January 14, 1896, to David W. Simons and Laura S. (Broudy) Simons - attended the Detroit public schools; then, graduating from Central High School, he enrolled in the College of Engineering at the University of Michigan. His career objective was not music; he was graduated in 1917 with the degree of Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering. But the interest which he had in music was growing; he had become skilled in playing the piano and several musical instruments. In 1915 and again in 1916, Simons and another student, Abraham Gornetsky,² wrote the score for two Michigan Union Operas. An oft-told story at the Michigan chapter of Zeta Beta Tau fraternity, of which Seymour was a member, was to the effect that after writing his second Michigan Union opera, he announced to his father that he was going to drop out of college and work as a composer. At this point, "D.W." laid down the law to Seymour: "Get your engineering degree first; that's what you are at the university for! You can write your songs later!"

Following his graduation, he was employed briefly as a research engineer in a Detroit automobile plant, but as the United States became involved in World War I, Seymour was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the Army Air Service (then an adjunct of the Signal Corps; a generation later it became the United States Air Force). His military career was spent in aeronautical research and development at sites in Waco, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio.

At the war's end, while in New York City, Seymour met Nora Bayes, a leading singing star of contemporary musical comedy. In 1919, he wrote for her what became his first song hit, "Just Like A Gypsy". Continuing to compose for Miss Bayes, he wrote the musical score for two complete stage productions, "Ladies First" (1919) and "Her Family Tree" (1920). In 1921, while living in London and Paris, Simons wrote a number of songs, including several for Elsie Janis, a popular American singer then on tour in Europe.



Seymour B. Simons
1896 - 1949

He returned to this country in 1922. Coming back to Detroit, he formed his own orchestra, playing in motion picture houses as a major stage attraction, featuring his own songs. During that era he was composing and collaborating with Gus Kahn, Richard Whiting, Benny Davis, Gerald Marks, Billy Hill, Irving Caesar, and others.³

It was during these years that the writer first met Seymour Simons, whose band was playing at a Detroit cabaret spot of note called the "Florentine Room", in the old Addison Hotel, at Woodward Avenue and Charlotte Street - one of today's slum areas. I was all of 5 years old, and for reasons unknown to me, my parents took me along. The room was famous for its glass dance floor, under which were a variety of changing colored lights.⁴ We had a table on the edge of that floor, and during intermissions, a pianist with a tiny spinet came round the floor and played a variety of songs. When he came to our table, he played - and sang - a ditty about a little boy, called "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face". The song may have had pathos, but as my mother used to relate, I looked at my hands (well-scrubbed for the occasion) - and promptly started to cry! Then Seymour - whom my father had known when Seymour was a student and member of Zeta Beta Tau at Ann Arbor - came over to our table and chatted with us. I didn't meet him again until my own college days, when Seymour would return to ZBT fraternity initiations - and I acquired the privilege of calling him "Sy".

In 1926, he formed an orchestra booking agency in Detroit in his own name. Then, in 1931, he again formed a touring orchestra which played leading hotels, theaters and clubs throughout the country, until it disbanded in 1936. He was no stranger to radio broadcasting, going "on-the-air" in the early 1920's; and in 1937, he was featured on a coast-to-coast Sunday evening radio show sponsored by Chevrolet. When that program terminated in 1938, he retired from show

business, thereafter devoting much of his time to his father's real estate and business interests. During World War II, he was Entertainment Chairman of the Detroit USO, responsible for organizing hundreds of shows performed for servicemen stationed at military and naval installations, as well as hospitals, throughout southern Michigan.⁵

In the post-war years, Seymour kept in touch with music while Program Director of Vogue Recording Company in Detroit. He acted as a design consultant for the WWJ Studio on Lafayette Boulevard; we can recall his discussing with us that no two walls of the auditorium were parallel, substantially reducing reverberation. He was still an engineer, as well as a musician!

Like his father, Seymour involved himself in the Detroit Jewish community. He was a director of the Jewish Community Center and of the Hebrew Free Loan Association; a board member of Congregation Shaarey Zedek. He was active in the Boy Scout movement; in the Masonic Lodge, being a member of the Detroit Consistory and Moslem Shrine (32nd Degree), Ashlar Lodge 91, F. & A.M.; The Lambs; Great Lakes Club; and Franklin Hills Country Club. He died suddenly, on February 12, 1949. He had been married twice, his first marriage being to Ruth E. Oppenheim, daughter of Casper and Minnie Oppenheim, of Detroit. There were three children of that marriage: Shirley, now Mrs. Charles E. Schwartz, of Huntington Woods, Michigan; Sarah, now Mrs. Seymour Lampert, of Ann Arbor; and one son, Ruthven (better known as Rudy), of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. His first wife died in 1928. In 1942, Seymour married Sylvia Waldman, of Belleville, Illinois, who survived him until 1985.

In 1975, Seymour Simons was one of the original inductees to the Songwriters' Hall of Fame in New York City;⁶ no little honor, considering the vast army of tunesmiths who have come and gone over the years. The songs he left behind are his monument; a complete listing of his hundreds of published works would indicate that his was no flash-in-the-pan talent. Three of his better known songs, termed "standards" in the music business, were "All of Me", written in 1931 in collaboration with Saginaw-born Gerald Marks; "Breezin' Along With the Breeze" (1926), with Detroiters Dick Whiting, whose daughters Margaret and Barbara have achieved musical prominence; and "Honey" (1928), also done in collaboration with Dick Whiting. The years keep passing by; but the memory of Seymour Simons returns each time his lovely, romantic music is heard, warming the hearts of those who knew him, and enchanting those who did not.

FOOTNOTES

1. Levin, Judge Theodore, "Judge Charles C. Simons", *Michigan Jewish History*, November, 1965; Kaufman, Judge Ira, "Michigan Judiciary of Jewish Lineage", *Michigan Jewish History*, January, 1980.
2. Abraham Gornetsky's later music was composed and published under the name Jay Gorney.
3. 5. Much of the detail concerning the career of Seymour Simons has been taken from *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* (1954), James T. White Co., Publ.
4. The author suspects this may have been the precursor of today's "psychedelic lighting". The Florentine Room's floor, of ground glass tiles, was moved to another location in the 1940's; it may still be in existence.
6. *The Halls of Fame* (1977), J.G. Ferguson, Chicago, Il, Publ.

The photograph of Seymour Simons, as well as the montage of his sheet music, were supplied by Rudy Simons, his son, incidental to an interview on March 31, 1986.

BI-ANNUAL PUBLICATION SCHEDULE RESUMED

Members of the Society will be happy to know that MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY will again be publishing two issues each year. The Editorial Board designated George H. Goldstone as Editor of this issue, the editing of which began in March. We trust that the current issue will prove enjoyable to all our readers, and that some of them will be encouraged to contribute articles of Jewish historical interest.

Occasionally, we are informed of a file of materials which is available to a writer who has the skills and willingness to put the material into narrative form. If you have experience in expository writing, and would like to be a part of the editorial team of MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY, we would be delighted to have your help. Contact either Betty Schein (313/355-1657) or George Goldstone (313/647-3399). There are projects now in hand where we can use your skills!

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