A History of the Jewish Community in Reading and Berks County
rfj5031, Written by students at Pennsylvania State University, Berks

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The book is dedicated to Daniel Tannenbaum, the former director of the Albright College Holocaust Library and Resource Center. Dan was dedicated to Holocaust education. During his tenure as the Executive Director of the Jewish Federation of Reading, Dan was instrumental in helping to found the Center. He would later assist with the creation of a Holocaust Studies program at Albright and the many programs which support it, including the annual Richard J. Yashek Memorial Lecture. Dan arrived in Reading after a long career serving Jewish federations and community centers throughout the United States. A former social worker, with an M.A. in Social Work from Ohio State University, Dan served in the Navy in the Pacific Theater during World War II. He was married to the former Shoshana Harrison for over 50 years and they had two children, Marc and Miriam.

Dan died in December 2010, just two weeks after he gave an interview to one of the student writers of this book. During November and December 2010, Dan gave a great deal of his time to the students, seeking to have his knowledge of Jewish history in Reading and Berks documented. We feel privileged to have had this opportunity to record and preserve Dan’s historical knowledge of the local Jewish community.
Acknowledgments

Laurie Grobman
Professor of English and Women’s Studies, Penn State Berks

The project that led to is a form of what is known in higher education as *community-based undergraduate research*, a form of instruction that partners students, faculty, and community organization to fill a community need. More than 25 students at Penn State Berks partnered with the Jewish Cultural Center/Jewish Federation of Reading and with hundreds of members of the local Jewish community to document and preserve the community’s history.

Many people put forth great effort to support a project such as this.

Tammy K. Mitgang helped to coordinate the project, gave students research leads, and reviewed and edited every chapter or sent chapters to others to review.

Jayne Kleinman helped out whenever I asked.

Jennifer Goss, coordinator of the Albright College Holocaust Resource Center, was appointed to her position after the untimely death of Dan Tannenbaum. In addition to the responsibilities of the Center, Jen graciously agreed to continue the project Dan and I had begun to organize and that appears in this book. My students wrote narratives based on several of the videotaped testimonials housed at the Holocaust Resource Center. I deeply admire Jen’s work ethic, knowledge, commitment to education, and heartfelt concern for Holocaust victims and all victims of genocide.

Several community members gave enormous time and effort to students: Bernard Gerber, Bob Kauffman, Jill Skaist, Seymour Bloom, and many others. I also thank every person (and there are too many to name) in Reading and Berks who was interviewed by students.

Thanks go out to many people from Penn State Berks for their support of and commitment to community-based research, including Dr. Susan Phillips Speece, Chancellor; Dr. Paul Esqueda, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs; and Dr. Belén Rodríguez-Mourelo, Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences Division Head.

Special thanks and appreciation go to students in my Fall 2010 “Writing Local Jewish History” course and students who conducted independent studies in the spring semester who approached this assignment with maturity, integrity, and professionalism.

I also thank students in my Spring 2011 course, Honors Writing in the Humanities, who had the difficult task of viewing videotapes of Holocaust survivors and writing their narratives. They did so with great compassion, and they tried their best to tell the stories with accuracy and honesty.
Special recognition goes to Alyssa Williams, who wrote many Holocaust testimonials for the book by viewing over 10 hours of videotaped testimonies. Viewing these videotapes is an emotionally painful and a daunting task, and I am aware of the emotional turmoil Alyssa felt. She did this work with great compassion and with an incredible work ethic and sense of urgency.

Special recognition also goes to Christine James, Editorial Assistant, who contributed to this book in so many ways. She wrote the introduction to this book; she gave her classmates research leads; she meticulously edited many, including all the bibliography entries; she supplemented research and writing in several chapters; she designed the book cover; and so much more. Basically, she did everything I asked of her, and she did so with the most amazing attitude and work ethic.

Thanks also go to the Penn State Berks Honors Program and baccalaureate degree programs at for providing funding and support for the printing of A History of the Jewish Community in Reading and Berks:

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I express my sincerest thanks and appreciation to The Howard O. and Jean Beaver Endowment for Community Service:  “The purpose of this fund shall be to support the University’s land-grant mission of service to the needs of the community and to encourage the spirit of volunteerism in the Berks Campus Community.”

**Note**

The content in this book was limited by time, space, cost, and access. All chapters were written by undergraduate students within the span of one semester in a course that included a great deal of other assignments. The students learned to write history while writing history. They made every effort to cover many topics and to gather as much information as possible from multiple sources. Students have done their best to represent the historical evidence accurately and objectively. Any inaccuracies are entirely unintended.

The content of this book is accurate to the best of our knowledge. The writers are undergraduate students and not professional historians. Much of the information collected is based on the memories and experiences of those who were interviewed. Students have done their best to represent the views expressed in the interviews accurately and objectively. Any inaccuracies are entirely unintended.

We are aware that much of the Jewish community’s history has been left out of this book, but we hope the book is the stepping stone of further documentation and preservation of this history. It is vital to realize that this book is a history, not the history, of the Jewish Community in Reading and Berks.
Foreword

It seemed obvious after reading an article in Penn State Berks, Research, (Winter 2009-2010) that I had to contact Dr. Laurie Grobman. A professor of English and Women’s Studies at Berks, Dr. Grobman’s work brings teaching and research together as a classroom experience and has resulted in the publication of two local histories, Woven with Words: A Collection of African American History in Berks County, Pennsylvania and Hispanics/Latinos in Reading and Berks: A Portrait of a Community. The books were collections of untold histories and celebrations of multiculturalism. As president of the Jewish Federation of Reading and someone intrigued with learning more about my own personal history, the possibility of working together with Dr. Grobman and her students to gather the stories and history of our Jewish community was compelling. To my knowledge, the last effort to compile a comprehensive history of the local Jewish community had been in 1990 when Dr. Paul A. Leisawitz, a local physician, wrote A History of the Jewish Community in Reading and Berks County.

The concept for this book gained momentum with a flurry of emails and grew into a community-wide effort led by more than a dozen students and their professor, a teacher who I consider visionary in her efforts to build bridges that unite cultures.

As writers in a “brave new world,” the efforts of the students are admirable. Dr. Grobman’s classes were composed of students from other communities, juggling challenging course work; many with little or no knowledge of the area prior to arriving on campus. None of the students working on the project are Jewish so religious ritual and cultural nuances required definition and further exploration as well. Ultimately, the students were challenged to join in an undergraduate research effort destined to become a published book that would tell the story of the Jews of Berks County, a daunting task in many respects.

It was not until I began to see and experience the interaction of the students with members of the Jewish community, its synagogues and institutions, that I understood the paramount success of this project – the shared experience before the written word. Dusty photographs were retrieved from cardboard boxes and family records gathered while students and their interview subjects sat side-by-side, paging through family photo albums and fading recollections. The creation of this book represents an exchange of more than historic information and oral histories; it is a work bound with relationships—community building.

Readers will learn about our earliest settlers, a group of German Jews in the settlement of Schaefferstown and later the establishment of the first synagogue on record at Chestnut and Pearl Streets in Reading, dedicated in 1865. From shopping on Penn Street to tales of Max Hassel and racketeering, the book captures, chapter by chapter, snapshots of life in Reading and the lives of those who helped to build our Jewish community and the broader Berks County neighborhoods we enjoy today. The history is by no means complete. It is, however, an ambitious beginning.

Conversations and writings that centered on anti-Semitism in Berks County were the most difficult for me to read and consider. Students shared with me the complexity of conversations with community members, many
who asked to be anonymous or later requested that their statements not be included. The writers struggled at times with the intensity of the research about local survivors of the Nazi Holocaust, much of it completed at the Holocaust Library and Resource Center at Albright College with the assistance of the Center’s coordinators, Jennifer Goss and the late Daniel Tannenbaum, who died during the writing of this history.

Although anti-Semitism was a blatant, painful reality in our local history, it was no stranger to the histories of towns and communities across the country and around the world. There were businesses, social clubs, and neighborhoods where Jews and other ethnicities were not welcome. However, the true success of the Jewish community in Berks County was the ability of its members to successfully open the doors that were at one time closed to them. Jews created neighborhoods, built businesses, synagogues, religious schools, civic organizations and social clubs that celebrated their religion and culture. And they built relationships that reached beyond hatred and ignorance. Our neighborhoods today are rich and diverse, reflective of the multi-cultural communities shaped by the immigrant populations who settled here.

“Mazel tov” to Dr. Grobman and her students; your work is appreciated and important. You challenge us all to write our stories, share our history, and celebrate our communities!

Tammy K. Mitgang
President, Jewish Federation of Reading
**Introduction**

by Christine James

Vanity Fair, Boscov’s, Sweet Street Desserts, and the Peanut Bar—these are all businesses that helped put Reading on the map and make Reading known throughout the country. These businesses also have all been either owned by or can be largely attributed to the Jewish community in Reading. Vanity Fair, for instance, was started as an outgrowth for many of the Jewish owned textile factories around the city. Bernie Fromm, in an interview with the author. Apr. 18, 2011. Boscov’s was founded by Soloman Boscov as he sold his wares out of a sack on his back. Albert Boscov, in an interview with the author. Nov. 18, 2011. The stories that have been recorded in this book depict just how much the Jewish community has influenced the Reading area.

The Jewish community in Reading has long since been an influential group in city. According to a Reading Eagle article from 1923, the Jewish community was described as “a factor in the city’s growth. Although the members of this faith have been located here only three quarters of a century, they have always been recognized as useful citizens, figuring in the civic and business life of the community ever since their arrival here.” “Progress of Jews in this Community—Leading Factor in City’s Growth—Their Organizations, Houses of Worship and Cemetery,” Reading Eagle. Oct. 7, 1923. Business, particularly along Penn Street, was a major part of the Jewish community’s contribution to the city’s economy. The Knoblauch Bank and Boscov’s have also left indelible marks on the city. Philanthropic acts, including the Boscov-Lakin Technology Center at Pennsylvania State University, Berks, have also greatly impacted the community. This community has a rich history that has not yet been documented in a form accessible to the public. With this undergraduate community-based research project, the students of Penn State Berks hope to begin the chronicling of this community’s history.

The recording of history is an inherently selective process. It is impossible for a historian to write the complete history about any community due to the fact that outside influences, unseen by the historian, are always in play. For these reasons, this book, too, is selective. In fact, this book has passed through many layers of selectivity. First, we were able to access historical documents that have been selected and saved by the community. The interviews were a second layer of selectivity came from the interviews. Several announcements were placed in Shalom, inviting the community to come and share their family history, and we appreciate those who came out to share their stories with us. Those meetings helped direct the students toward certain areas of interest which they then pursued. After the interviews, the students had to choose what information to include in their chapters, adding another layer of selectivity, and further research this information. The Reading Eagle, fully archived on Google Archives, was extremely helpful, but even newspapers have biases and selection processes. All chapters were edited, supplemented, and reviewed by me (the Editorial Assistant), Professor Laurie Grobman, and several members of the Jewish community, especially Tammy K. Mitgang.

Due to the time constraint of a 15 week semester course that included several other assignments, the book
had further limitations. However, this book is a comprehensive glimpse of the Jewish community in Reading. Students attempted to cover as much of the Jewish history as possible and hope that this book will inspire others to fill in gaps.
Abe Minker, Racketeer

by Razvan Viteazu

Background to the Rackets in Reading

Racketeering in Reading played a major role in shaping the city’s image and its communities. Webster’s Dictionary describes a racketeer as someone who carries on illegal business activities through crime. The problem of racketeers has plagued the city and its inhabitants for nearly an entire century. Starting out with the bootleggers during the Prohibition, to the bookies for the illegal numbers games, to the problems of prostitution, and most recently the drug problem, the city has a fought a century long losing battle against people trying to earn a living through illegal means.

One of the most powerful and most influential rackets to dominate Reading was the numbers game. Playing the numbers was both very simple and very rampant. One could walk up into a grocery store or local tavern and buy numbers. Bookies, or number writers as they were known then, would walk the streets asking people if they wanted to play, handing out receipts to those who did. Factories and workplaces had bookies that were well known by the workers. The drawing of numbers was selected daily. Bookies would work together and select numbers from randomly picked horse races. Each horse race announces a total betting pot, the amount of money people have betted on that race. From that bookies would select three random digits. The drawing was universal, meaning all the bookies would use the same numbers to determine its winners. The winnings were substantial. They were certainly nowhere close to the Powerball winnings of today, but a regular person could win a month’s salary or even more. More important was that due to its illegality, winners kept all the money without paying taxes.

In Reading, the numbers game took off as a booming illegal enterprise sometime after Prohibition ended. The city was left with an illegal void to be filled. Thanks in part to Prohibition, Reading’s criminal organizations had enjoyed a golden age of sorts (see chapter on Prohibition). Racketeers and profiteers such as Max Hassel flooded the city with both alcohol and large amounts of cash. Once Prohibition ended and alcohol became legal, bootleggers needed a way to replace their lost income.

Due to the popularity of gambling, the numbers racket was adopted by various criminal organizations within Reading. It continued on quietly after Prohibition until the 1950s when U.S. Senator Estes Kefauver exposed Reading as being a corrupt town dominated by criminal activities. From the early 1950s onward, Reading and the federal government fought a long battle to stamp out both rackets and corruption.

In 1978 the state introduced its own version of the numbers game. It was an effort to both cash in on the numbers game popularity, and at the same time the state admitted that it had fought a losing battle against it. The numbers game and the Pennsylvania lottery have coexisted since 1978 all the way to the present. Betting on numbers illegally may not be as popular today, as it was back in the 1940s or the 1950s, but it has survived nonetheless.
The Minker Family’s Involvement in the Rackets

Abraham Minker was born in 1898 in what is today the country of Belarus and was, at the time, part of the Russian Empire. He was one of eight children. The Minkers were poor Jews who would eventually seek opportunity in America just like many other groups at the turn of the 20th century. According to Minker, as documented in Ed Taggert’s book, *When The Rackets Reigned*, the family arrived in America in 1904 and struggled from the very beginning. Because the family was very poor, Minker dropped out of school at the young age of ten. In order to help out his parents, Minker and his brothers, Alex and Issadore, turned to peddling. The brothers would push a wagon loaded with fruits and vegetables and sell them to the local community. From this early business entrepreneurial success, the family opened up a produce store at 333 North Eight Street in 1914. Abe and Alex Minker ran the store.

During the 1920s, while Alex ran the produce store, Abe became involved in bootlegging. While Minker’s run as a bootlegger was brief, and he never achieved the bootlegging popularity and notoriety of Max Hassel, it did shape and influence the remainder of his life. As there were a number of groups operating in the bootlegging racket, Abe became involved in a shootout that nearly cost him his life in 1922. Even though Abe escaped the shooting incident unharmed, the subsequent investigation into it found Abe and Alex guilty of perjury. On May 1, 1923, Abe Minker was sent away to Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, while Alex Minker’s conviction was overturned. Abe Minker spent the next two and a half years in state prison, but his life as a career criminal was just beginning. After his release in 1925, Minker and younger brother Issadore became involved in the numbers racket. Other Minker brothers William and Alex continued to be involved with Abe Minker on and off, but it would be Issadore, or Izzy as he became known, who would become one of Abe Minker’s most trusted associates.

While the 1920s remained relatively quiet for Abe, the 1930s were more troublesome. Police surveillance and investigations into numbers banks, the places where the money and receipts from bets were taken to, were starting to uncover a large network that was headed by Abe Minker. In August 1935 after a police raid on a numbers bank, located on Greenwich Street in Reading, William and Issadore Minker were arrested and convicted. They received three month sentences in the Berks County Prison. The city was cracking down on the numbers racket. From 1935 to 1939, Abe Minker was indicted five times. His lawyers were able to keep Minker out of prison, as he would spend less than one year in jail for all five cases.

With the advent of World War II, the 1940s brought a period of peace and prosperity for the Minker family, at least from a legal standpoint. Abe claimed, during a court appearance before a judge, that he had entered military service around 1942, but was released the very next year due to his age. He then opened one of his most prosperous legal enterprises, the White House Market in Mount Penn in 1947. For the next two decades, Minker operated both his legal and illegal activities from the White House Market. While investigators would later claim that the market’s basement was the center of all the number banks, Minker vehemently denied those accusations.

Minker’s luck continued to improve in the 1940s. In April 1945, Tony Moran, a rival, was killed under some very unclear circumstances. The alleged gunman, Johnny Wittig, was given a 10 to 20 year sentence for the
Wittig spent roughly six years in prison, and following his release, he worked for Minker. Minker therefore was able to benefit twofold. By having his rival Moran out of the way, Minker was able to consolidate his hold on the numbers rackets. And by having Wittig on his side, Abe now possessed a tough and trustworthy lieutenant who watched over him and became his main enforcer.

Minker’s network now included mainly his brothers and Wittig. The numbers racket was operated by many people of many different backgrounds, but the top organizational decisions were made by Minker and his close circle of lieutenants. Closing out this circle of trusted family members, Abe brought in the Fudemens.

Alex and Louis Fudeman were nephews of Abe Minker. Alex Fudeman became one of Minker’s most trusted lieutenants. He became a money collector from various number banks, and he also served as the middle man between Minker and his various interests. The two Fudeman brothers had criminal records that dated back to the 1930s, and they came to be important players in Minker’s growing empire. Through his brothers and nephews, Abe Minker was able to stay in the background. It made it very hard for the police to gather evidence, because he never had direct links to any of the criminal activities he ran.

In the 1950s the local police received assistance from the federal government. Senator Estes Kefauver’s Commission on organized crime named Reading as a haven for criminals. Various local known criminals were subpoenaed to appear before the commission in Washington. On June 28, 1951, Abe Minker, Issadore Minker, and Alex Fudeman all appeared and testified. The Minker brothers and Fudeman all invoked the Fifth Amendment. The hearings may not have been able to crack Minker’s empire, but they were influential in the long run. While corruption and the inability of the local police to stop Minker’s organization allowed him and his family to flout the law, after the Kefauver Commission things changed. Federal agents flooded the city in large numbers and started investigating.

On the surface things might have looked as business as usual for Minker’s organization, but there was a distant storm brewing on the horizon. Federal investigators were building their case against Minker and his organization in the mid-1950s.

On November 13, 1957, Minker and others were arrested on conspiracy charges. According to Taggert, however, due to pressure from such individuals within Minker’s organization as Alex Fudeman, witnesses that were once willing to testify, decided that they would no longer cooperate with the government. By December 1959 the government’s case against Minker fell apart due to lack of witnesses. Yet, other cases against him started to pile up. On October 3, 1959, Abe celebrated Yom Kippur quietly at his synagogue Kesher Zion. Later that evening, federal agents raided Minker’s home and arrested him. Twelve other members of his organization were also arrested at various other locations throughout the city. Minker’s legal troubles were only increasing. With Minker now having the Yom Kippur case to fight, the feds moved in for the kill. On May 26, 1960, the federal government issued 16 indictments against Minker and other members of his organization, for tax evasion.

Minker was now cornered but certainly not finished. His team of lawyers was both expensive and very good, and they kept Minker out of prison for a very long time. However, on October 25, 1961, Minker’s lawyers
were not able to save him. He was sentenced to four years in federal prison and a $35,000 fine. According to Gene Friedman, reporter for the Reading Times who covered Minker’s trials, the sentencing hearing though is best remembered not for its lenient punishment, but for the approach that Minker’s legal team ended up taking. First, Minker’s lawyers presented rabbis and other witnesses that spoke of Minker’s many generous deeds and his philanthropic works. The second, and more bizarre, episode of the day occurred when Abe suddenly shocked the court with his claim that he was being framed by his nephew Alex Fudeman. According to Minker’s story, Alex Fudeman fabricated evidence collected by federal agents. Even more stunningly for the audience was Minker’s claim that Alex Fudeman confessed to Minker to the whole affair. He confessed in private to Minker, but he was not present in the courtroom. Judge C. William Kraft apparently did not believe Minker, who was then sentenced and fined.

With his sentence imposed, Minker and his lawyers sought to appeal the prison term. He appealed first to the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which turned down his request for a new trial in January 1963. In March of that same year, Minker’s lawyers appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld the four year prison sentence and the fine imposed.

With his appeals exhausted, Minker was sent to the Lewisburg Federal Prison, located in central Pennsylvania. The government soon brought a new case against him. On June 24, 1964, Minker was indicted by the federal government for failure to pay taxes. Abe Minker was 67, and his health was deteriorating. Not wishing to go through the stress of another trial, Minker cut a deal with the feds for the first time in his life. In return for a guilty plea, Minker received a two year sentence that ran concurrent with his four year sentence. On May 11, 1965, Minker pled guilty for the first time in his life.

Abe Minker served three years and eight days in prison total. He was released on May 24, 1966. Minker had grown tired of the negative limelight and his criminal activities. He and his wife moved to Arizona, trying to escape both the local press and his troubles. Minker and his wife later moved down to Fort Lauderdale in Florida. There Minker died in 1985 at the age of 87. Issadore Minker also moved to Florida, and he died there in 1995.

**Community’s Perspective on Minker and the Rackets**

The Minkers and the Fudemans were two of the families that ran the numbers racket in Reading. The facts above paint a picture of Minker’s criminal organization from legal and media sources. Yet court documents and newspaper accounts speak with their own bias. To better understand who these people were, and how they impacted their community, we need to take into account the members of the community. The local Jewish community has their own views on the Minkers and Fudemans. The community is represented here through interviews with Ed Taggart, Gene Friedman, Bernie Gerber, Seymour Bloom, Richard Roeberg, Robert Kauffman, Michael Charnoff, and Meyer Weiner. Obviously, many other members of the community may have differing views of the Minkers and Fudemans.

The numbers racket is acknowledged by many within the community to represent something that is negative, the bad side of the community. That is in itself only half the story. The Minkers and Fudemans were
“ordinary” people with families to support, and at the same time they broke the law. At the time, many people viewed the numbers racket as harmless for the most part. It seemed as if the police and the politicians allowed it to exist. According to some, the streets of Reading were much safer when Abe Minker ran the town, then now with the infestation of drugs in Reading. While no one should run out and praise what Minker did, it is very important to make the distinction of the rackets that his organization ran versus those of today’s criminal racketeers.

Abe Minker was also a very interesting person. By some accounts Minker was religious, belonging to the conservative synagogue Kesher Zion. Just how religious he truly was is debatable. Ed Taggert, news reporter and pioneer researcher on the rackets in Reading, talks about Minker being very upset about his arrest on Yom Kippur. Yet it is unclear whether he was sincerely outraged, or was simply using the incident to poke doubt into the public about the government perhaps discriminating against him. As a reporter covering Minker, Gene Friedman is more knowledgeable on the matter. He is also one of the few, if not the only one, to meet Minker on many different occasions and to talk to him. Friedman did not doubt Minker’s religious faith, but some questions still lingered. He witnessed firsthand the sentencing episode, when rabbis and other witnesses spoke of Minker’s generosity. We may never truly know why those witnesses went out of the way to portray him in such a positive light, making note of his many philanthropic deeds. At the same time, many members of the community seem to echo the sentiment that Abe Minker was no Max Hassel. Still, Minker was considered a very approachable person if one knew him. If you knew Minker or were connected to him, and you needed a favor, then he was certainly the guy that could get things done.

Meyer Weiner was Abe Minker’s accountant and a friend of the family for nearly 40 years. He offers a unique and different insight into Minker’s character. Wiener remembers Minker as a generous gentleman, noting his many donations to his synagogue and various local charities. Meyer also recalls an episode when Minker offered to buy a pony for one of his kids. The most important thing for Minker was his family; his wife and daughter were everything to him. Meyer remembers that after he was released from prison, Minker was changed both physically and emotionally. He confided to Meyer that he did not know why things happened the way they did. The lasting image that Meyer has of Minker is that even while he left town, Minker maintained a positive outlook and was happy to be left alone with his family.

It is equally as important to look at Abe Minker from a much broader perspective. He was not a part of a Jewish criminal organization. Minker was part of a criminal organization that stretched out over many ethnic backgrounds. Many other nationalities were also engaged in the criminal underworld. Minker is not the product of his Jewish culture, and the distinction needs to be very clear. Abe Minker does not represent the Jewish community; he might perhaps better represent the criminal community.

Notes


8. Taggert, p.18.


10. Taggert, p.27.


17. Taggert, p. 40-42.


25. Friedman Interview, 2010.


29. “U.S. v. Abraham Minker, Appellant., 312 F.. 2d 632(3rd Cir. 1963),


33. Taggert, p.28.

34. Friedman Interview, 2010.

35. Taggert, p.313.


40. Taggert, p.115.
41. Friedman Interview, 2010.
42. Roeberg Interview, 2010.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Charnoff Interview, 2010.

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Anti-Semitism

By Andrea Stennett

Anti-Semitism appeared well before the 1800’s when Reading saw its first influx of immigrants; throughout the next 200 years the community experienced several waves of migration. According to Daniel Tannenbaum, coordinator of the Holocaust Resource Center at Albright College, “as each immigrant came over to the United States they were greeted with a certain bit of animosity. Tensions not only settled between each ethnic group, but also within the groups as all.”¹

By the early 1900’s most German Jews had settled in the area and established some means of making money. Because most of them spoke Yiddish, they could converse with and sell products to the Pennsylvania Dutch who owned and settled in the majority of Berks County. During this time Anti-Semitic feelings had been dwelling within the county for nearly 150 years. American Germans, who still felt strong ties to their birth country, conflicted with the American Jews and German Jews due to national pride and belonging. There had always been some form of rivalry between the groups, but as the reality of World War II reached across the Atlantic, anti-semitic feelings swelled within Berks county. “The immediate post-war years were ugly ones filled with economic unrest, xenophobia and a new kind of anti-semitism much more serious then America had ever known before. Henry Ford began to publish the Dearborn Independent, which circulated its hate for Jews everywhere and the Ku Klux Klan had a new sense of life to the North.”²

Roy Frankhouser made a name for himself in the Reading area as a member of the Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi Party. He was an active member in the community, among many others, who endorsed the Nazis with marches and acts of violence against minority groups

In my interviews, Don Abramson, Judith Hartman, Dan Tannenbaum, and Sidney and Esther Bratt all agreed Jews were not welcome to live in Wyomissing up until sometime after the 1950s. As a result, Jews lived in surrounding areas such as Hampton Heights and Penn Side to raise their families.³

Jews from the Reading and Allentown areas formed the Berkleigh Country Club in 1926. In article by McGovern about African Americans at Berks County’s country clubs, McGovern states that the Berkleigh was “Formed in 1926 by Jews because they were not permitted to join other clubs.”⁴ As of 1990, the Berkleigh had not had any Black members, but then- membership chairman Dr. Norman Winston stated, “we have no quotas. We are 100% open.”⁵ An article by Chris Millard in Golf Digest notes that when the Berkleigh was founded, “In that era, Jews, much like the Irish and Italians in the region between Allentown and Reading, weren’t welcome at the more established clubs. Berkleigh became an idyllic refuge.”⁶

Reportedly, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in Reading also prohibited Jewish members, leading some Jews to establish the Young Men’s Hebrew Association (YMHA) (this later became the Jewish Community Center).² As theorized by Daniel Tannenbaum, the YMHA had initially started as a way for Jews within the community to gather together and socialize. Just because Jews were prohibited from joining
certain organizations didn’t mean it had to keep them from forming their own, which is exactly what they did.

According to Tannenbaum, barriers began breaking down when the first two Jewish doctors, Dr. Herman Kotzen and Dr. Irving Imber, were given privileges at Reading Hospital. Dr. Kotzen became the first Jewish doctor to work at the hospital and was ultimately one of the first members of the Jewish community to move into Wyomissing (Dan Tannenbaum). He was celebrated by patients for his excellent service as a pediatrician, and in 1950-1951 he served as president of the Berks County Medical Society Alliance. Dr. Gerald Goodman became Reading Hospital’s primary radiologist. He “directed a flourishing radiology residency program that owed much of its success to his dedication.” He was also active in the Jewish Federation and served as its president between 1980-1982.

Though the hype of Nazi jargon began noticeably dwindling by the mid-1960s, white supremacist and other hate groups were still acting out. Around 1975, one man was arrested and prosecuted for detonating a bomb in the Jewish Community Center. Then Kesher Zion and the B’nai B’rith apartments in 1978 were defaced with swastika symbols; by 1996 Oheb Shalom was the target of “White Power” remarks and “It our country” idiolect. Esther Bratt, a Holocaust survivor and member of the Jewish Federation, remembers when these events first started happening nearly 10 years after she first moved to the Reading area with her husband Sidney Bratt, also a Holocaust survivor. “It was very sad to hear about,” she said reflecting back on the events. Don Abramson grew up with bullying remarks. Then, in 1990 his business, Keystone Tees, was vandalized with images of swastikas and the words “Kill Jews.”

Neil Hoffman, Oheb Sholom’s previous president, remarked that the acts of vandal-ism never gave his fellow congregants a sense of fear or intimidation, rather they felt violated. Jews have always been a vital part of Reading’s community.” The majority of people involved in this research project said they felt respected within the community, not just for what they do, but who they are.

Notes

1. Dan Tannenbaum interviewed by Andrea Stennett on November 17, 2010.
2. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
7. Dan Tannenbaum interview.
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By Alyssa Williams

The Jewish community in Reading, Pennsylvania is full of diverse members who have originated from different areas, pursued different career ventures, and participated in different hobbies, but almost everyone can relate on the food and good times they shared during their community’s past in bakeries, bagel stores and a prominent delicatessen. Memorable dining experiences were had by all at the Crystal Restaurant. Where a community shares a meal, and what they eat during it, can be just as important to their history—and just as telling—as any oral story passed down through generations. When speaking to some of the members of the Jewish community, the food itself didn’t always stand out in their minds, but the places and the people still do today.

Hindin’s Bakery was founded in the early 1940’s by Max Hindin. His bakery was known for producing freshly baked Polish and Jewish rye breads and rolls. Restaurants in the area, including the former Fegley’s Restaurant of Exeter, PA, bought their bread from them for their patrons. The Hindin’s Bakery was a popular storefront within the community as well.

Max Hindin’s role in the community did not stop with baking. In March of 1965, Hindin lead the founding of the Congregation of Beth Jacob. The congregation did not last, however, and no longer exists today. Max Hindin had no children, and the strict level of Orthodox worship he desired was less practiced within the community. Hindin’s Bakery, on the other hand, lived on. In 1988, Max Hindin sold the bakery to long time employee William Fletcher. Fletcher had worked for Hindin 21 years before acquiring the business, and continued to run it until it closed towards the end of this past decade.

Another bakery that was talked about often was Shulman’s Bakery. According to Samuel Cohen, “There was a bagel bakery called Shulman’s Bakery, and the procedure was that the people, or at least my parents, used to go there Saturday night because that’s when the bagels for Sunday morning breakfast [were baked]. So you’d get the very fresh bagels by going there, and the bakery was in the back of their house. I’m not sure of the exact address, but you’d just park in the alley behind there and get your bagels. That was kind of traditional. Other members of the community couldn’t help but praise the Schulman’s bagels as well. Jill Skaist remembers the bagels, saying that they were “unique and truly delicious.”

When asked about delicatessens in Reading, one name bursts from everyone’s lips: Rudnick’s. According to Samuel Cohen, “There was a bagel bakery called Shulman’s Bakery, and the procedure was that the people, or at least my parents, used to go there Saturday night because that’s when the bagels for Sunday morning breakfast [were baked]. So you’d get the very fresh bagels by going there, and the bakery was in the back of their house. I’m not sure of the exact address, but you’d just park in the alley behind there and get your bagels. That was kind of traditional. Other members of the community couldn’t help but praise the Schulman’s bagels as well. Jill Skaist remembers the bagels, saying that they were “unique and truly delicious.”

When asked about delicatessens in Reading, one name bursts from everyone’s lips: Rudnick’s. According to some, Rudnick’s was the only deli the Jewish community really had—and there hasn’t been anything like it since. It was a kosher-style deli owned by the Rudnick family who made their home with their store on North 9th Street. Both Mr. and Mrs. Rudnick had been born in Russia and came to America for better opportunities.

According to their daughter, Evelyn Drezner, “Neither one of them had any experience in a delicatessen, so they worked very, very hard to make this a success. My father was the one who went to Philadelphia to get...
all the food. My mother, of course, stayed in the delicatessen. He used to go to Philadelphia every Friday and bring everything home. Long hours. Hard work. Hard, hard work—but they did well. They managed because of the work that they did.” Members of the community thought highly of the delicatessen in return for their efforts. Mrs. Rudnick is remembered to have given “little tastes” to children when they visited the store.

Evelyn Bloom expressed her fondness for the deli, saying, “Oh they had the most wonderful corned beef, and all the Jewish food they carried; they made it themselves.”

Evelyn Drezner related that she hadn’t known of the deli’s favor within the community as a child, saying, “It was quite a success—I didn’t know it myself being the daughter, but Rudnick’s seemed to have been a place where people loved to come.

“I looked at it from the other side: It was my mother’s and father’s place, but everyone seemed to really enjoy coming to Rudnick’s. They truly enjoyed my mother very much. She was the one who used to give out the samples to the children. Everybody got a taste.”

Mr. Rudnick cared a great deal about the quality of his product and the satisfaction of his customers. Rudnick formed a respected professional relationship with his suppliers in Philadelphia, and personally inspected every cut of meat that entered his delicatessen.

During the 1960’s, Mr. Rudnick’s passing marked the beginning of the end for the deli. Evelyn Drezner recalled her mother being very persistent that she would continue to run Rudnick’s despite her husband’s passing. It gave her mother purpose, and she was able to keep the delicatessen going for a while. The level of respect that the Philadelphia suppliers had for her father carried over to her mother when she continued the business.

Eventually, Evelyn opened a second Rudnick’s on North 6th Street. When she first announced her plans for a luncheonette, she was met with some opposition from family. Her mother, then retired, thought she was “crazy” for wanting to do it, but her husband supported her because he realized it was something she really wanted to do.

“We had a cook that would make meat, soup, things like that, but it was basically sandwiches, bagels, lox, cream-cheese – the meat, you know, that kind of thing. And we did have take-out part too, if they wanted to take the meat out,” Evelyn recollected. “I kept that for two years, and then I sold it. That was enough. I didn’t realize…it was very hard work. I loved it, but my husband said enough was enough—and he was right.”

Although founded in 1924, Jimmie Kramer’s Peanut Bar Restaurant wasn’t opened at its Penn Street location until 1933. Before that, Kramer had moved from one location to another, speculatively because prohibition was instated and “drys” would raid and close down a location, forcing him to open up another. It was then titled “Jimmie Kramer’s Olde Central Cafe,” and received its first legal liquor license in March of 1934. The peanuts were introduced in 1935, wherein Kramer insisted that his patrons toss the shells on the floor. These peanut shells soon became a trademark for the establishment.
The story goes that Kramer had previously provided the bar patrons with pretzels, but one day when the shipment was backordered, he had to find a substitute bar snack and peanuts were what was available. The Peanut Bar even appears on the Travel Channel, touted as one of the first bars to provide free peanuts to its patrons.

1935 also marked the arrival of Annie “Mom” Kramer. She brought with her “pots and pans,” and became the Peanut Bar’s first cook. The bar was now able to provide patrons with seafood platters and soups.

Harold Leifer, Jimmie Kramer’s son-in-law, took over ownership of the Peanut Bar and brought retail and accounting savvy to the restaurant in the 1950’s. Jimmie Kramer’s Peanut Bar is currently flourishing under a third generation. Harold Leifer passed away late November of 2010, leaving the restaurant to its president, his son, Michael Leifer. 10

Famous for its Toasted Coconut Cream Pie, Gottlieb’s is affectionately remembered in Reading’s Jewish community as a fine family restaurant. Isadore and Fannie Gottlieb opened their restaurant’s doors in the 1920’s. Gottlieb’s was located on Penn Street, and served Jewish cuisine to both the Jewish and non-Jewish population of Reading. According to the Gottliebs’ granddaughter, Sharyn Cohen, Isadore was known for more than his coconut cream pie, “He was also known for his Jewish fare, for both Jewish customers and non-Jewish customers. The non-Jewish customers learned about brisket, matzo-ball soup, short ribs, and kasha bows.”

The Toasted Coconut Cream Pie is what their former patrons first remember, though. Sharyn and her husband, Bruce Cohen shared their knowledge of the restaurant, including the information about the pie’s recipe, “It has been duplicated, not exactly, elsewhere; various restaurants in town, and there are two versions of the recipe for this. Since it was during WWII, [Isadore] had a pre-WWII recipe and a during-WWII recipe because he couldn’t get some of the ingredients for the pie.” 11

The restaurant enjoyed success until Isadore retired in the mid-1940’s. Bruce Cohen recalled a conversation he had three or four years ago with a former patron of Gottlieb’s, “He said that he can state that he is perhaps one of the few people who can say exactly where they were in 1945 when they heard that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had just died. He was in Gottlieb’s, having dinner.”

Sharyn’s parents even met due to the restaurant, and she shared the brief synopsis of their meeting, “My father was on his way west to make fame and fortune, stopped in Reading, stopped in this Jewish-style restaurant, saw this lovely young lady who was getting her college education and waitressing at the same time, and fell in love with either my mother or the food first—you know, that’s up for debate—and he never went any further than Reading.”

The Crystal restaurant was not Jewish owned, but it was definitely frequented by the Jewish community during its heyday in the 1940’s. The Mantis family owned the Crystal restaurant, and many of the earlier generations harbor fine memories of meals spent there. 12 You want to know about the Crystal? I’ll tell you about the Crystal. When we first got married, we used to go out for like a movie for something. We’d go to
the Crystal for dinner, like say on a Saturday night.\textsuperscript{13} “Oh, that was a famous restaurant, the Crystal. Everybody used to go there for lunch, and after the movies it was a place to congregate. And everyone was really heartbroken when it burned down…Oh it was many years ago,” recalled Evelyn Bloom, “Regular food, but everybody would meet there. It was a congregational place. You would go for lunch and meet a lot of people there.”\textsuperscript{14} Samuel Cohen had similar memories of the Crystal, saying, “It was kind of traditional for the business men to have lunch there. The same people who had stores up and down Penn Street, that no longer exist, but they would all go there for lunch. It was a very, very popular place. People also went there traditionally after the movies that were on Penn Street. There were about five or six theaters on Penn Street at that time. So after movies we’d go there for coffee.”\textsuperscript{15}

Evelyn Drezner remembered the Crystal restaurant as well, and remarked about the quality of their food and their catering services, “It was a wonderful, wonderful restaurant. It really was. The food was delicious. They did catering. They catered my son’s Bar Mitzvah. Yes, oh yes. That was a landmark in Reading, the Crystal. The food was as good as any you could find anywhere. People would come from big cities, oh yes. Even people who came in here for business from New York would say, ‘You cannot beat the Crystal Restaurant for food’—and it was true. They had their own Chinese chef for a while. They did that. Their bakery was unbelievable.”

The Crystal Restaurant succumbed to a fire on February 26, 1982. Police investigated possible causes and leads, but members of the community will say that the restaurant had already changed drastically from its heyday. What used to be the place that everyone went before and after movies had become a less prestigious part of Reading’s culinary district, and finally perished in flames.\textsuperscript{16}

Notes

4. Mary Jo Fox, R14.
11. Sharyn and Bruce Cohen, interview with author, December 3, 2010
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Building a Community

By Christine James

According to Dr. Paul Leisawitz in his written history, A History of the Jewish Community in Reading and Berks County, the first Jews to come to America after escaping continued persecution from Spain and Portugal arrived in the later part of the 1600’s. An article that Leisawitz included at the end of his own written history notes that the first 23 Jewish settlers came on a boat from Brazil in 1654. However, it wasn’t until 1720 that a number of Jews were documented in the Reading area who built a synagogue and bought land for a cemetery. The cemetery is believed to have been located on Tower Hill about 0.4 miles below the intersection of 419 and Main Street. Despite assurances that the area is “definitely” the cemetery from neighbors, there is only documentation from the 1950’s. A group of Jewish men bought the property in the 1950’s and gave it to the Historical Society after guaranteeing that nothing would be built on the spot. Yet the first documented Jewish settlers in Reading were on a tax list from the 1750’s. Those three men were named Lyon Nathan, Meyer Josephson, and Israel Jacobs and made their livings by trading with the families and Indians in the surrounding areas. In 1790, the first federal census showed that there were only 250 Jews in the state. The census counted men, women, and children.

The Jewish immigrants who settled in the area of Reading were mostly from Eastern Europe and Russia, escaping the Russian Army draft or persecution. Here are the stories from some of Reading’s earliest Jewish settlers.

According to Alan Leisawitz, his grandfather, Levi Leiser, and his grandmother, Rachael “Rae” Wachter, both emigrated from a town in Lithuania today known as Vilnius. The city is located in a part of Lithuania that frequently changed hands and was under both Russian and German occupation at different points throughout history. Levi and Rae emigrated in the late 1800’s as teenagers when their town was most likely under Russian occupation. They did not know each other when they travelled from the “old country” because there were many small villages around the large city and so it was nearly impossible for them to have met. Upon arriving in the States, Alan believes that his grandfather and grandmother spent some time in New York but ultimately travelled farther away in order to look for jobs since there were so many immigrants in New York. “Why they came to Reading is a little bit of a mystery to me,” Alan said, though he mentioned that they had older siblings in the Reading area which probably ultimately brought Levi and Rachael to Reading, where they met. They settled in Reading and raised four sons in the area.

The Blumberg family also can trace its roots fairly far back in Reading’s history although Mrs. Evelyn Blumberg was not able to say exactly when the first Blumbergs emigrated from Russia. However, she speculated that they, along with most other Jewish Russian emigrants, left Russia to avoid the Russian army. The Blumberg family went on to become an instrumental part of the building of the new Kesher Zion.

Another instrumental founder of this community was Max J. Skaist. According to his granddaughter, Jill Skaist, Max left what is now known as Lithuania, but was Kovno, Russia in 1899. Why he left is unknown,
but he went to live in the Cape of Good Hope, Cape Town, South Africa where he became a naturalized British citizen in 1902 and studied law by working at a firm. According to a passenger list, Max’s wife, Taube Kotzen, 29, his two daughters Rachel, 5, and Sara, an infant, and son Morris, 2, left South Africa ahead of Max and arrived in New York on the St. Louis on May 26, 1906. Taube then took the children and stayed with a family relative in the Herwitz family living in the Reading area. Max arrived on September 5, 1906 and immediately met up with them. They later had their last son, Eli, in 1909 in Reading. Max made a living by selling New York Life Insurance in 1920. He was a representative of the insurance company for 25 years, working both out of his home and late out of his office in the Baer building. Throughout his life, Max worked to build the Jewish community in Reading and as one of the founders of B’nai Zion in 1911 and Kesher Zion in 1929, he left his mark. Max also passed down his business of insurance to his youngest son, Eli, who expanded it into a real estate business as well. While the business is no longer open, Jill can remember a time when she was stopped because a couple recognized her last name and sang her father’s praises in his realtor’s business.10

While the reasons behind Max’s decision to leave Russia are unknown, others know why their ancestors left. The threat of the draft into the Russian Army sent the Goodman family to the United States in 1902. Pauline Goldberg took the time to write down on three pages of notebook paper all she knew of her family history. She writes: “In 1902 my father Israel Goodman was in the Russian Armory [and] somehow friends and family managed to smuggle him out disguised as a Rabbi wearing a beard, long black coat and black hat.”11 He was the first of his family to leave Bialystok, a city in northern Poland which was then part of Russia. He also left his sweetheart, Fannie Goldberg behind. When Israel arrived in the States, Fannie’s aunt and uncle, Harry and Fillie Picon, who were already living in the Reading area, took him in. Using his skills as a “master shoe-maker,” Israel quickly found work and saved up enough money to send for Fannie who was also the first of her family to leave her home country and travelled with a doctor and his wife who acted as her guardians for the voyage. After having a successful shoe store in Reading for a brief period, they decided to move to Orange, New Jersey, but they were not as successful, possibly due to the changing shoe styles, and moved back to Reading where they stayed and opened up their shoe repair shop.12

Also from Bialystok, the Kozloff family emigrated to the US in either 1903 or 1904, according to Judith Hartman. Lewis Kozloff, Judith’s grandfather, fled Bialystok in order to escape the pogroms and came to Reading because he knew people there. He used his tool-making skills that he learned in Europe to make a living in Reading. According to Hartman, he is the one to credit for the idea to engrave a line in keys for an added security measure. However, because it was not copyrighted, the idea has been used freely and without credit being given to Lewis.13

The Knoblauch family has long left its mark on Reading, opening the Knoblauch Bank in 1900. Tobias Knoblauch, Eileen Knoblauch’s grandfather, emigrated from Krakow, Austria by himself in the later years of the 1800’s to escape persecution. Eileen also mentioned that in the 1800’s, it was very popular to leave Europe and live in America. Tobias lived in New York for some time but moved to Reading after meeting Jennie. Since her family lived in Reading, he moved to the area as well. After settling down, Tobias sent for his brothers who also came to live in the Reading area. He then started his bank and was very helpful when it came to loaning money to other families who needed it. In fact, he became known for loaning money to new
immigrants struggling to get started in the area and keeping a record of it taped under his desk, relying on the honor system.\textsuperscript{14}

The Mendelsohn family, possibly one of the largest families in Reading, can trace its roots back to the early 1900’s after Milton Mendelsohn’s father emigrated from Kiev, Russia and his mother emigrated from Poland in 1907 or 1908. Edith Mendelsohn remembers that when she first came to Reading after marrying Milton in 1939, “almost every other person that I met was my cousin through marriage.” It is not known why Milton’s father left Russia but the Russian draft may have been one reason. Not much is known as to why Milton’s father decided to settle in the Reading area either; his mother moved there because she had family already settled there.\textsuperscript{15} Milton’s father opened his own practice as an obstetrician-gynecology practice at the Family Medical Center and worked there from 1955 to 1994, when he retired.\textsuperscript{16}

Yet the threat from the Russian draft for their Army was not always the reason for Jewish Russian immigrants. In fact, when Robert Pollack’s grandfather, Soloman Pollack, emigrated from Russia to Schuylkill County in 1900, it was more in search of greener pastures and a better life than a threat from the draft. He peddled furs, making the trek along what is now Old 22 to sell his muskrat, mink, and marmot furs all the way from the fur market in New York to the Allentown and Reading area. It did not take long before Soloman opened his first store in 1911, but the Reading store was not opened until 1959 by Robert’s father, Harold Pollack. This store later became the headquarters of the various Pollack Furs stores around the area and is one of the oldest stores still open on Penn Street.\textsuperscript{17}

Among the best known Berks County Jewish families in Reading is the Boscov family. Solomon Bascovitz Boscov came to the US when he was 21 years old from the Ukraine after having been drafted into the Russian Army for 20 years. While traveling on the S.S. Pennsylvania in steerage, he was told by another traveler to sell lemons in Washington D.C. because everyone there liked lemonade and so he was sure to make money once he arrived in the US. So after traveling to DC and buying a few lemons, Solomon realized that no one was buying his lemons and decided to head to Reading because of how similar his Yiddish was to Pennsylvania Dutch. He then became a peddler with a sack on his back. That sack was the meager beginnings of the regional department store chain that currently exists. He opened his first store in 1911 and since then the Boscov family has left a legacy in the Reading area.\textsuperscript{18}

The wave of immigration to the United States rose again after World War II, when the US took in thousands of Jews fleeing the ravaged European continent. Esther and Sid Bratt are two more recent immigrants arriving on the shores of Ellis Island in the mid 1940’s. Esther was born in Vilna, Poland in 1929 which was under Russian control during the beginning of World War II from 1939-1941. After living in a ghetto from September 1941 until 1943, she and her mother, Marsha Israelit, and father, Samuel Israelit, survived the war by working in a labor camp. Once the war was over, Esther’s family moved from Poland to Austria and eventually moved to New York City when her uncle sent for them. A Jewish chaplain, who was part of the Army, offered to take a message from her family to relatives living in the United States if they wanted. Marsha wrote a short message but could only give the chaplain her brother’s name and the city he lived in. Yet somehow he did get the message and immediately sent money to bring the three of them to the States. Esther and her family came to New York on the Marina Flasher, an Army boat refashioned into a transport
vehicle for Jews fleeing Europe, which was the third boat to arrive in Ellis Island after the war. When registering in Ellis Island, Samuel changed the family’s last name to Elson so that he would no longer be so easily identified as a Jewish man in his new life in America.\textsuperscript{19} Esther’s uncle, Milton Gordon, ran a hosiery business in New York called M. Gordon Hosiery Mill and had a mill in Sinking Spring, Pennsylvania. In 1948, Milton died of a heart attack while in Sinking Spring and Samuel was asked to move to Reading in order to take care of his brother-in-law’s business. Though her parents moved to Pennsylvania, Esther chose to remain in New York where she later met her husband Sid Bratt in the Catskill Mountains.\textsuperscript{20}

Sid Bratt also survived World War II through the Kindertransport. He was taken from his home in Germany, which is now part of Poland, when he was ten years old and was relocated to England in June 1939. He left his mother, Elsa Bratt, twin brothers, Heinz and Irvin, and a younger sister, Irngart, behind and never found out what happened to them. His father, Alfred Bratt, was already in a concentration camp when Sid was taken by the Kindertransport, but the two were reunited in London after the war was over. When his father remarried in 1947, Sid’s stepmother had family in the United States so they emigrated shortly after the war.\textsuperscript{21} The family stayed in New York where Sid met Esther. Sid and Esther stayed in New York until Esther’s father, Samuel, offered Sid a job which he took, moving to the Reading area in the late 1950’s. Sid and Esther raised three daughters (one deceased), and the others live nearby in Allentown and Reading.\textsuperscript{22}

No matter the reason, each of these Jewish families has left their own mark on the city. Escaping the Russian Army, Hitler’s soldiers, or in search of new and better opportunities, families from all walks of life have made their home in Reading, Pennsylvania and each has used their own talents to shape this city. Whether it is a bank that helped other immigrants get on their feet, a department store that provided lots of jobs and remains a successful business today, a fur store that has kept Reading’s inhabitants warm, or through social works, each family who has settled in the Reading area has played a part in this city’s history and will continue to contribute to the city’s present and future.

Notes

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3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 1-2.
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7. Alan Leisawitz interview by Christine James, November 8, 2010.
8. Ibid.
9. Evelyn Blumberg interview by Christine James, November 1, 2010.
15. Edith Mendelsohn interview by Christine James, November 5, 2010.
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Entrepreneurial Diversity

by Christine James

Coming to America was only one obstacle many Jewish immigrants had to overcome in creating their new lives. Finding employment was another issue every family had to deal with. But each family responded to that issue differently. Some chose to open businesses on Penn Street and some ran manufacturing facilities which ultimately was the catalyst for the Vanity Fair Outlets on Penn Avenue. Others, however, followed entrepreneurial ventures such as banking, electrical supply, pest control and graphic design. Such business diversity has helped protect Reading’s economy from economic crisis. “There were people making pretzels, there were people making steel, there were people making cupcakes, which allowed everyone to help each other and be as successful as possible, truly working together as a community. These businesses filled other needs of the community in Reading and Berks and some still continue to do so today.

The Knoblauch Bank

One business that made the community’s welfare its top priority was the Knoblauch Bank; it opened in 1900, the same year that its founder, Tobias Knoblauch, obtained his naturalization certificate. After emigrating from Krakow, Austria in the late 1880’s, Tobias spent a few years in New York but eventually moved to the Reading area because his wife, Jennie, had family there. Once in Reading, Tobias used his private funds to open the bank. Located at 706 Franklin Street, Tobias committed himself to helping other Jewish families who were struggling in Reading. According to his granddaughter, Eileen Knoblauch-Wagner, Tobias would give loans to patrons without charging interest or setting a due date for repayment. Instead, Tobias would ask the borrower to repay the loan as he or she was able to and kept a note of their loan under his desk.

Whenever Tobias saw a need in the community, he worked to find a way to fill it. For instance, many new Jewish immigrants had no ownership over anything but the clothes on their backs and a few personal items. Without any money to put a down payment on a house, these families had little chance of helping their families become more prosperous. Therefore, the Knoblauch bank funded a construction project in which many houses were built throughout the area. These houses were then rented out to Jewish families in need. The money the renters paid went toward finally owning the house so that, eventually, the renters would become homeowners.

Immigrants also frequently had to exchange their money in order to mail it to their family they had left behind in Europe. Thus, the Knoblauch bank also offered money exchange and a travel agency so that patrons could not only send their loved ones money but perhaps visit them as well.

The Knoblauch Bank also employed many of the Knoblauch family members, and Tobias eventually handed the bank to his son, Leo C. Knoblauch, who continued his father’s traditions. The bank eventually began to lose financial backing and was bought out by Royal Bank in 1995. Despite its closing, though, Knoblauch Bank’s travel agency still exists because it merged with AAA. Caring for the company came only second to
helping the community in the case of the Knoblauch bank.

**Sweet Street Desserts, Inc**

All the hard work put in by the employees of the companies above deserves a sweet treat at the end of the day and to fill that need, Sandy Solmon was there. Starting her company in 1979, Sandy used her degree in economics from Berkley to flesh out several ideas for a new company. The company that she felt the most passionate about, though, was her idea for a cookie company which opened in June on 13th Street, right near the Turkey Hill.

Her first year was not an easy one. Commodity prices for sugar and chocolate sky-rocketed, doubling in price. With only three employees, Sandy had to work very hard, learning that running a bakery took a lot more work than just making a product and having it distributed. Her first distributer, Aramark, which is now U.S. Food Service, and Woodhaven Food, helped her to distribute her goods throughout most of Pennsylvania and parts of New Jersey. Her second distributer, which is now Cisco, helped to expand that market to all of Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Michigan. Though most of her business is in wholesale, Sandy does have a bakery in which patrons are able to walk right in and buy her goodies directly.

Currently, Sweet Street Desserts, Inc. provides goods for all 50 states and 49 countries, including Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Mexico, and most of Europe. She has almost 1000 distributors today, making her business a leader in gourmet desserts in the entire country. Sandy hopes to begin branding her goods and breaking into the retail food market so that her company can become a household name, not just in Reading but all over the country and the world. Sandy’s employees, the “missionaries of the dessert experience,” also hope to continue to expand their international market as well.

For domestic expansion, Sandy has started an online business which can be found at www.sweetstreet.com. She is “very proud to be a part of Reading,” explaining that a great part of her success is the community in which her company began. For Sandy and her “sweet” business, things certainly seem to be on the rise!

**Partners Design, Inc.**

Partners Design, Inc. was started in 1971 by twin brothers, Jack and Jeff Gernsheimer. After growing up in Bernville and attending the same high school, Tulpehocken High School, they went their separate ways to pursue different college degrees. Graduating from Syracuse University in 1968, Jack went to work as a graphic designer at J. Walter Thompson in New York City. He also worked in Olso with internationally renowned designer, Bruno Oldani. Jeff, however, originally pursued a career as a veterinarian but changed his major once he experienced the work his brother was doing. After graduating from Moravian College in 1968, Jeff also moved to New York to work for the design group at BMA Associations.

Returning to Bernville, the two brothers decided to open Partners Design in 1971 which is located inside an old farmhouse at 187 Koenig Road. The land is on a farm once owned and operated by their father, Solly Gernsheimer. Partners Design has designed logos for many local businesses including Boscov’s, National
Penn Bank, Berks Packing Company, Blue Marsh Canteen, Canal Street Pub and Restaurant, C.H. Briggs Hardware, and the former Bernville Bank. Jack also designed logo for Bernville’s 150th Anniversary Celebration which took place in 2001. Jeff also worked as the Assistant Graphic Arts Manager at the Hershey Company.

The brothers have also done work for the Jewish community in Reading. They have designed five logos using the Star of David for organizations such as the Jewish Cultural Center, the Reform Congregation Oheb Sholom, Sinai Academy, and the Holocaust Library and Research Center at Albright College. They also made a logo in response to the Yom Kippur War of 1973. The Gernsheimer brothers have left a lasting impact on the Bernville and Berks communities.

Notes

2. Ibid.
5. Sandy Solmon, in an interview with the author. April 18, 2011.
7. Jack and Jeff Gernsheimer.

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The Jewish Community Center of Reading

by Aaron Griffith

In February 1923, Max J. Skaist wrote a proposal for a Jewish Community Center.¹ He stated, “It is unnecessary for me to dwell upon the urgency of having a Jewish Community Center, whereby all Jewish activities, educational and social, whether it is of local interest or national, to be sheltered under one roof with a scientific system of administration, and by that means achieve much better results than in the past, because of the fact that we have attained very poor results through efforts and loose methods.”² By March 5, 1923 a group of men were able to put their signatures to a check for $100,000.³ The donors were as follows: Luria Brothers $30,000, Hyman Liever $8,000, David Rabinowitz $5,200, Sher & Sons $5,000, Israel Liever $3,000, Joseph Liever $3,000, Julius Jaffee $2,500, Charles Shapiro $750, E.L. Brodstein $600, Abe Blumberg $2,500, M. Rosenthal $2,500, S.I. Kotzen $2,500, P. Knoblauch $2,500, M. Knoblauch $2,500, David Shein $2,000, Rev. Shubow $2,000, I.V. Glass $750, Jewish Voice $500, Sam Rosenberg $2,000, Lawyer Hoffman $1,600, M.J. Skaist $1,500, Maurice & George Weiner $1,250, J. Claster $1,100, S.K. Cohn $750, and Arthur Beilin $600.⁴

Also to help raise money for the JCC, in the spring months of 1923-26, the young women of the junior Hadassah and the Kyrath club (both Jewish organizations run through their community) performed in minstrel shows and musical comedies. The members above mentioned and others such as Bud Gossberg, Abe Yaffe, Sam Saul, Harold Blumberg, Earl Stein, Eb Lipman, Sam Leisawitz, Irvin Youngerman, Max Yaffe, Beatrice Shapiro Lipsitz, Pearl Stein, Sarah and Rose Yaffe, Blanche Featherman, Minnie Levin, Lena Hassel, Mae Saul, Celia and Sarah Shuman, Eleanor Simon, Lillian Gartman and Charlotte Youngerman, in addition to others who we are certain must have been active in production for which we have no playbills.⁵

After the funds had been acquired, a building at 134 North 5th St., Reading was bought by a provisional board of trustees consisting of Alex Kagen, Louis Fink and Murray Landy.⁶ A campaign for $125,000 was conducted, and on January 3, 1944, a charter was granted by the government.⁷ A “Certificate of Charter” was issued by the Court of Common Pleas, held at Reading and Berks County on February 7, 1944, that established the Articles of Incorporation for the Jewish Community Center of Reading. The charter was approved and recorded in the Office of the Recorder of Deed in Berks County. The law firm of Yaffe and Blumberg and Edward Youngerman presented the motion. Its statement of purpose as noted in the organization’s bylaws is “the JCC is dedicated to enriching Jewish life, perpetuating Jewish values, and instilling pride in, and understanding of, the Jewish heritage. While the JCC is designed primarily to fulfill the needs of the Jewish community and to preserve and enhance the heritage and values of Judaism, its culture, traditions, ethics, and philosophy, participation in activities of the JCC is open to all. By 1954, the JCC served over 1500 youths and adults.

The Center was completed and dedicated in October 18, 1945 with Leonard Sebrams as the first Director followed by Harry Sack in 1947.⁸ Although the Center was launched during WWII, the officers and members of the various committees succeeded in obtaining the necessary governmental propieties and
materials, converting the structure into a modern and well-equipped center with athletics, health, cultural, and meeting facilities. The following people served as leaders in the building fund campaigns or as members of the building and architectural committee during the planning and construction of the center: President Dr. Irvin G. Shaffer, Vice Presidents Emanuel Jacobs, Elias Greenfield, and Irvin Cohen, Treasurers Morris N. Blumberg and Irvin C. Swartz, Secretary Ellis Schein, and Executive Director Harry S. Sack.

Plans for a new location began to materialize in 1959 when the center purchased a 17-acre tract of land on Hampden Boulevard for a modern facility and day camp to better serve its members and the larger Berks county community. The groundbreaking ceremony of the new Jewish Community Center of Reading at 1700 City Line Street in Reading was held on September 1965. The building at 1700 City Line Street in Reading was home to the Jewish Community Center from 1969 to 2008. Although closely tied to Jewish culture and identity, the JCC was also a recreational and sporting facility for many non-Jews. It housed a large gymnasium, a racquetball court, exercise room, and large indoor swimming pool.

In 1973 on 113th N 5th, the JCC was bombed. Two bombs built into two small wooden boxes were left on the hoods of parked cars and exploded, killing one person and injuring two others. A third bomb—a pipe bomb—was found in a house project not far from where the other two had exploded. The JCC joined other organizations in the county in the national observance of Jewish books month, which was to be held between November 19 and December 19th. This location was bombed in 1973. By 1977 the fair was in full strength and was being sponsored jointly by the Jewish Community Center, the Jewish Federation of Reading, Kesher Zion Synagogue, Shomrei Habrith Synagogue, and Temple Oheb Sholom. In 2001 the book fair was dedicated and renamed, Hannah Goldsmith book fair, in memory of a beloved member of the Jewish community of Reading.

The Jewish Community Center of Reading was merged into the Jewish Federation of Reading on December 31, 1996.

September of 1998, brought even more exciting news for the JCC when the Jewish Community Center Building Endowment Fund Drive, for the expansion and renovation of the aging JCC, reported early success. This undertaking was being assumed by a new, young, committee of leaders in the Jewish community, all under the ages of 45. JCC President and Fund Drive Steering Committee Chair Joe Wolfson said, “These young men and women recognize that now is the time to come forward and demonstrate that another generation is ready to accept the responsibility of leadership along side those who have been long time leaders of the Reading Jewish community.” Joe also added that the leaders pledged almost $600,000. This was in addition to the substantial funds raised from major contributions.

Bernie and Barbara Fromm, co-chairs of the Jewish Community Center Building and Endowment Fund, named the team of twelve committed community leaders who spearheaded the Fund Drive for the expansion and renovation of the JCC, there names were, Don Abramson, Irv Cohen, Michael Fromm, Vic Hammel, John Incledon, Lee Meyers, Bob Pollack, Ken Sodomsky, Herb Wachs, Alma Lakin, Ed Lakin, and Maralyn Lakin. In addition to the fund raising team, four Committee Chairs were also appointed: Lois Cohen, Community Education; Susan Fromm, Public Relations; Ken Lakin, Building; and Tammy Mitgang,
By October of that same year the JCC Fund cabinet announced that the campaign had raised over 2.5 million of the 4 million dollars campaign with few solicitations. The renovation and expansion was to enlarge the auditorium, build a new Senior citizen center, an elevator, new preschool classrooms, and a Youth Center as well as refurbish the whole JCC and repair the Center’s infrastructure.

However, it was not until January 2000 that the JCC building contract was signed. The delay was in large part due to architectural plans that came up almost a million dollars more than was expected. There was then a six month period where time was spent trying to pare down cost without affecting the quality of the final plans. The Fund Committee also did not want to leave the JCC in debts, which would ultimately effect the JCC negatively for future generations. The final agreement cost was slightly higher than originally projected.

Today the JCC is located at 1100 Berkshire Blvd # 125, Wyomissing, PA after the sale of the old JCC building to the Reading School district. After nearly two years of studies, discussion and legal wrangling, the sale of the Jewish Community Center campus to the Reading School District is finally complete. “The sale of the building lifted a financial burden that was draining the Federation of the critical funds that can now be used to infuse our community with the resources to celebrate our history, embrace our culture and explore our spirituality,” said Tammy Mitgang, Executive Director of the Federation and JCC. “We have a unique opportunity to establish a new, sustainable home for the Jewish community while sharing our ‘peoplehood’ with the broader community.”

Federation Board President Yvonne Frey Oppenheimer said the completed sale was cause for celebration. “After over a year and more of disappointments and delays the Reading Jewish Community can move on and build its future,” she said. “This is indeed going to be a good New Year — L’Shana Tova.” The $7 million sale was completed Sept. 17 at Heartland Settlement Company in Wyomissing, ending the need to pursue what would have been a request for a sixth sale extension from the Reading School Board. Oppenheimer and board Secretary Kate Mohn signed the sale documents on behalf of the Federation, joined by its legal counsel, Mervin A. Heller, Jr., Esq., of Leisawitz Heller Law Firm. Others representing the Jewish community were Mitgang; Michael Fromm, Immediate Past Federation President; Jay Steinberg, previous Federation executive director; and Dr. Gordon and Carol Perlmutter, board members. The atmosphere in the conference room was euphoric as the documents were executed, debt satisfied and disbursements made, including payment of $121,000 in roof repairs and $15,000 to Daniel Sodomsky.

The payment to Sodomsky was done on advice of counsel in order to have him withdraw his appeal to Commonwealth Court. The continuation of the appeal could have prolonged the legal proceedings and delayed settlement for possibly up to a year. Sodomsky had been challenging a city zoning ruling that allowed a school on the JCC property. City Schools Superintendent Dr. Thomas R. Chapman Jr. has agreed to let the Federation remain in the building as a tenant for several months, granting it time to find a new temporary or more permanent location. Mitgang said the district has been a collaborative, positive partner with the Federation. She said she will work closely with the district and its director of construction, Barry
Suski, to allow for a smooth and timely transition. Suski and his assistant, Barbara Potts have maintained offices in the former preschool wing since late August. Meanwhile Federation leaders are working to consider data collected from the most recent community needs survey along with real estate opportunities and investment strategies, to decide on the first step on our community’s future path.

**JCC as Cultural Life**

The JCC has been a major part of the social life for Reading’s Jewish teens with clubs such as Quadcity and Intercity. Quadcity and Intercity were organizations that allowed Jewish teens from Harrisburg, York, Lancaster, Lebanon, Easton, Allentown, and Norristown. These organizations offered athletic events, banquets and dances. Bernie Gerber, a Jewish lawyer in Reading today and life time resident, commented on what the Jewish teen life was like in the 60’s-70’s and said, “The Jewish Community Center is where Jewish teens really learned their social graces.” He also mentioned a woman by the name of Bonnie Borell, activities director. Bernie said that Bonnie taught all the kids how to dance, and every teen at the center could tango, foxtrot, and rumba because of this wonderful lady. The JCC also organized adult events. One of the biggest adult programs was the bowling leagues, and by the 1960’s both men and women had their own leagues and bowled every Tuesday night. It would cost $10 per person, however, everyone would give $11 and at the end of the year the extra money would be used to fund a trip. The money saved to take a trip to the Borscht Belt or in parts of, and Counties in that were a popular vacation spot for from the 1920s through the 1960s. This was just one more event the JCC organized for its community.

The JCC also offered many other activities for Jewish youth, including basketball, bowling, and a summer camp. Many of the Jewish youth were not allowed to be involved in sports after school; they were to be dedicated to their studies orders of their parents. However, what the JCC had to offer was a perfect fit to stay on top of their studies while still being able to have some fun. “Pop” Polter, an athletic director, was a favorite among the youth and their parents.

Perhaps one of the most significant organizations to be added to the JCC was the Boy Scouts of America. Their Charter was recognized and presented with its official papers on October 31, 1962. This was a big step in becoming an organization that was accepted by other communities.

The Reading Jewish Community Center today is a place of community and activities as well as a gathering place. The Center provides many different activities such as Book Fairs, classes, lectures, holiday programs, bus trips, Bridge club, Mah Jongg, senior clubs and much more. The center is an extension of Jewish life beyond school, the workplace and houses of worship. It is the nucleus of the Reading Jewish community and its heart. The Center is a place where life is celebrated and where Jewish people can embraced their Jewish connections. It is also a hub for education and Jewish culture for people of all ages. Their goal is “to create an exciting, thriving and responsive JCC, where programs and services are offered on site or at key locations throughout our community. If we can’t do it well in one location, we will offer it to perfection in another. Are we virtual? At times, but more importantly, we are about YOU! Won’t you JOIN US?”

**Notes**
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
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Jewish Education

by Blaine Turner

For the Jewish Community in Reading and Berks County, the culture is preserved through education, especially in Hebrew Schools. Many Jews of Berks County and Reading are living in an aging demographic, so it is important to the Jewish Community that they pass on their knowledge to the next generation.

Hebrew Education

Many young Jews living in Reading and Berks County saw Hebrew education as a way to get together for social reasons while learning about their history and culture. In an interview, Alan Leisawitz explained how there are two goals to Jewish education, to educate as broadly as possible and to keep the traditions alive.\(^1\) Hebrew education usually takes place during the time of the Bar Mitzvah/Bat Mitzvah of either a young man or young woman. The older generation always attended Hebrew School as it was part of their week, “like a second school,” stated Leisawitz. “Living in Reading it would be somewhat difficult not to go, everyone else went. If you didn’t you would be the odd one out,” stated Seymour Bloom.\(^2\)

Most Hebrew schools had sessions three days a week. These sessions usually lasted from 4-6 p.m. and were primarily after school programs. Occasionally Sunday morning was used as a time to meet as well. According to Leisawitz and others the joke that many young Jews had was “I hate Hebrew school.” But Leisawitz and others recall having good times and learning a lot during their time in Hebrew School. After that it is optional for young Jewish students to attend a “Hebrew High School.” “It’s just something you did, you didn’t have to but it was a good continuation of what you learned before. It also was a good social time for young people,” said Leisawitz.\(^3\) However, according to Jill Skaist, “Most of my friends went to Hebrew School but didn’t return to Hebrew school after the Bat and Bar Mitzvah”; “most of us didn’t appreciate it as much as we should have.”\(^4\)

In recent years the number of Jews attending Hebrew School has steadily declined. Some classes at Kesher Zion over 30 years ago included 35 or more students. Now they include between 10 and 15 students. The current generation does attend synagogue and take part in the Bar and Bat Mitzvah.\(^5\)

One of the most commonly attended Hebrew Schools is found at the synagogue Oheb Sholom. The year 1932 marked the beginning of a High School department. In May of 1935 the first class was graduated from the Hebrew School at Oheb Sholom. That same year Hebrew School was included in the curriculum of the Religious School and a school newspaper was begun in 1940.\(^6\)

In 1940 The Men’s Club at Oheb Sholom originally sponsored lectures such as Fulton Oursler and the Rt. Hon. Lord Morley, an Under-Secretary of War in the British Cabinet. The Men’s Club was reactivated in 1956 and continues being one of the driving forces of congregational activity. The club’s goal was to have fostered a feeling of camaraderie and brotherhood. This has extended into its educational and social
functions.\footnote{7}

In 1950 Oheb Sholom had grown to 179 families in Berks County and Reading. 52 pupils attended Sunday School at this time as well. In 1958, the property adjoining the Temple on Perkiomen Avenue was purchased for the sum of $20,000 to provide a Religious School Annex.\footnote{8} On Saturday, May 2, 1964, the gala Centennial Dinner was held with an address given by Dr. Jacob R. Marcus, the Adolph S. Ochs Professor of Jewish History, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Morris Friedman had served many years as the principal of the Religious School.

Many Jews attended the Hebrew School at Kesher Zion Synagogue, called the Morris Hassel Religious School.\footnote{9} Kesher Zion was built in late 40s, and an old mansion was used as a Hebrew School for many years. That building was demolished, and the present building houses Jewish education. The Morris Hassel Religious School is named after the brother of Max Hassel. Max Hassel, known as both a racketeer and philanthropist (see chapter in this book), donated the school to Kesher Zion.

In 1939, Mr. and Mrs. Morris N. Blumberg from Wyomissing invited the graduates of the Hebrew School to their home. Gifts were presented to the Blumberg family as well as Rabbi Max J. Routtenberg, principal of the school and Mr. and Mrs. Hillel Henkin of the Kesher Zion faculty. Outstanding students were rewarded by Mr. Blumberg.\footnote{10}

Many members of the Jewish Community recalled Reverend William Litchtbroun as being a positive member of Kesher Zion. Litchtbroun, a Holocaust survivor, lost his family in the Holocaust. Litchtbroun became second cantor at Kesher Zion.

Benjamin H. Klonsky served as cantor at Kesher Zion from September 1949 until his cantor emeritus in 1986. Klonsky was also in charge of the Hebrew School at the Kesher Zion Synagogue while being supported by five rabbis.\footnote{11}

According to a Reading Eagle article from 1962, another notable person at Kesher Zion was Morris N. Blumberg. Blumberg served as chairman for the several United States Jewish Campaigns in Reading and was President of the Kesher Zion Synagogue Hebrew School.\footnote{12}

Rochelle Kauffman, currently an attorney and the daughter of Bob Kauffman was the first Jewish girl to read the Bar Mitzvah service at Kesher Zion during the 1960s. In an interview at the Highlands retirement center, women who are part of the Jewish Community explained how they did not attend Hebrew School as children. However they urged their own children to attend Hebrew School seeing that they could benefit from a proper Jewish Education. Many of their own children attended the Kesher Zion Hebrew School.\footnote{13}

Notes

5. Alan Leisawitz interview in discussion with the author, November 2010.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.

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The Jewish Federation of Reading

Ryan Edwards and Erin Koller

The Jewish Federation of Reading (JFR) is a part of the greater Jewish Federations of North America. This umbrella organization encompasses 157 Jewish federations and over 400 independent communities. The idea behind the Jewish Federation is to further the welfare of the population and advance the community socially, culturally, and educationally. The Jewish Federations of North America was formed from the 1999 merger of the United Jewish Appeal, the Council of Jewish Federations, and United Israel Appeal, Inc. Until 2009, it was known as the United Jewish Communities (UJC) when it changed its name and logo to create a more global brand for the image of the international nonprofit system.

The local Jewish Federation of Reading’s mission statement as of October 21, 2010, is “to cultivate a vibrant, healthy Jewish community, inspire greater Jewish identity, and promote deeper understanding and stronger connections between Jews and non-Jews in Reading/Berks County.” Today’s funds raised by the Reading Federation are donated to many programs – locally, nationally and internationally: Israel, immigration, children, the elderly, education, and more.

In the early 1920s, the Jewish community, both in Berks County and nationally, realized it needed to centralize its fundraising efforts into one organization. In doing so, groups and committees were established to petition for funds, as well as to decide where these funds were allocated to. These organizations went by many names, but Reading’s branch was called the Jewish Community Council. The largest of these organizations began to meet to focus their efforts on common problems of the Jewish people.

The tenacity and skill by which these early organizations brought together the required aid for Jewish communities was marked by a visit from Nathan. P. Cohen, a regional director of the Palestine Foundation in October of 1926. In an interview with the Reading Eagle, Mr. Cohen said, “The manner in which the Jews of Reading have rallied to the campaign which is to be launched in this city next Monday morning on behalf of the millions of Jews now suffering annihilation in Russia and Poland, and on behalf of the rehabilitation of Palestine, is marvelous.”

With the onset of WWII, the Jewish community around the world realized they needed to assist the Jewish people of Europe who were targeted for annihilation by the Nazi regime. This need for direct, focused aid resulted in the further expansion of the Jewish Community Council. In 1935, The Jewish Community Council was formally organized with Ellis Brodstein as its president.

Following WWII, many flyers were circulated announcing slogans like “We are happy to announce that European Jews are in need of your assistance”. Many of these flyers were requesting money from American Jews in order to help the European Jews fund their immigration to America or restart their lives after losing everything they had in the Nazi Holocaust. The Federation was instrumental in sending financial aid to Europe from America.
In fact, the year 1948 was deemed the “Year of Destiny” by the United Jewish Appeal, which at the time was the national umbrella organization that works through local organizations such as the Jewish Federation in Reading. In 1948, UJA planned to raise $250,000,000 in order to provide “supplementary food and other forms of assistance to 250,000 Jewish in Germany, Austria, Italy and Cyprus; provide relief and rehabilitation assistance for more than half of the 830,000 Jewish in Eastern Europe…aid in the reconstruction of Jewish communities in Western Europe and in the emigration of the large numbers of Jews who are to be admitted into Palestine.” The need for money and other supplies was ongoing after WWII with the continual need to move people away from anti-Semitic sentiment and into safer areas such as Palestine, which would soon become what is today Israel, and the United States. Yet, the Jewish community alone could not provide such large sums of money at this time so in 1949, the Christian Committee in Berks County hoped to help the Jewish community in Reading reach their goal. That year, the UJA was planning to raise $350,000 and the Christian Community planned to raise about 7% of that goal.

During the 1950s, the UJA sent out many different promotional materials, hoping to raise as much money as possible. In 1956, the UJA ran 4 different campaigns. The first was titled “You Backed Them Up in ’48” which was intended for general distribution and was meant to be informative of the UJA’s overall program for that year. The second, titled, “Edward R. Murrow Broadcasts from Israel,” was an excerpted collection of Mr. Murrow’s five radio broadcasts from Israel to the United States in February 1956. “Target for Tomorrow?” was another UJA ad circulated during this time and highlighted the border issues and threat from neighboring countries that Israel faced. There was also a film that the UJA had produced that year called “Nobody Runs Away” which depicted issues that Israel had in allowing massive immigration while trying to build a democratic economy.

1971 saw Mr. Leo Camp as president of the organization. Under his leadership, the Jewish Community Council was transformed into the Federation. In response to his actions in constructing the current incarnation of the Jewish Federation, a yearly Leo Camp Memorial Lecture occurs, highlighting various causes and bringing in guest speakers from around the world. In 1972, the name was officially changed to the Jewish Welfare Federation. This was in response to the Jewish Community Council’s expanding role as an influential and important part of Jewish communities around the world. In 1970, a new constitution had been written, outlining the new and broader responsibilities of the organization. The name was finally changed to the Jewish Federation in 1977.

In 1978, the Federation organized the Jewish Awareness Committee for Schools. Headed by Sue Kantor and Marion Morris, the goal of this committee was to keep lines of communication between the school district superintendents to avoid any problems that may occur in schools where minority individuals are concerned.

In the 1970s, Soviet Jews struggling to flee persecution and emboldened by the rise of stature of the state of Israel began looking for aid. In response, the Jewish Federation of Reading began its Adopt-A-Family Program. The program connected local community members with Soviet Jews unable to leave their country because of lack of credentials or inability to pay the emigration tax. The letter writing program served to reaffirm moral support from western Jews. This was in an effort to one day unite the two families. Phone calls from those fluent in Russian and living in the Reading area to those trapped in Russia also served to
The Jewish Federation of Reading took responsibility to help these families create a new life. Apartments were chosen and furnished with basic supplies of clothing, furniture, and other necessities to make the transition as smooth as possible; most of these families left the Soviet Union with practically nothing, needing to sell most of what they had to pay emigration fees. Ads were placed in local newspapers asking the community for donations of the needed items. Two phone numbers were given to each arrival; one for an English-speaking supporter, and one for a community member fluent in Russian. The professional community also gave offers of medical and dental services to the new families. The Adopt-A-Family program was also in response to the needs of the local communities. If the community was in need of a doctor, a Soviet family would be sponsored that fulfilled that certain need of a medical caretaker for the Reading community. In fact, for a time, Reading resettled more Jewish people in proportion to its population than any other city in the United States.

Under the presidency of Dr. Gerald A. Goodman, the Jewish Federation renewed its Israel Work-Study-Travel Experience program in 1981. This program would partially fund a college student’s trip to Israel for those without the monetary ability to travel. Financial assistance in the form of loans and grants would be made available for those students who had “demonstrated interest as well as merit and need.” Receivers of this aid were allowed to travel to Israel either with a Jewish affiliated organization or to pursue continued studies as an institution of Jewish learning.

In 1993, the Holocaust Library and Resource Center was established at Albright College through efforts and funds raised by the Jewish Federation of Reading and Albright College. The mission of the center is to “provide community awareness, information, audio-visual support and education about the Nazi Holocaust to prevent this tragic event from happening again.” The center provides speakers for schools and community groups in Berks County, and works with the Berks County Intermediate Unit to sponsor workshops and seminars for teachers. The center currently houses over 2,323 different titles of Holocaust related material and more than 290 video, sound, and computer titles. Included are over three dozen taped interviews with Holocaust survivors and liberators.

Since its inception, the Jewish Federation has been strongly proactive and vocal in support of Israel. Through the efforts of the Federation of Reading, petitions and letters have been organized and sent to government officials, rallies have been staged, Israeli speakers have been dispatched through the continental area, and missions have been sent to Israel to aid the country. According to the Jewish Federation of Reading’s website, “A strong, secure Israel is the bedrock of the global Jewish community. Through our overseas
partners,…North America’s federations have played- and continue to play- a pivotal role in Israel’s remarkable story of immigration, renewal and growth.”

Funds raised by the Jewish Federation of Reading were directly made available to various projects in Israel, including the construction of immigration absorption centers, medical facilities, and new communities.

Presently, the Jewish Federation of Reading continues to provide support to the community of both local and international Jews. Locally, taxi programs, food assistance and social groups such as Friendship Circle and a bereavement group benefit the elderly. There are counseling services available for both individuals and families. Summer camp awards are provided to families to assist in sending children to Jewish day school and overnight camps and assistance provided for college students to study in Israel. JFR collaborates with local synagogues to provide secular and religious programs and publishes Shalom, a monthly newspaper on Jewish affairs. Federation committees represent Jewish interests to the government, schools, and general public.

The Jewish Federation was and continues to be a strong advocate for Jewish interests and principles both locally and across the globe.

Notes

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5. Daniel Tannenbaum.
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Jews in the Legal Profession

by Rattanpreet S. Kohli

“Lawyers serve the public, always in the forefront in any situation, quite because of their assertive traits. Attach goodwill and fight adversity.”

Recently retired attorney, Alan Leisawitz

Jewish Attorneys During the Great Depression Era

Prominent attorneys such as Samuel H. Rothermel and Max Fisher paved the way for later generations. Rothermel was the County Controller for Berks County from 1928 to 1935. At a time when there was substantial support for the Nazis in the United States, Rothermel pursued his career in spite of the anti-Semitism.

Max Fisher, having served in both World Wars, devoted his entire life to public service. Fisher was a member of the Berks County Bar Association and resided in Pennside. A well-known professional, Fisher touched many lives, Jews and non-Jews alike, through affiliations with many organizations, such as the United Way, the Jewish Council of Berks County, the National Committee of United Palestine Appeal, Reading United Jewish Appeal, the Jewish Community Center, the Kesher Zion Synagogue, and the Reading Jewish Community Center. Fisher’s wife, Rose, was a member of Reading’s Chapter of Hadassah and the Reading Women’s Club. During World War II, Rose Fisher served on the Citizens Committee and worked for the American Red Cross.

Post-World War II: The Era of Opportunity

Harold Blumberg was a former assistant to the district attorney in Reading. He passed at the age of 90 and had a prosperous career. Blumberg worked for former District Attorney James F. Marx, and was later named first assistant district attorney in November 1955. Blumberg had also worked in the older law firm of Yaffe & Blumberg, Reading. He was admitted to the Berks County Bar Association, though the time period when he was part of it is not clear. Harold Blumberg was also a member of Kesher Zion Synagogue, which is located in Reading, and used to be a solicitor for the Reading Parking Authority. Harold Blumberg had graduated from Albright College in 1931 and from the University of Pennsylvania Law School four years after that, in 1935 in Philadelphia. Blumberg was a board member, and secretary, and legal counsel for the Berkleigh Country Club for about ten years. Blumberg was a very active individual, hence very successful. His wife, Evelyn Blumberg, is a key player in the sustained development of the Jewish community in Reading. She has been in publications of the Jewish Federation of Reading as an influential personality,
much like her husband Harold.

Harold Blumberg was also a part of the law firm, Yaffe Blumberg Reuben & Youngerman, where he was partners with Max Yaffe, Sidney Reuben, and Edward Youngerman. This law firm, which was formed in 1952-1953, became the leading law firm in the Reading area. Max, Harold’s cousin, was a leading commercial lawyer in Berks county, according to retired attorney, Bernie Gerber. Sidney Reuben served as Deputy Attorney General for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for about 20 years and was the leading authority on unemployment compensation law. Edward Youngerman was “the lawyer’s lawyer” in that many attorneys came to Edward when they needed advice on tough cases. He served as the second Assistant District Attorney to Henry Koch. The first Assistant District Attorney was Emmanuel “Manny” Wise who mentored Edward. Edward is also credited with obtaining the 18 acre site that the Jewish Community Center was built on, located on Hampton Boulevard. He had been responsible for obtaining the site and negotiating a fair price.

The name of Leon Ehrlich came to mind for many when asked about earlier Jewish attorneys in Reading. Leon is retired and is now 90 years old. He had served as a secretary-treasurer of the Reading Steam Heat & Power Co. in the late 1960s. Ehrlich came into the public limelight when he had asked on the radio, “how did a lawyer become ‘the man in trouble?’” This notion is very notorious with public figures, especially attorneys. The office staff of Ehrlich was instrumental in the guidance and support for the Pennsylvania Association of Legal Secretaries, as well as the National Association of Legal Secretaries in Berks and Montgomery Counties, PA. This is important as Leon Ehrlich had supported the training and the placement of women in the legal industry.

Samuel Liever, a prominent criminal defense lawyer between 1959 to the early 1960s, was a lawyer for Abe Minker, a Reading racketeer. He originally began his career in 1935. A “larger than life” type of attorney, Liever practiced criminal law and represented high-profile criminals such as Abe Minker, who was a reputed racketeer. Samuel Liever was Minker’s lawyer for this case and worked extremely hard to deliver justice. Miker faced many accusations such as claims that he made white money black though illegal activities. However, there were some people that had regarded the prejudicial views against Minker being perpetuated against him. Liever tried many cases during his career, making him a versatile attorney, but he was also a “behind the scenes politician.” According to Bernie Gerber, Sam participated in a campaign to oust a sitting judge and assisted William K. Hess in his primary Democratic election in 1945. After winning the primary, Hess went on to win the general election ousting Paul N. Schaffer, the sitting judge. A law firm with his former colleagues still exists in Reading: Liever Hyman & Potter. Liever Hyman & Potter was also the first law firm to be in a boutique style and specialized in personal injury and workers’ compensation.

**Attorneys**

Robert H. Kauffman was born in Reading on August 8, 1928. He was admitted to the Berks County Bar in 1954. He had studied at the University of Pittsburgh around 1950, and then Harvard Law School around 1953. He practiced law in many areas, such as Commercial Law, Corporate Law, Banking Law, Bankruptcy Law, and Municipal Law. Kauffman recalled times of hardship, due to anti-Semitism prior to
World War II as well. He is now a retired attorney and still living in Reading. Still active, Robert Kauffman is a partner in conjunction with the Jewish Community Center for the research. He is a member of the Kozloff Stoudt firm in Wyomissing. At this point, many Jews in the area were able to see the wall come down. Due to earlier lack of opportunities, many lawyers were solo practitioners as opposed to joining huge firms in major cities.

Retired attorney Bernard “Bernie” R. Gerber worked with the District Attorney in Reading in 1968 and 1969. A Reading native, Bernie had a soft spot for his home community. He graduated from Pennsylvania State University with a degree in accounting in 1956 before joining the Army for two years. He was then discharged from the military and began to study law at the University of Pennsylvania. He graduated in 1962 and then returned to Reading and joined Yaffe Blumberg Reuben & Youngerman where he was mentored by Edward Youngerman. After Edward’s death in 1966, Bernie also left the firm to start his sole practitioner practice. In 1971, he partnered with Jack Linton who was the city solicitor under Karen Miller. Together, Bernie and Jack ran Gerber & Linton until 1988 when Linton started his own practice and Bernie partnered with Jill Koestel and Lisa Ciotti. Bernie worked with Jill and Lisa until he retired in 1997. Being involved in the Reading community was always something Bernie felt passionate about. After his retirement, Bernie hosted an interactive talk radio show on WEEU from August 1997 until August 1998 called “You’re Talking Law With Attorney Bernie Gerber.” He was also the president of the Reading Reciprocity Club in the 60s and worked for the organization of ‘Housing Endeavors of Low-income People (HELP).’ He is also a Reading High School alumnus from 1952. Bernie was the founder of the Reading Mounted Patrol. Then, he later became the co-chairman of the Citizens Committee for the Reading Mounted Patrol.

Alan Leisawitz was born in 1942 and graduated from Bucknell University. He received his law degree from the University of Pittsburgh. Though Alan Leisawitz is retired, a law firm in Wyomissing that continues the work and his name: Leisawitz, Heller, Abramowitch, and Phillips, P.C.

Judges

Elizabeth Ehrlich and Calvin Lieberman were apparently the first Jewish judges in Berks County, elected to the Court of Common Pleas in 1984. Ehrlich and Lieberman won the election in a 10-candidate race. Ehrlich received the most votes.

Ehrlich is a senior judge in the Berks County Court of Common Pleas. She was the first female judge in Berks County. Ehrlich has been a firm advocate for causes like awareness of the effects of alcoholism. Ehrlich and her husband have children who are lawyers, practicing in other parts of the country.

Calvin Lieberman was elected to Court of Common Pleas of Berks County. Lieberman founded the firm Lieberman, Rothstein, and Myers in Reading. He resigned his judgeship after being charged with retail theft and conspiracy but always claimed his innocence. Lieberman served in World War II and received both a bronze star and purple heart.

Judge Stephen Lieberman served on Court of Common Pleas of Berks County from 1996 until 2000 when
he was nominated by President Clinton to the federal bench in 2000. He served as an assistant county solicitor as well as a member on the assistant legal counsel for the state auditor general.

Notes

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
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15. Ibid
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22. Gerber.
23. Robert Kauffman.
25. Ibid.
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32. Alan Leisawitz
36. Ibid.
37. “President Clinton Nominates Stephen B. Lieberman to the Federal Bench,” US Newswire (Sept. 14,


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Shalom, June 2007.
Local Politics and Government

by Mary Ann Watts

Emanuel Furth

Emanuel Furth was born in Reading and graduated from University of Pennsylvania Law School. He practiced law and was also active in politics. He was elected to the Pennsylvania Legislature in 1881 and re-elected in 1883. Furth was a member of various committees and a delegate to various conventions of the Democratic party. He assisted in the framing of a bill under which the city of Philadelphia is still administered.¹

Henry Loeb

Henry Loeb was twice in the Common Council and once in the Select Council in the 1880s.²

Edward Youngerman

Edward Youngerman was appointed Assistant District Attorney in 1952. He was a graduate of Reading High School in 1931. Youngerman graduated from Temple University in 1931 and Temple University Law School in 1938. He was president of the Jewish Community Center.³

Marcia Goodman-Hinnershitz

Marcia Goodman-Hinnershitz was elected to Reading City Council in 2004 to represent Reading’s District 2. She was re-elected in 2008 and she currently chairs the Public Works Committee. In 1975 she received a BA degree from Penn State University. Temple University awarded her a Master’s in Social Work in 1993. From 1993-1997 she was a member of the Reading School Board where she served two years as vice president. She has been active in leadership roles in city and state organizations, such as the Advisory Board of Berks County Children and Youth and Board of Directors for the Coalition for a Tobacco Free Pennsylvania. She was helpful in assisting the Community Development Department at neighborhood meetings when the Comprehensive Plan was being developed. Her goal is to improve the quality of life for residents of Reading.⁴

Judith Kraines

Judith Kraines is a prominent figure in the political landscape of Berks County. She has served on many boards and been instrumental in the progress and success of many community organizations. She ran un成功fully for a seat in the House of Representatives in 1992. Kraines was elected Controller of Berks County in 1996 and re-elected in 2000. Her re-election campaign literature listed her accomplishments as bringing order to the office by hiring additional accountants including a CPA and a certified government
financial manager, classifying the bank accounts into restricted, non-restricted and fiduciary accounts, modernizing and the streamlining the accounts payable process and producing annual reports in an easy to read format. She is the first female to be elected to the position of Berks County’s County Controller.

Kraines is a graduate of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL. She has worked as a public information specialist for the Department of Human Rights in Tulsa, OK, as a reporter for NBC news in Chicago, IL and WLWC-TV in Columbus, OH. In 1994 she was appointed public information/media relations assistant at Penn State Berks in the Office of University Relations. In this position she was editor of the Monthly Lion, a magazine for faculty, staff, and students and Advantage, a magazine for Berks County Alumni.

As Controller she was a member of the Prison Board and County Retirement Fund Board. She has been president of the Berks County League of Women Voters and served as its treasurer. Kraines was vice chairman of the Berks County Government Study and holds memberships in the Berks County Chamber of Commerce, American Association of University Women, Berks County Medical Society Alliance, Berks Women’s Network, Marion Grange, Berks County Farm Bureau, Reading Rotary Club, and served as vice president of the Heidelberg Heritage Society. She was founder of the Berks County Commission for Women. Kraines is most proud of her work with libraries and municipalities to found the Berks County Public Library System.

Stephen A. Glassman

Stephen A. Glassman graduated from Brown and Yale Universities with highest honors in degrees in architecture and art history. As principal of his own firm, Glassman practiced architecture for 25 years. His design work has appeared in numerous national publications and he has been the recipient of many professional awards and citations. He also lectures in museums and universities. Glassman has appeared on TV, been featured on radio and in the press. On these media appearances Glassman is the spokesperson on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) as well as other civil rights issues. Glassman was the first openly gay political appointee in Baltimore, MD; he was the Civic Design Commissioner under Mayor Kurt Schmoke. Glassman chairs the Rebuilding Reading Commission, which was established in October 2009 to address poverty in Reading.

When Glassman came to Pennsylvania he served as president of Common Roads, a LGBT support for youth in the Harrisburg area. He served as co-chair and founder of the Statewide Pennsylvania Rights Coalition, whose purpose was to achieve equal rights, through legislation addressing sexual orientation and gender identity. Glassman was appointed by Governor Mark Schweiker to the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission in May 2002. In June 2003 Governor Edward Rendell appointed Glassman Chairman of the Pennsylvania Relations Commission. He is the highest openly gay appointed official in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In 2005 Glassman graduated from Harvard University’s JFK School of Government program for Senior Executives in State and Local Government.

Glassman grew up in Baltimore, MD and at an early age he and his sisters were attending civil rights
demonstrations with his parents. His parents participated in protests against segregation in restaurants and amusement parks. He credits his parents with his deep concern for those who are disenfranchised. He was always taught to respect each person regardless of color, culture or station in life. His main concerns are social justice and in the arena of human relations he focuses on issues of aging, gender, sexual harassment, bias, housing rentals, racial justice, bullying, immigration rights and equal opportunity for all.

David S. Bender

Dr. David S. Bender is the Registrar of Penn State Berks Campus and an Associate Professor of Education. He earned a BA degree in Psychology from Bucknell University and an MA degree in Educational Psychology from Cornell University. He received his PhD in Educational Psychology from Cornell University. Dr. Bender is a native of Connecticut and came to Berks County to teach at Penn State University.

Bender has been School Director in Exeter Township for 28 years. He is the longest serving board member and currently chairs the personnel committee. Bender originally ran and continues to run for School Director to make sure that people who are pro-education will be elected. He says that probably the most pressing problem for school boards now is budgeting. The board must produce a balanced budget. Bender said the board also deals with issues of curriculum and personnel. He said he spends about four hours weekly on his non paying job as school director. But, he also said, “It’s my hobby, I enjoy it.”

Judith L. Schwank

Judy Schwank has done it all. She has been an educator and politician. She served two terms as Berks County Commissioner, the first woman to ever hold that post. She did not seek re-election, choosing instead to become president of 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg, working very closely with state legislators to support causes of the statewide organization. Schwank was named chair of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Planning Board by then-Governor Edward G. Rendell.

Schwank has BS and MS degrees in Agriculture Education from Penn State University. She served as a Berks County Commissioner (2000 to 2007) and was commission chair (2004 to 2007). She has served as Berks County director of Penn State Cooperative Extension and as a horticulture agent. In 2010 she was named Dean of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences at Delaware Valley College.

In January 2011, the Berks County Democratic Committee named Schwank as the candidate to represent the party in the special March 15th election to replace the late Senator Michael O’Pake. Schwank said her first priority will be the state budget. She states, “I felt the pull to come back to public service.” On March 16, 2011 Schwank won the state’s 11th Senatorial District by an unofficial vote of 20,124 to 14,794 votes received by her opponent, Larry Medaglia. In an email statement to the author on March 21, 2011, Shwank stated, I was very honored to be selected by the Berks County Democratic Committee as a candidate to fill the remainder of Senator O’Pake’s term in the PA State Senate. Knowing the Senator’s record of service to the community and his history of bringing people together to resolve the issues we face, I felt it was very
important to conduct my campaign in a positive manner. I wanted to assure voters that, while I would never
duplicate Senator O’Pake’s stellar record of service, that I would bring the same positive attitude and
dedication to serving the public. My priorities as state senator include improving the economy and quality of
life in Berks County through job creation and retention, eliminating school property taxes, working to
improve public education and providing better stewardship of our environmental resources in Pennsylvania.”

Notes

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
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12. Stephen A. Glassman, PHRC Chairperson. accessed February 27, 2011
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15. James A. Gilmartin, retired school superintendent, Berks County. Accolades expressed in an excerpt

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Max Hassel, Prohibitionist and Philanthropist

by Sara Williams

Passed in 1919, the 18th Amendment, Prohibition of Intoxicating Liquors, began the Prohibition Era. This amendment gave the United States one year to halt its manufacturing, sales, and transportation of alcohol as a beverage. It was repealed in 1933 by the 21st Amendment.

The Reading Eagle ran a story from New York on March 28, 1930 about a nationwide poll taken by Literary Digest on whether or not the 18th Amendment should be repealed. Out of 1,244,483 ballots taken from twenty states and Washington DC, about forty-two percent favored the repeal of the amendment. The report shows that the poll percentage had gone up about two percent from the week before. In New York City the figures provided “gave a majority of nearly 16 to 1 against enforcement (of the 18th Amendment) in Manhattan and the Bronx, and of more than 12 to 1 against enforcement in Brooklyn.”¹ New York City’s polls suffered from technicalities, but Reading’s numbers were clear: “Gloversville N.Y. and Mount Clemens, Mich., had pluralities for repeal, while Reading, PA, and Scranton, PA, gave absolute majorities for repeal. Reading was the wettest of the group.”² There is no question that in Reading, Pa, this experiment was a flop. The most well-known prohibitionist from Berks County is Max Hassel.

Before becoming a famed “beer baron millionaire newsboy,” Max Hassel became an entrepreneur at a young age selling his own handmade cigars.³ Israel Liever is described as Max Hassel’s best friend from his teenage years onward. Liever’s father, Hyman Liever is credited with being the possible source and model for Max Hassel’s business expertise and possibly directed the two friends towards the cigar business.⁴ Together, Max and Izzy formed their own enterprise, Berks Cigar Company. Hassel brought up their enterprises to an Immigration and Naturalization examiner, informing him, “At the age of 16, I was in the wholesale tobacco business for three or four years: the Berks Cigar Company, and the Universal Cigar Stores,” and when asked what credit he had established in the bank during that time, Hassel answered, “to the amount of approximately $30,000.”⁵ Obviously, Max Hassel had no problem finding profits or friends as the result of hard work and an admirable nature that is referred to again and again. Hassel’s cunning allowed him to view the shift of personal freedom during Prohibition as a businessman, and “as he assessed the public’s early reaction to Prohibition, he knew beer and hard liquor would never go out of style. It there’s a market, a good salesman will find it.”⁶

Max Hassel’s foray into the bootlegging industry began with a business he opened in 1919 with Benjamin Sher, an elderly man who was a 50 percent owner of one of Hassel’s cigar stores, the Schuylkill Extract Company. Max filed an appointment to withdraw federal alcohol from a local warehouse for food extracts.⁷ He was granted the permit May 7, 1920 after posting a $20,000 bond to ensure the alcohol would only be used for the extracts.⁸ That business was supposedly lax in record keeping which allowed for an unaccounted amount of alcohol received by Hassel, recorded by authorities, and purchased by customers.⁹ This company was only the first of Max Hassel’s companies to be visited by investigators from the Philadelphia Prohibition office. Hassel was advised to surrender his permit and claim ignorance to the law forbidding aliens from
acquiring a permit. His $20,000 bond was returned to him. Shortly after, Hassel began another business, Berks Products Company, with a mysterious Stanley Miller receiving the permit for alcohol and “to buy and sell whisky permits to druggists,” who is suspected to be nothing more than a false name used by Max Hassel.

When asked about Max Hassel’s business, some of the people interviewed for this chapter recalled that he was a bootlegger, a famous beer baron, but that he did not do business in Reading. This is not necessarily correct because sources show that Hassel’s business began in Reading. The first brewery purchased by Max Hassel was the Fisher Brewery at 1600 N 1100 street in November 1921. This brewery was reportedly raided eight times during the course of Prohibition. William Peter Frederick Moeller and his sons William Peter Moeller, Carl Frederick Moeller, and A. Robert Moeller were hired as brewmasters by Hassel. William P.F. Moeller was known to be devoted to “improving the quality of his beer.” The other two breweries that Hassel ran in Reading were the Laurel Brewing Company and the Reading Brewing Company. Eventually Hassel was forced out of Reading by Prohibition office investigators, but by then he already had his barony set up throughout the area, including in Lancaster, and moved on to New Jersey. Hassel rented a suite in the Carteret Hotel in Elizabeth, NJ.

News on Max Hassel was a big deal in Reading, and he often made the Reading Eagle. One headline read, “1,240,000 Tax Lien Filed Against Hassel by Government” “The United States Government today started action to collect $1,241,926 from Max Hassel, of Reading…this amount is alleged to be due the government in taxes covering a period from 1920 to 1925.” The Reading Eagle goes on to claim, “It is the largest tax lien ever filed in the United States court here.” This event was also reported upon in the Pittsburgh Gazette which also credits him as “millionaire newsboy beer baron.” The story confirms that “the lien was the largest ever filed against an individual in this district.” “In December, 1924, Hassel was involved with eight others in the August Manufacturing Company case which was tried in the district court here. They were accused, with the company, of manufacturing high-powered beverages. The brewing company was indicted with them and, when the case was tried, the concern pleaded guilty.” There was a $1,000 fine and the indictments against Hassel and the other eight were dropped.

Notes

1. “Repeal Votes Gain in Dry Poll; Reading Shows Wet Majority.” Reading Eagle April 14, 1933.
2. Ibid.
4. Ibid, 15.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid, 16.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. “1,240,000 Tax Lien Filed Against Hassel by Government” Reading Eagle. (Reading, Pa).
16. Ibid.
Medical Profession

by Mary Ann Watts

In a 1941 Report, “The Jewish Population of Reading,” Paul Ackert wrote, “Jewish occupations are diversified, but most Jews are engaged in some commercial enterprise, clothing stores lead, with furniture, jewelry and grocery stores following in that order. Attorneys and physicians number about 15 each, and there are a few optometrists and other professional people.” Most Jewish doctors were initially employed at Community General Hospital and St. Joseph Hospital and later joined the staff at Reading Hospital. This article describes only a small number of the medical professionals the Reading and Berks region.

Dr. C. Harold Cohn

Dr. C. Harold Cohn is a native of Reading who graduated from Reading High School in 1941 and from Bucknell University. He was the third Jewish physician to do a residency at Jefferson Medical College (1948). He also interned at St. Joseph Hospital in Reading. In the early 1960’s Dr. Cohn was given staff privileges at Reading Hospital. He became their first Jewish surgeon and first Jewish President of the Reading Hospital staff. He later became Chief of Thoracic Surgery. Dr. Cohn was on the staff of all three local hospitals. Dr. Cohn was first the President and later the medical director for Berkshire Health Plan. He has served on numerous boards of the hospital. In 2011 he was honored by Reading High School as an outstanding alumnus.

Dr. David N. Farber

Dr. David N. Farber was an ophthalmologist in Reading for 45 years. He graduated from Ohio State University and its medical school and completed his residency in New York and Philadelphia. He began his practice in 1947. Dr. Farber closed the practice in 1973 to join Eye Physician Associates with his son, Dr. David Farber. David Farber was a president of the Berks County Medical Society and was on staff at St. Joseph Medical Center and chief of ophthalmology. He spearheaded mass immunization of Berks County children against German measles in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Dr. Farber was a former president of Jewish Federation of Reading as well as the Berkleigh Country Club, a co-founder of the Council on Chemical Abuse, and chairman of the health division of the United Way of Berks County. He died in 1998.

Dr. Elizabeth Foldes and Dr. Zoltan Roth

Dr. Elizabeth Foldes and her husband, Dr. Zoltan Roth, joined the staff of the former Homeopathic Hospital, now St. Joseph’s Hospital, in 1942. She is perhaps the first female Jewish doctor in Reading, but this is not confirmed. Dr. Foldes and Dr. Roth were natives of Budapest. Dr. Foldes graduated from the University of Prague and came to the United States in 1939. She studied for one year at Columbia University and interned at Montgomery Hospital in Norristown, PA. She opened an office at 105 S. Fifth Street and practiced obstetrics and gynecology, later adding geriatrics, retiring in 1990. Dr. Foldes died in 1999; she was
predeceased by her husband, who died in 1971.  

Dr. Gerald Goodman

Dr. Gerald Goodman graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1963 and did his residency at Temple University (1964-1967). He joined the Reading Hospital in 1970 as director of the residency program. He was also director of the section on angiography. Dr. Goodman was very active in the Jewish community having served as president of the Jewish Federation from 1980-81. He along with others was instrumental in founding the Hebrew High School (provided evening classes for students), the Shalom newspaper, and the Leo Camp Lecture Series at Albright College. Leo Camp was Dr. Goodman’s mentor. Dr. Goodman volunteered at the Hadassah Hospital in 1961, 1967, 1968, 1972, 1980, and 1982 after the 6 Day War, the Yom Kippur War and the War with Lebanon. He was featured in the Jerusalem Post. Dr. Goodman was honored by Hadassah, and received the Myrtle Wreath Award for his service to Hadassah and Israel. Dr. Goodman’s nephew, Dr. Ronald Adelman credits his uncle with his decision to enter the field of interventional radiology which was Dr. Goodman’s field of expertise. Dr. Adelman did his residency in radiology at the Reading Hospital and is now practicing in the field of his role model and mentor.

Dr. Neil Hoffman

Dr. Neil Hoffman graduated in 1967 from the University of Wisconsin Medical School. He did residencies in Barnes Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, MO and University Hospitals in Cleveland, OH. He did an internship at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, MI. Hoffman came to Reading in 1979 with his wife Judith Kraines and two children. His specialties are forensic and anatomic pathology. For thirty years he was the only Board Certified Forensic Pathologist in Reading.

Hoffman spent two weeks in Zareb, Croatia in November, 1995 with Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) under the auspices of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). PHR was investigating mass murder perpetrated by Serb irregular troops on the occupants of the sole hospital in Vukovar, Croatia during the Yugoslav Civil War in 1991. He was part of a multinational team of investigators who examined 205 decomposed human remains. In August, 1999 he spent two weeks in Visoko, Bosnia for the UN ICTY investigating the mass murder of Bosnian men and boys near Srebrenica, Bosnia by Bosnian Serb troops in July 1995. This involved examination of remains recovered from mass burial and re-burial grounds. This was the largest such murder in the western world since the Holocaust of World War II. There were more than 800 victims. Based on the findings of the team there were successful prosecutions by the ICTY for Genocide and Crimes against humanity.

For his participation in the above and the discussions and talks he gave about his experiences, Hoffman received the Berks County Medical Society Community Service Award in 1999. In 2002 he received the Pennsylvania Medical Society’s International Voluntary Service Award.

Dr. Irving Imber
Dr. Irving Imber was the first Jewish internist at the Reading Hospital. He was a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine (1941). He did his internship and residency at Reading Hospital (1941-1943). In 1949 Dr. Imber was appointed Assistant in Medicine of the outpatient department of the Reading Hospital.

In 1966, Dr. Imber became President of the Berks County Medical Society. At his appointment, he made the following remarks, “Medicare has taught the physician a most important lesson. He now has a degree of government control over the practice of medicine and therefore he must take an active interest in the politics of the nation. It is our responsibility to see that Medicare works to the benefit of our older population and it is also our responsibility to see that Congress acts wisely in extending this law to the land.” Dr. Imber was Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Reading Area Community College.

Dr. Herman Kotzen

The consensus in the Berks community is that Dr. Herman Kotzen was the first Jewish physician to be granted staff privileges at the Reading Hospital. Dr. Kotzen was born in Reading in 1901. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in 1925 and was licensed in 1927. Dr. Kotzen interned at Philadelphia General Hospital (1925-1927) and was a resident at St. Christopher General Hospital for Children (Philadelphia 1927-1928). He did graduate work at Children’s Memorial Hospital in Chicago and Washington University in St. Louis. Dr. Kotzen was a Pediatric Assistant at Reading Hospital (1929-1938), Dispensary Pediatric Assistant (1930), Dispensary Pediatric Chief (1931), Pediatric Associate (1939), and Pediatric Chief (1940). Dr. Kotzen was a consultant in Pediatrics to the Berks County Tuberculosis Sanitarium. He was a member of the Philadelphia Pediatric Association, American Medical Association, Pennsylvania Medical Society and Berks County Medical Society.

Dr. Paul A. Leisawitz

Dr. Paul A. Leisawitz, general surgeon and family practitioner, was born in Reading. He was the 1929 class valedictorian of Reading High School, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and received his medical degree in 1937 from Jefferson medical College. Dr. Leisawitz was on staff at St. Joseph Medical center and was a former president of the hospital’s staff of physicians. He retired in 1979. Dr. Leisawitz authored the book “History of Jews in Berks County” and interviewed survivors for the Holocaust Library and Resource Center at Albright College. He died in 1965.

Dr. Jerome Marcus

Dr. Jerome Marcus graduated from University of Pennsylvania with a BA in Psychology and from Temple University with a MD. He did residencies at Reading Hospital and Medical Center and at Hershey Medical Center. He is a Certified Clinical Pathologist. In 1983 he co-founded Omega Laboratories. Omega Laboratories was voted the Small Business of the Year and subsequently the Large Business of the Year by the Berks County Chamber of Commerce. Dr. Marcus serves on the Board of the Vegetarian Resource Group which is made up of MDs, PhDs, and dieticians. The VRG is a nonprofit organization dedicated
to educating the public on vegetarianism and the interrelated issues of health, nutrition, ecology, ethics, and world hunger.  

Dr. Sandra Rowan

Although not the first female physician to practice in Berks County, Dr. Sandra Rowan, a pediatrician, was active staff at Reading Hospital in the late 1960s. Her former husband, Dr. Noel M. Rowan, was also active staff.

Notes

2. Interview by author, February 25, 2011.
5. Ibid. 47.
7. Ibid.
15. Ibid, September 17, 1949. 9.
17. Ibid, May 15, 1875.
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The author thanks Barbara Nazimov for her valuable assistance in this research.
Military Veterans

By Erin Koller and Ryan Edwards

Many people in the Jewish community served the military throughout the years. However, in many cases, they were drafted, according to Daniel Tannenbaum, the late director of the Jewish Holocaust Research Center at Albright College and a Navy veteran. Dan also said that “Jews were not considered equals but they were drafted in harmony. A lot of young men left Berks before they could even be drafted, but there were other men who came by themselves searching for a job and ended up being drafted in order to support their families.” Others, however, chose to take part in military activities, serving in many wars including both world wars, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

Abe Golden Post

The Abe Golden Post, 170, Jewish War Veterans of the United States, was named in honor of Abe Golden, a Reading soldier who was killed in action at Argonne. Members of the Abe Golden Post assembled at Mt. Sinai Cemetery, Shillington, on Sunday May 29, 1938 to honor the late Captain Daniel Epstein, Civil War Vet. The memorial service took place at Captain Epstein’s grave. Captain Epstein was born in 1836 and died in 1905. He served in the 27th Pennsylvania and 34th New Jersey Infantry in the Civil War.

Members in attendance at the service included Captain Epstein’s grandson, Rudolph Rubel, who was awarded the Croix de Guerre in the World War, and Captain Epstein’s three children: Jonas and Edward Epstein, and Mrs. Bertha Rubel. Oscar Mendelsohn was re-elected as the commander of the Abe Golden Post, Post 170, Jewish War Veterans, at the Post Home on March 30, 1941. The Post provided Passover meals to 50 Jewish soldiers stationed at Indiantown Gap who were unable to go home for the Passover holiday. Commander Mendelsohn appointed Oscar Daniels to represent the post at the G.A.R. meeting to plan for Reading’s celebration of Memorial Day. The public was invited to attend these Memorial Day ceremonies.

Representatives of the Jewish War Veterans, the American Legion and three labor unions of the Reading Clothing Manufacturing Company held a dinner on March 12, 1942 to celebrate the raising of funds to be used to national defense. Some of the money was used to help defray the cost of military air craft. The dinner was held at the Berkshire Hotel. Attendants at the dinner included the representatives of the two war veterans’ organizations: Oscar Mendelsohn, commander of Abe Golden Post, Jewish War Veterans; Jack Shapiro, State department commander, Jewish War Veterans; Al Bickman, Trenton chief of staff of the Jewish War Veterans headquarters; Maj. Joseph D. Eisenbrown, American Legion; and Ben Kaufman, of Trenton, national commander of Jewish War Veterans. Donations totaling more than $4,500 for national defense purposes were raised by local groups at a dinner at Berkshire Hotel on March 12, 1942. The dinner was attended by more than 50 people representing three union employee groups of the Reading Clothing Manufacturing Company, the Jewish War Veterans, and American Legion.
The Abe Golden Post contributed $550 to the national fund of $180,000 that was being raised by the Jewish War Veterans for six pursuit planes. The guest of honor and principal speaker was Ben Kaufman, of Trenton New Jersey, national commander of the Jewish War Veterans and one of the few veterans of the first World War to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. He was introduced by Oscar Mendelsohn, commander of Abe Golden Post, and Jack Shapiro, state department commander of the Jewish War Veterans. Kaufman urged more voluntary contributions to the government for the war effort. “Of the funds being used by England for the war” Kaufman said. “Fifteen percent are voluntary contributions by the citizens. This represents sacrifices made by grateful people to a grateful government.” Kaufman announced that his organization started a campaign to sell $25,000,000 worth of defense bonds. He complimented labor for the part it is playing in the war.4

Ten members of the Abe Golden Post, 170, Jewish War Veterans of Reading, participated in a protest parade in July 1946. The ten members included: Rabbi Max Routtenberg, Henry Cohen, Joseph Lipsitz, Lee Wood, Barney Mason, Irving Koons, Daniel Rubenstein, Leonard Levine, Joseph Feder, and Jerry Kobrin. The point of the protest parade was to demonstrate the Jewish War Veterans accord with the Jews of Palestine.5 Oscar Mendelsohn, of Abe Golden Post, was named chairman of a committee to plan the annual Armistice Day celebration at a meeting of the Combined Veterans of Berks County on September 27, 1949. Mendelsohn, along with the other members of the committee met on September 29, 1949 to plan the Armistice Day events.6 On May 30, 1954, flags flew over the graves of veterans of all wars. On May 31, there was a parade on 11th and Penn Street at 9am. This parade honored four military units: The Abe Golden Post, No. 170; The Jewish War Veterans, Reading, Post No. 3; Amvets, Berks County Post No. 46; and the Associated Veterans of Berks County.7 The final mention of the Abe Golden Post in the Reading Eagle is in May 1974; we have not found any other information about it.

Other Military History

The Men’s Club of the Temple Oheb Sholom held a dinner in 1946 to welcome back the members of the congregation who were discharged from the armed forces. The veterans’ dinner included guest speaker, Elwood A. Geiger who is an educator and former sports referee. The veterans welcomed at the dinner included: Marvin Friedman, Richard Katz, Dr. Eli Goulden, Dr. Stewart Jacobs, Stanley Folkman, Edward Greenberg, Arthur Sherry, Robert Karpf, Simon Hammel, Meyer Jaskulek, Irwin Kins, Jack Kins, Stuart Friedman, Robert Brok, James Holzman, Dr. Thomas Barnett, Leo Bloom, and Ralph Brok. The welcoming address was delivered by Dr. Joseph A. Liefter and Rabbi Sidney L. Regner asked the invocation.8

In May 1946 special exercises for the Memorial Day period were opened for four days. Included in these special exercises were the annual parade and programs sponsored by The Combined Veterans Council of Berks County. Members of the veterans post attended a memorial service for the fallen veterans at St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church.9

Berks County Veterans

Below is the list of Berks County’s military veterans. They are listed alphabetically by their last names. This
list includes only those veterans we were able to find out about; we also honor those veterans whose names are not listed here.

Albert Boscov was in the Navy during the Korean War. He reviewed movies used for training and worked in the commissary after basic training. 10

Irvin Cohen was in the Army from 1944 to 1946. Cohen said, “The battle in Europe caused the Holocaust to be better known. Until this time, Americans didn’t know how devastating the Holocaust was.”11

Charles E. Daniels was a veteran of World War I and a commander of the Abe Golden Post, 170. 12

Dr. Herbert Edelman was a commander of the Abe Golden Post, 170. He enlisted in the Medical Enlisted Reserve Corps and served during World War I at Camp Greene in North Carolina as dental officer. He earned the rank of first lieutenant.13

Irving Fidler served in the Army from 1960-62. He and his wife, Diane Charnoff Fidler, married on June 28, 1970. Together they have three children, Michael 40, Joseph 37, and Rachel 31.

Solly Gernsheimer played on a Jewish Boys Soccer Team in Hanau, Germany in 1933. After immigrating to the U.S., Gernsheimer served in United States Army from 1940-1945. His estimated termination of service was December 8, 1941, but after Pearl Harbor, he was sent to Hawaii and served as a Mess Sergeant at the Scofield Barracks until the end of the war.

Bernie Goldberg became a 1st Lieutenant in Army in 1941. Goldberg worked in hospitals overseas during WWII. Goldberg served overseas until 1945.14 Lt. Goldberg aimed at getting and maintaining a high morale. Lt. Goldberg began his Army career as an enlisted man. He received basic training with the Coast Artillery at Fort Eustis following his induction in August 1941. Lieutenant Goldberg was commissioned as a 2nd Lt. on September 25, 1942, in the Quartermaster Corps, and was assigned to the Thirty-Third.15

Theodore Kobrin served in the Philippines, where he was promoted to the rank of Captain. Kobrin was also a member of a P-38 fighter group.16

Alan Leisawitz went to Bucknell and was a member of the ROTC. Leisawitz served in Vietnam from January 21, 1969 until January 24, 1970 and was a Captain. Before serving in the Army during the Vietnam War, Leisawitz was a computer programmer for two years.

Paul Leisawitz is the late father of Alan Leisawitz. Paul, who was born in 1912, was called to serve in World War II in 1942. During WWII, Paul served in the medical division. After taking a short leave of absence, Paul returned to the war in 1945, where he helped clean up the invasion of Normandy. Paul also served in the medical units in England and Italy and later became a Captain in the Army.

Sam Leisawitz, the brother of Paul Leisawitz, was born in 1908. Sam served in the Air Force between WWI
and WWII and served until 1958.  

Milton Mendelsohn was drafted into the Army in 1944, at the age of 26. While serving in Italy on the front lines, he wrote to his family constantly. Upon returning home, Milton would not talk about his times in the Army.  

David Moyer served in World War II in the United States Army from 1943-1946. David Moyer is the son of Annie and Abraham Moyer. David married Marjorie Sulman in 1946. Upon his return, David Moyer worked at the Campbell Soup factory in Maidencreek Township.  

Henry M. Scher was a second class radio technician and member of the US Coast Guard. Scher performed essential patrol and convoy duty in the North Atlantic and helped maintain open supply lines to the ETO.  

Daniel Tannenbaum was a Navy veteran of World War II. He states that in the military during World War II, “Jews were not considered equals but they were drafted in harmony. A lot of young men left Berks before they could even be drafted, but there were other men who came by themselves searching for a job and ended up being drafted in order to support their families.” He died in December 2010.  

Harry Wachter served in the army during World War I. A Reading High School graduate in 1911, Wachter died in his Philadelphia home, at 58 years old.  

**War Casualties**  

Jack H. Blumberg was killed in action in WWII. For many years, the Jack Blumberg Memorial Tournament was held annually at the Berkleigh Country Club. A plaque at Kesher Zion Hebrew School’s honors KZ’s Hebrew School alumni who also served in the military. The plaque was presented by Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Lewis in loving memory of Blumberg.  

Irvin Singer entered in the Air Corps in October 1941. He was reported missing in action in the Southwest Pacific on April 10 1941. Staff Sergeant Irvin Singer was among 17 Pennsylvania soldiers reported by the War Department as killed in action. The announcement gave no details as to his death. He was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Singer.  

**Notes**  

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Retail Stores and Outlets and the Growth of the Penn Street Merchants

by Michael Henderson

Jews in Reading made their living as merchants and peddlers dating back as early as the late 1800’s. As their businesses grew (many family owned), Penn Street was lined with expanding retail stores. These business owners were referred to as the Penn Street merchants. These stores helped bring a sense of pride and culture to the community. Their impact on Reading is important to note.

Coming to Reading

Some of the earliest known settlers in Reading were three men named Lyon Nathan, Meyer Josephson and Israel Jacobs. They appeared in tax lists in the 1750’s, and likely traded with families and Indians in the nearby countryside. They also bought products from their coreligionists in Philadelphia, the Gratz brothers. Original letters written by Josephson in Yiddish are in the possession of the American Jewish Historical Society as part of the Gratz papers presented to the society many years ago.¹

Josephson, who described himself as a country shop keeper in phonetic Yiddish, came to America in about 1740 and lived in Reading from about 1755 to the early 1770’s when he moved to Philadelphia. In one letter, he speaks of going to Lancaster for Yom Kippur probably at the home of Joseph Simon, an early founder of Lancaster. He ordered from the latter most of the goods which he sold in his store. By 1836 there are records of 8 Jews living in Reading. Most of these men became merchants with various kinds of clothing stores or manufacturers of hats.²

The Penn Street Merchants

While Reading provided many different places for retailers to set up shop, Penn Street in Reading seemed to be the place that everyone gathered. It is commonly remarked, even today, that business owners, both active and retired, can remember a time in which most, if not all, of the businesses on Penn Street were owned by people in the Jewish community. Penn Street was home to a great array of different business selling everything one would need.

The grandfather of Robert Pollack, Solomon, owner of Pollack’s furs, migrated to Schuylkill County in 1900 as a Russian immigrant. He came from New York to Pennsylvania looking for greener pastures. He peddled furs and other better outerwear in the coal regions of Berks, Schuylkill and Lebanon County. He sold to beauty salon owners, madams of brothels and dress shops. Ultimately, he settled in Pottsville. He opened a second store in 1926, which served as the headquarters. He died in a car crash three months later. Robert’s grandmother, Sarah, took over the business. The Depression hit and she had to sell the business to the Geller Brothers of New York. The Geller brothers got into a car accident traveling from New York to Pottsville trying to foreclose on her.³
When Robert’s father, Harold, became 21, he got his inheritance and bought shares of the business from the Gellers’. His father and grandmother operated the store for years together and then Robert’s uncle, Bernard, came into the business in 1936. The store opened at 127 N. 5th St. in downtown Reading in 1959. In 1992, the Pottsville store closed and Reading became the headquarters. Their business is now located at 541 Penn Ave. in West Reading.4

Hyman Bloom founded Bloom Furniture store in 1914 at 339 South Sixth St. He was the only worker in the beginning, but as time passed, he added new employees and moved to larger quarters. Although it was very successful, Bloom furniture eventually closed in 1992. Jack Leifer, owner of Bloom, cited the economic slump and the decline of downtown Reading as the main reasons.5

George Gilman, a former resident of Reading, opened Gilman’s Department Store in 1960 on the Northeast corner of 7th and Penn Streets. In 1952, the Gilmans had sold their business on the southwest corner of 7th and Penn Streets and moved to Florida. They own the building that they reoccupied. Gilman decided to open the store because “the public favors downtown shopping. The public wants to shop and where else can they shop better than on Penn street where the selections are the largest and the prices are competitive.”6

Jack Gerber came to Reading in 1930 as the shoe manager at Mary Sach’s department store on North 9th Street. Mary Sachs closed during the depression, and Gerber took over the shoe department at Gilbert’s, where he stayed until 1946. He then went into business for himself at 503 Penn Street and established Jack Gerber’s Fine Shoes, a specialty store for women and children. He established niche departments and was well known for hard-to-fit sizes and bridal wear. He was especially good at matching bridal shoes to gowns.

Lobel’s, owned by Samuel and Hyman Lobel, was located at 518 Penn Street. On August 18th, 1936, a Reading Eagle article stated that Lobel’s was growing. In two years, Lobel’s had become the headquarters in Berks County for children’s clothing. As stated in an ad in an April 1975 edition of the Reading Eagle, Lobel’s was “First choice with mothers because we sell clothes that children like at prices that parents appreciate.”7

**Boscov’s on North Ninth Street**

A young man named Solomon Boscowitz left his home in a small village in Russia, crossed Europe on foot and found passage on a boat to America. He arrived in 1911 in his early 20s. After struggling as a vendor in Washington D.C. and then delivering Western Union telegrams, he moved to Reading due to the heavy Yiddish speaking population there. It turned out the particular dialect was actually Pennsylvania Dutch. But Solomon Boscov, the shortened form of his surname, found that not only could he grasp the language, he was welcomed by the people who spoke it. Boscov established himself as a peddler, selling different merchandise such as handkerchiefs, underwear and suspenders.8

By the late 1910’s he had become a partner in a general merchandise store, and in 1921, he opened his own store in a row house at 1401 N. Ninth St. The living room was the storefront and Boscov, his wife and three kids lived in the back of the house and upstairs. As it became successful, the store grew. Boscov bought out
the neighbors on Ninth Street and converted the homes to retail use, ultimately occupying 1401-1413 N. Ninth St.²

Solomon established the very first Boscov’s store at 9th and Pike Streets in Reading in 1921. Through hard work, honest and loyal co-workers, fair prices and quality merchandise, the small store expanded every year. In 1954, Solomon’s son Albert and son-in-law, Edwin Lakin, joined the company, and the original store was renovated and enlarged. Albert Boscov’s love of advertising had an immediate impact on the company as the newspaper ads were enlarged and made more exciting.¹⁰

November 1962: The company began its expansion program with the opening of an exciting, contemporary “Boscov’s West”.
August 1965: It was then followed by a “North” located in the Reading Fairground Mall in Muhlenberg Township.
February 1967: A fire destroyed the 9th and Pike street store, called Boscov’s East.
November 1967: Boscov’s West was destroyed by a fire, and the new Boscov’s East opened in Exeter Township.
November 1968: There was a re-opening of Boscov’s West.
August 1972: The first Boscov’s store outside of Berks County opened in the Lebanon Valley Mall.
January 2002: Boscov’s announces purchase of Strawbridge’s store at the Berkshire Mall.
Today: Boscov’s Department Stores currently have 39 stores reaching across 5 states in the Mid Atlantic region of the country.¹¹

Albert Boscov, the child of a retailer, discussed how other children did not have to stay in the same business as their parents. “There was no requirement for the children to stay in the business. Some did it because they liked it. A lot of them became professionals. Lawyers, doctors, all of the things you couldn’t do here.”¹²

Albert also discussed how the Jewish holidays affected the industry. “In those days, when there was a Jewish holiday, Penn Street was closed. Because you have to remember the early generations were very religious and so they were closed,” said Boscov. This stands in stark contrast to the way stores operate today.¹³

**Penn Street Today**

The decrease in the amount of these Jewish owned retail stores has taken away something that meant a great deal to them. According to Holocaust survivor Sidney Bratt, “You used to go in the store, and they greeted you by name. They knew your taste in clothing. It’s not what it once was.” Bratt is probably not alone in this feeling; that the increase in regular malls has taken away from the social and personal feel that these retail stores were most known for.¹⁴

Retail was a huge part of Jewish culture and everyday life. Other stores such as The Boys Shop, The London Shop, Jeannette Shop, Heather Shop, Kagen’s, The Clothes Tree, Gilbert’s furniture, Joseph’s Men’s Store, and Martin’s Dress Shop provided places where people could purchase goods and find job opportunities that were not always readily available in other industries. The development of shopping malls caused many of
these stores to be phased out, but they will always be remembered.

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Sustaining a Community

By Stephen Groller

The first Berks County Jewish settlement of Schaefferstown, located southwest of Reading, has scant historical documentation.\(^1\) What is generally known includes the German descent of the Jews living there, their small numbers which dwindled over time as a result of intermarriage, and their acquisition of land for both a synagogue and cemetery.\(^2\) In large part, this cemetery was the only mark of Jewish history that remained. The earliest Jews here and in Reading’s surrounding areas were primarily engaged as merchants, in trade, and in manufacturing.\(^3\) Also during these early years, the first religious institutions were founded.

Synagogues are a vital part of Jewish communities everywhere; they serve as places of worship as well as an integral social role. In many respects, a synagogue’s location can dictate the concentration of the Jewish population in a certain area and vice versa. For example, in years past, it was customary to walk to synagogue services, so many congregation members who lived and worked in the city would live within a relatively short distance of the synagogue to which they belonged in order to make the trip.\(^4\) The first of these in the area, founded in May of 1864 by a small number of German Jews (approximately 16 families), was the reform congregation Oheb Sholom. In July of 1865, the first building to be used by the congregation was bought and dedicated; it was located at Chestnut and Pearl Streets in Reading.\(^5\) Of course, land for a cemetery was purchased as well. The two other Berks County congregations, Shomrei Habrith and Kesher Zion, eventually followed in 1887 and 1929 respectively.\(^6\) Throughout the years, the congregations have moved slightly away from the city center, as have the Jews themselves.\(^7\)

The late 1800’s saw another wave of Jewish immigrants into Reading and its surrounding areas, mostly coming from Russia and Poland. These Jews came to America to escape harsh persecution and (in Russia) the pogroms, government approved attacks against Jews,\(^8\) which had made their lives unbearably difficult. Also, this wave brought a strong orthodox influence to the area, as seen through their establishment of the aforementioned Shomrei Habrith temple in 1888.\(^9\) While the synagogue’s presence and influence cannot be contested in Reading or any other area, they have gradually lost their ability to serve as a reason for the Jewish presence in Berks County. Jewish religious institutions are more widespread than ever, especially in larger urban areas.\(^10\)

The majority of the first generations of Jews in Reading were laborers or merchants (most notably on Penn Street), or they worked in industrial positions. Those that owned their own businesses normally lived close by; many were even in the same building, with their living quarters a floor above their stores.\(^11\) Those that encompassed the early Jewish community are generally regarded as having ambition to own a business. Many began in more labor-intensive positions, but moved up the ladder as they prospered to become managers, presidents, owners, etc.\(^12\) A certain life style began to formulate as a result of this high level of work ethic and determination. The parents of the more recent generations valued education as paramount, with higher expectations of their children.\(^13\) Around this period, in the early to mid-1900’s, a large concentration of Jews lived in Northeast Reading, as the area was regarded as having one of the best early
education districts in the city on 13th and Union Streets.  

Certainly, the evolution of transportation played a part in where Jews lived. As with any of the residents of Berks County, public transportation and trolleys gave way to the ubiquity of automobile ownership, and as a result, Jews could branch out and move farther away from Reading’s center. The concentrations of Jews in Mt. Penn, Exeter Township, and later in Wyomissing that exist today would not be possible if it weren’t for the means to travel the distance. These concentrations on the outskirts of Reading came in large part during the boost of suburbanization that followed World War II. In the early 1950s, the new community of Pennside was being built, and many Jews bought new homes there. Eventually, some Jews moved from there, many to Glen Oley Farms, a 160-acre development of larger houses even farther east of the city in Exeter Township. Homes in Glen Oley were on an acre or more of land, and during the 50’s and 60’s, some Jewish families chose to build homes there.

Due to the social and residential exclusions placed on Jews in the area, the tendency and need to band together and participate in activities was prevalent. For example, Jews could not belong to various clubs or social organizations, they couldn’t apply for certain jobs, and they even couldn’t purchase real estate in some areas of Reading. Normally, young adults hung around with a larger crowd consisting of their Jewish peers. For young Jews, social or sports activities existed through Jewish organizations and religious institutions. Certainly, the time period had a slightly different environment for all young adults in terms of school-based activities or sports. The events and activities including Jews from all the different neighborhoods and cities brought them closer together and, to a large extent, resulted in an eventual population expansion due to the dating that occurred.

The Jewish Community Center is an undoubtedly pertinent influence on the Jewish population in Reading. Ever since its first dedication in 1915, the JCC has helped keep the Berks County Jewish community together, regardless of differences in orthodoxy and custom, which especially existed in Reading due to the orthodox, reform, and conservative congregations located here. The Community Center was a hub for Jews to get together in discussion and activity. The events, dances, trips, banquets, and activities organized by the JCC were an important aspect in maintaining the values that kept Berks County’s Jewish community together for so long. As years past, and the trend to branch out and leave Reading became more prevalent, the JCC became even more vital to the community’s waning numbers. Up until its previous location was sold to the Reading School District, the Community Center was one of the strongest organizations for the Jews in Reading. Even today, this cohesive institution still exists (albeit in a smaller form) to benefit the community as its older generations pass away and younger generations move away.

Those Jews that have gone have mostly moved to nearby metropolitan areas like New York City and Philadelphia, leaving Reading behind. This second generation of professionals moves on and rarely, if ever, returns. The reason behind this trend is unclear; certainly, having such a high percentage of professionals may provide a reason. The majority of second-generation Jews became doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, etc., as opposed to the retailers and manufacturers of older, foreign-born Jews. Undoubtedly, advancement opportunities that come with these jobs can take these people and their families to other cities and states. In these cases, higher pay or a potentially higher quality of life may be more enticing than the roots that exist in
Berks County. This tendency may also be an inevitable product of the times. The second-generation Jews moved on to more opportunities, and subsequent generations followed their lead. To meet other Jews and maintain the community as a whole, newer generations have to seek where most of the Jews are. As time has gone on, that has become larger metropolises rather than Berks County. Further, familial ties may play a part. The families of Reading Jews are spread more widely throughout the country than nearly any other immigrant group in the area. These movements elsewhere could have resulted from a sense of distance that existed in the families with roots overseas. Other immigrant groups with closer ties to western gentile religions feel a deeper connection to the area, while Jews do not. They may feel like their differences resulted in roots that weren’t set as deeply. Also, World War II and the Holocaust could have created even more distance from a notion of a well-established “home.” Moving away from a place to which they have less of a connection is probably easier for them, especially with the community unfortunately dwindling and dying. Some sources indicate that the trend to move from smaller towns to cities with higher Jewish populations is a trend that spans the whole of the Jewish community. World War II and encouragement to attend college strayed many young Jews away from small, family-owned businesses. Seemingly, Berks County has been no exception.

Today, the Jews remaining in Reading and Berks County are fairly widespread, with concentrations still around Exeter Township and Mt. Penn, as well as some in the Northeast and in West Reading and Wyomissing more recently. The synagogues still have substantial memberships, and involvement among the Jewish community still exists in large part thanks to the Jewish Community Center. The customs and culture of the Jewish community are maintained mostly by the generations that are older now, and with them, the history has begun to fade. With struggles like an ambitious young generation looking for opportunity elsewhere, a past of implicit exclusion, and a certain disconnect from a sense of home, it would seem that the Jewish community in Berks County has more than shown its resilience over the years.

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6. Raymond W. Ford, 163.
7. Ibid.
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Chapters
Synagogues

Synagogues

By Barry W. Foster

There are three synagogues recognized by the Jewish community of Reading in 2011. These synagogues are Reform Congregation Oheb Sholom, Kesher Zion Synagogue, and Chabad-Lubavitch of Berks County, which has replaced the former orthodox Jewish synagogue, Shomrei Habrith. Oheb Sholom and Kesher Zion have survived, transcended and remain to present a unique offering to the community of Reading, Pennsylvania. Filling the void left by the closing of Shomrei Habrith, Chabad-Lubavitch has recently opened in the area and has become a part of the Jewish community in Reading.

Reform Congregation Oheb Sholom: The Initiation

Reform Congregation Oheb Sholom is the oldest surviving synagogue in Reading. In 1864, sixteen charter members formed what would become Temple Oheb Sholom.¹ Two years later, in January 1866, a house was rented near Sixth and Franklin Streets and the congregation was housed in the building of B. Dreifoos and then Fischer’s Hall at Eighth and Washington Streets.² Eventually in April 1884, an Oheb committee raised $910 for new synagogue ground to be called their own.³ In November 1884, a decision was made to purchase the Emanuel Congregation of the Evangelical Association church building at Chestnut and Pearl Streets for $4250.⁴ On the Friday evening of July 31, 1885 and the following morning, Reform Congregation Oheb Sholom was officially dedicated by Dr. Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati, the leader of Reform Judaism, and Rabbi George Levy of Pottsville, who was Oheb’s new Rabbi.⁵ From Oheb Sholom’s 1864 initiation to Rabbi Levy’s 1885 introduction, Oheb was recognized as embracing a particular change in keeping with its “Reform” status:

Consider the tremendous upheaval! In just twenty short years the group had gone from Orthodoxy with its dietary laws and services entirely in Hebrew and devoid of music to a revolutionary new concept. A reform prayer book was now used; there was a choir, an organ, carpeting and bare heads. And the flock—there was now thirty-four member families and two seat holders.⁶

From August 1885 to July 1890, Rabbi Levy led Oheb Sholom, followed by Rabbi Goldstein, who served a seven-month term for the congregation.² In July 1891, Rabbi N. Michnick served, followed by Rabbi Mr. K. Kline of Pottsville and the congregation shared their Temple with a Presbyterian congregation in 1889. They then shared their Temple with a Methodist congregation in the early 1890’s and also an Evangelical group met in the Temple.⁸ Cohen and Friedman exclaim, “The warmth of brotherhood, even in the 19th century, pervaded Oheb Sholom.”⁹

In a Reading Eagle newspaper article from September 10, 1892 entitled “The New Rabbi, Pastor of Oheb
Sholom Congregation-Sketch of His Life,” a narrative of Rabbi Mr. K. Kline is told. In it, the young 24-year-old Kline is described as follows:

Raised at the spring of knowledge and wisdom; brought up and nourished at the foundations of Jewish lore, imbued with Jewish thought and feelings. Early in his boyhood Rabbi Kline possessed a deep sense and love for knowledge, especially for modern science. There being in his town no public schools for Jewish instruction, his father engaged a capable instructor, at whose hands the Rabbi received the first rudiments of secular education placed side by side with Jewish studies.  

The next Rabbis were Mr. Julius Magil of Allentown in March 1894 and Dr. Julius Frank in 1897. During Rabbi Frank’s 30-year leadership of Oheb Sholom, the congregation moved to the Perkiomen Avenue Temple at Chestnut and Perkiomen Streets in 1921 to inhabit their new synagogue designed by Edward E. Scholl. Rabbi Julius Frank retired in 1927 and passed away in August 1929. After Rabbi Frank’s retirement and passing in 1929, Rabbi Sydney L. Regner served the congregation.  

In the World War II period the Perkiomen Avenue Temple served as an emergency disaster relief shelter in which the “Eternal Light” was covered as a defense measure during the required war time blackouts. The neighboring Park Evangelical Church was stricken by fire in 1942, so the Temple shared its building for Sunday services. In gratitude for Oheb’s kindness, Park Evangelical presented Oheb one of its most valued possessions, an original Bible printed in Hebrew. By 1950, Oheb Sholom had grown to 179 families and 52 students in Sunday school. Rabbi Dr. Lester W. Roubey began on December 10, 1954, the 90th anniversary of the temple.  

1963 marked a major building project for Oheb Sholom, including work done on the social hall, kitchen, air-conditioning unit, audio system and sanctuary. The congregation had also grown to over 200 families.  

1964 represented a social crossroads for Oheb with the arrival of a new Rabbi, Alan G. Weitzman, and a congregational movement which energized numerous inter-faith programs with Christian congregations to include tutoring children and a recreation center for disadvantaged youths called “House of Soul.” On May 31, 1969 the Reading Eagle reported a tragic event that will be remembered in Temple history:

A HOMEMADE DYNAMITE bomb exploded behind a Jewish synagogue here last Saturday night, smashing windows throughout the neighborhood of 13th and Perkiomen Avenues and causing extensive damage to Temple Oheb Sholom. The blast occurred only moments after a group of children was dismissed from a confirmation class in a room at the back of the building where the blast occurred. Miraculously no one was injured. The blast triggered a massive investigation by city and state police, shocked members of all faiths and jolted the mayor and city council into offering $5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the bomber. A professional bomb team from the Indiantown Gap Military Reservation was called to assist with the investigation and debris was sifted for items to be analyzed. The services of other state agencies were offered to the city to
help with the probe.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1972, the Temple grew in a financial capacity and purchased a $100,000 Israeli Bond. The decade was also marked by the research of a new prayer book, \textit{Gates of Prayer}, in January 1977 that was accepted in 1979 in a move to modernize Hebrew from an Ashkenazic to Sephardic shift. Oheb’s membership base reached an all-time high of over 300 families at the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{18} Oheb Sholom continued connecting with the community by participating in the following programs: Threshold of Berks County, Berks County Food Bank, Alcoholics Anonymous, Berks County Ministerium, Berks County Prison, Reading Human Relations Council and Reading Urban Ministry.\textsuperscript{19} In 1984 Oheb gave a $6,000 offering to “Operation Moses” to help Ethiopian Jews move to Israel and a $1,000,000 Israeli Bond was acquired by the Reading Jewish Federation and the synagogues in Reading. 1989 was “The Year of the Torah,” and for the 125th Temple anniversary raised $258,000 for an endowment trust.\textsuperscript{20}

The 1990s marked another crossroads for Oheb Sholom. During 1996, it became evident to the congregation they would relocate to a new synagogue. Rabbi Weitzman also announced his retirement plans in spring 1998.\textsuperscript{21} June 1997 was the initiation to purchase a new synagogue property, and in February 1998 Brian I. Michelson became the new Rabbi.\textsuperscript{22} Oheb Sholom is still located at 555 Warwick Drive, Wyomissing, Pa. and services are performed in Hebrew and English.

**Kesher Zion Synagogue: The B’nai Zion-Kesher Israel Merger**

In 1911 a charter was granted to B’nai Zion and in 1920 the congregation purchased the old Chestnut Street Synagogue that had been dedicated by Oheb Sholom in 1885.\textsuperscript{23} In 1913 a charter was granted to Kesher Israel which bought a church at 8th and Court Street and in 1929 the merger of B’nai Zion and Kesher Israel produced the Kesher Zion Synagogue.\textsuperscript{24} In fact, on May 16, 1929, Rabbi Louis J. Hass addressed both sisterhoods from Kesher Israel and B’nai Zion about joining the women’s groups in “the cause of Judaism.”\textsuperscript{25} 1947 marked the ground breaking year for the present Kesher Zion home at 1245 Perkiomen Avenue, Reading, constructed on December 9, 1950.\textsuperscript{26}

At present, Rabbi Minna Bromberg is the spiritual leader and teacher for 210 families at Kesher Zion. Her role includes leading and planning worship services, running religious education for children and adults, providing pastoral care for the congregation, being involved in life cycle events, weddings and funerals, baby welcoming and rites of passage concerning Bar and Bat Mitzvah. According to Rabbi Bromberg, “The main idea about Hebrew school is to educate kids about Jewish practice, Jewish values, Jewish tradition and history. Part of that is seen as being preparation for becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah in order to be full members of a Jewish community.”\textsuperscript{27} Although most synagogues do not have a female Rabbi, Bromberg stated, “I’m one of the changes that we are going through in the synagogue, so it was a very new thing certainly for a lot of members in my congregation, there are certainly members of my congregation who would not prefer to have a woman as their Rabbi and so that was definitely a choice on the part of the leadership of the
synagogue to make a change that some people thought was wonderful and some people were less pleased with it.”

**Shomrei Habrith**

In 1880, Jewish immigrants began their travels to Reading, and through the decade began worshipping in a room at 11th and Elm streets. Before 1880, the largest number of Jews in the area belonged to the Reform synagogue, Oheb Sholom. However, in response to swelling numbers of Orthodox Jews coming from Russia due to increased persecution, there was a growing demand for an Orthodox synagogue as well. The first Orthodox synagogue was located at 11th and Elm Streets and later at 750 Penn St. and Eighth and Elm streets. It was not until Oct. 20, 1888 that a charter was established for Shomrei Habrith. In 1893 Shomrei Habrith synagogue was built at 533 N. Eighth St. and in 1902, property at 415 Moss St. was purchased as a social hall. In 1913 a new Shomrei building was erected at 533 N. Eighth St. for $25,000. In 1929 a vestry room, auditorium, and kitchen were added. Morris Knoblauch paid off the first mortgage of Shomrei Habrith as a gift to the synagogue when his daughter was married. In 1960, Shomrei Habrith moved out of center city Reading to a property to 2320 Hampden Blvd, and in 1962, the building was dedicated. 1988 was the Centennial of Shomrei Habrith. However, due to an aging population and many people in the Jewish community moving toward the Conservative and Reform synagogues, Shomrei Habrith closed in 2009.

**Chabad Lubavitch**

In December 2008 Shomrei Habrith leased the building to Chabad Center of Berks County. Then, in February of 2009, Shomrei Habrith was officially closed and reopened as Chabad Lubavitch, a Brooklyn-based Jewish movement that sends its followers around the world on the mission of building Jewish community. Chabad can also be described as “a Hasiadic sect of the Jewish religion that works to promote education and social outreach programs throughout the world.” Because of decreasing membership, Shomrei Habrith evolved to the Chabad center. The current rabbi is Rabbi Yosef Lipsker who succinctly explained the transformation of Shomrei Habrith into Chabad. “In 1997 I became the Rabbi of Shomrei Habrith and it evolved and today we are sitting in the Chabad Center of Berks County.” Rabbi Lipsker is the host of a weekly radio show, “Mind Over Matter,” broadcast each Thursday to WNWR 1540 AM Radio in Philadelphia from 10:30 to 11:00 am. He serves on the Board of Directors of the Reading Jewish Federation, is a consultant of the Caron Treatment Center for Substance Abuse and Chemical Addiction, and is a visiting chaplain at Reading Hospital, St. Joseph Hospital and Berks County Prison.

**Notes**

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Textile Manufacturing and Outlet Stores

by Kara Lindley

Reading, Pennsylvania was once known as the hosiery capital of the world.¹ The story of the Jewish community and textile manufacturing doesn’t begin here but expands in different directions with the manufacturing of garments. For instance, in New York in 1880, 65% of Jews were involved in the textile industry. Jews had previous knowledge of the textile industry. The whole family could work in industry together and in this way the family connections were preserved.² Therefore one can see the pattern of the textile business revolving around family and how it came to be a prominent profession in the Jewish community of Reading. By 1940, Pennsylvania was the number three state in apparel manufacture, and women’s clothing was the state’s fastest growing product.³ In the 1960’s apparel manufacturers operated their own small factory stores, selling their imperfects and over-runs to employees at bargain prices. Originally composed of pipe-racks and irregular merchandise, the concept grew and, eventually, the doors opened to the public. Thus, Reading became the forerunner of the outlet shopping experience. The idea promptly became popular, and imitations began springing up all over the country, turning outlets into a major retail industry. The Nolde Horst Building that housed the outlets now sits vacant and unused, a standing testament to what used to be.⁴

Camp Hosiery was one of the Jewish owned textile manufacturers in Reading. Camp, located at 1801 N. 12th St. Reading, made underwear under the names of Camp, Christian Dior, Anne Klein, and Jordache. These items were sold to upscale department stores. This company was founded in 1945 as Camp and McInnes by Erwin Camp and H. Stanley McInnes. Genesco, Inc. bought the company in 1967 from Erwin and Leo Camp. In 1972 it was sold again to Orange Harpeth Co. and Fruit of the Loom in 1986. Leo Camp was President of Camp Hosiery until 1971. The plant later moved south. For the city of Reading it meant that Camp Hosiery was one of the last old-line business names to hold out until being sold to warmer climates.⁵

Ivan Gordon was raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and attended Philadelphia University. Gordon came to the city of Reading in 1957 to work for Talbott Knitting. Talbott Knitting Mills was run by Sid Barrer, who also helped to start the first outlet stores. Barrer ran Talbott from 1966-78. Talbott was a division of U.S. Industries and they marketed a variety of consumer and industrial products. Barrer owned and was president of several knitting mills such as Linden Manufacturing Co. from 1946-66, and Windsor Knitting Mills 1979-88.⁶ Gordon states that most mills were family owned and he was the first Jew to come to the city to work for someone else. At Talbott, Gordon was hired to work with research and development. Gordon came with knowledge of synthetic fibers, which had recently been invented. Gordon left Talbott in December of 1962 and in January of 1963 he started his own company aided by Talbott. Gordon was a contractor for them. In 1968 he sold his company to Beck Industries, but continued working for them. The company went bankrupt and so he went to work for U.S. Industries. They gave Gordon the company, Gloray, to manage which was a large manufacturer of men’s sweaters. Gloray sold their goods to chain stores. Gordon worked there three years, until he decided to buy Gloray in 1978. In 1991 this company closed due to the onslaught of cheap imports from China. Gordon states that “the Chinese imports killed the textile industry in the
Reading area” also the company wasn’t able to compete with the low prices from China and Korea. In 1992 Gordon formed a company, still named Gloray, to serve his previous customers. He wasn’t making the products himself, but financing and selling those products to companies as a “jobber.” He worked with small family owned business and began selling to stores such as Costco. Gordon still owns Gloray and sells his products to stores such as Bloomingdales and Nordstrom’s and small boutiques. No manufacturing is done in the United States, but instead made in China. They also have an office in New York, which is where most of the designing takes place. The Reading office is where most of the billing and regulating takes place. After Talbott shut down their mill, the outlet stores still remained. Talbott Knitting Mill had their retail outlet store located on North Sixth and Hiesters Lane. The Talbott outlet sold dresses, sportwear, and men’s wear.

Another textile manufacturing company that calls Reading home is H. Oritsky Inc. In 1899 Isadore Oritsky started a clothing manufacturing operation in Philadelphia. His son, Herbert took over his father’s pants-making company in 1929. The company moved to 106 Grape St. in Reading in 1943. During World War II, Oritsky stayed in business by manufacturing coats for the U.S. armed forces. In the 1950s, the company began to focus entirely on making quality sport coats and suits for stores such as Brooks Brothers and expensive men’s outlets. In the early 80s and 90s, employees received notices that the plant was closing, but loans from the city saved the company. In 1986, Herbert Oritsky retired from the company. Hartmarx Corp. of Chicago bought the company and its president was Oritsky’s nephew, Michael Schiffman. Citing foreign competition and fashion veering away from expensive suits, H. Oritsky announced it would close its doors on August 7, 2001 after 102 years in business.

Samuel Cohen resided in Brooklyn, New York and commuted to Reading to manage a factory on Moss St. Samuel came to work for this company that was owned by his sister-in-law’s father’s family. Cohen had no experience in the apparel business, but had previous management knowledge. After commuting from the city for four or five years, Cohen and his wife and son Nick moved to Reading in 1944. Cohen wanted to start his own business, with a partner. Cohen went into this partnership because during the war, the military needed supplies such as military clothing. Cohen stayed with this business as president for 32 years. In the early years of the business, Cohen received a contract with the Navy to make men’s wool swimming trunks. Working for the government meant they were given priority on orders over other mills because they were helping with the war effort. The name Astor was chosen as the company name because John Jacob Astor was the first multi-millionaire in the United States, and thus successful. Eventually Samuel’s sons, Bruce and Nick, became employees in the business as it switched from textile manufacturing to the apparel business. In the transition, Astor began to produce coats, sportswear, and children’s clothing and changed its name to Astor Industries, Inc. In the early 1950s the company began to produce ladies swimwear. Eventually Astor became successful and had outlet stores opened in the late 1960s. These stores were located in Lancaster, Allentown, and two in Reading. In 1972 seven stores were opened in South Florida. In 1995 the manufacturing business was closed, but one store is still open today in West Lawn. Astor produced clothing besides their own for brands such as Rose Marie Reid, Bill Blass, Maidenform, Oscar de la Renta, and for famous fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli.

The David Crystal Brand was another prominent textile business in Reading. This company was founded in 1905 in New York City, but with plants also located in Reading. The Crystal Brand started out first as shirt
manufacturers with 15 plants and then expanded to the coat and suit industry giant. In 1969 General Mills acquired the David Crystal Company. The dress that Crystal became famous for is designed in New York, but stitched in Reading. These dresses include washable house dresses to silk frocks sold at exclusive boutiques. Dorsyl Dress Boutique is one of the plants that receive precut dresses from New York. “All that is needed to be done to these dresses is to add the finishing touches,” states Morris Cohen, treasurer of the company at 7th and Washington Sts. The shirtwaist was a popular trend that was designed by Crystal and found its way to Reading.\textsuperscript{12}

In the 1920s the David Crystal Brand had the first retail outlet stores on Moss St. This company was in the forefront of the outlet business before anyone else.\textsuperscript{13} Izod, a division of Crystal Brands, is also located in Reading. Izod Lacoste Golf and Tennis, which focuses most of its design and marketing on golf, was based entirely in Reading with corporate offices, warehousing, and everything down to the stitching of logos done on-site. Izod Lacoste men and women’s wear items were stored in the division’s warehouse for distribution to retail stores.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1951 Reuben Viener came to Allentown, Pennsylvania to run a manufacturing company, with no knowledge of the business. He talked his brother-in-law, Irvin Katzman, into going into business with him. Katzman and Viener were owners of RK, a shirt company during the 1950-60s. The company was successful in part due to the outbreak of the Korean War and the t-shirts were in demand. They then bought a factory in Reading that was making blouses and thus became involved with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). They became contract manufacturers, meaning they didn’t make a product for a specific brand, but supplied the labor force. At this time they also began making golf shirts. These shirts were beginning to be popular at this time and sold to people such as Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus.\textsuperscript{15} Viener bought out Katzman’s share of the company and moved the plant to Reading, where his son George Viener, in 1965, ran it. Viener had a degree in economics and knew that end of the business; the company was also unionized. The biggest obstacle was getting labor.

Eventually, Viener joined with an old fraternity brother, Neal Jacobs, to create NGN. Jacobs had previously worked for a garment factory in Blue Ball from 1965-1969.\textsuperscript{16} This company closed in 1983. One theme that seemed to resonate throughout this interview with Mr. Viener was the Pennsylvania German work ethic that the workers were motivated to work by noble and admirable reasons.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Made to Measure: the Uniform Magazine} is the story of the Lurio’s family business and how they made a name for themselves in Reading.\textsuperscript{18} “Though Elbeco Inc. has had its share of names—M. Lurio & Brother, Wide Awake Shirt Company, Lurio Brothers Company—one thing that hasn’t changed is its realization of the American dream. When Meyer Lurio came to America from Lithuania in 1879, he probably didn’t know he would become a big part of a successful company, one that would endure to celebrate 100 years in business.” Meyer was just the first of four generations to be a part of the textile and apparel industry. The brand is known nationwide for its quality uniform apparel for the law enforcement, fire, emergency services, U.S. Postal, security and transportation industries. Elbeco manufactures some of the best-selling uniform apparel, and its name is known both by the people who wear it and those who sell it.
The story starts back with 18-year-old Meyer Lurie, who immigrated without knowing how to read or write English. The “e” at the end of his name was mistaken for an “o” at Ellis Island, and his surname was officially changed. He peddled thread, buttons and other trim items among farmhouses and small towns across Pennsylvania. Eventually he worked his way up to become a wholesale store owner, supplying other peddlers and retail stores with items to sell. His two brothers, Benjamin and Joseph, joined him from Lithuania. Benjamin teamed up with Meyer in running the store in Lancaster, Pa., and it was renamed M. Lurio & Brother. They became successful supplying trim items and notions to the many apparel manufacturers across the state.

One of the Lurios’ customers had hit rough times. The Wide Awake Shirt Company had opened in 1889, but it was facing financial problems shortly after the turn of the century. In 1907, the brothers bought out the shirt manufacturing company and called on Meyer’s son Samuel to manage the Reading, Pa., factory. The items manufactured there were sold under the Wide Awake brand label for decades even after the company officially took on the name Elbeco.

Elbeco Inc. now comprises four domestic facilities each with its own specialty: City Shirt Co. in Frackville, Pa., specializes in the more complicated uniform and postal shirts; Galion Manufacturing in Galion, Ohio, produces trousers; the Reading, PA., building houses the company’s corporate offices and distribution center; and Warsaw Manufacturing, the newest addition in Warsaw, Mo., manufactures trousers. With each acquisition, Elbeco has been able to better service the changing demands of the uniform industry and its customers.

David Lurio is the current president of Elbeco and grandson of Samuel. He explains the largest shift in the industry was the change from made-to-measure uniforms to off-the-shelf, in-stock products. He says, “They were traditionally wool-blended fabrics that were custom measured and made for each individual employee. That had a certain high level of quality, but the cost was an issue. Also the availability of the items was difficult; it took some time to do the measuring and to actually make the garment. That tended to inhibit the attractiveness and growth of uniform programs in the country. It was back in the 1940s or so that the concept of in-stock uniform programs came about. “With that major change, came a boost in uniform demand and sales. Companies could afford the cheaper, mass-manufactured items and could get new hires into uniform programs easily. Over time, says Lurio, the customer began to demand uniforms that were readily available but also with easier care and better comfort. The introduction of polyester blends were received with huge applause, essentially ending the use of wool-blend, dry-clean-only garments that were once so prolific.”

A name worth mentioning with ties to both textile manufacturing and retail outlets is Rachman. For
twenty-seven years, Tobias Rachman was president of Rachman Manufacturing Co. His brother, Frank, was the secretary of the company. The company was located on 1135 Moss St. and at one point made clothing for the army and navy. A subsidiary of their company was Berks Sportswear Inc. Tobias’s son, Roger, also got involved in textiles as the owner of Bobbi Rogers Industries, Inc. Roger was also instrumental in the stating of the outlets in Reading. Roger’s company produced sportswear and dresses. Rachman also had a retail outlet, Cousins Factory Outlet Store, where they sold surplus merchandise, factory samples, and overruns. The store was located at 1265 Perkiomen Ave. Joel Goldberg and Robert Rachman ran and managed Hay Creek Apparel in Birdsboro. Robert is the son of Frank, and nephew of Tobias. The Rachman family has been in the apparel and textile business in Berks County for many years, and the business continues under the leadership of Robert’s son Darren Rachman.

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Women of Berks County’s Jewish Community

By Allison Owens

As their histories show, Reading’s Jewish women have been active in the area’s Jewish community dating back decades. Their legacy lives on today in the households of female descendants. Women of Berks’ Jewish community stand next to their men, contributing independently, willingly, and equally to the county and to their culture. In many respects, the Jewish women of Berks have dedicated their time and efforts to not only bettering the area as a whole, but also to strengthen their Jewish community from within. By preserving their rich cultural history in Berks, these women fortify the strength of their culture’s traditions and ideals. In doing so, the county’s Jewish women have helped to culturally enrich Berks.

Their steadfast domestic presence in the homes as mothers and wives has reinforced generations of unencumbered and proud Jewish families. In the synagogues, women have and continue to organize groups of their own to carry out philanthropic endeavors reflective of the faith and charitable attitude of their religion. Jewish women also play an active role in the education of the community’s youth. The Jewish education classes are aided by the commitment of many woman teachers to foster future generations’ participation in the synagogues.

Women organizations of the Jewish community of Berks date back to well before 1900. A Reading Eagle article in 1923 does list the following two women’s organizations: the Sisterhood of Temple Oheb Sholom (1914) and Ladies’ Hebrew Charity League (1905).¹

The activities of these notable groups are heavily chronicled in the Reading Eagle after the 1940s. For decades, Jewish women of Berks have given their time, money, and consideration in one common endeavor—to preserve their rich cultural history in the area and to pass down this history to future generations.

Of the Jewish women’s organizations in Berks today, there are four that have the most continued memberships and activities as well as the most documented histories in the area—the Kesher Zion Sisterhood, the Oheb Sholom Sisterhood, the B’nai B’rith Women, and the Hadassah Women’s group. The Kesher Zion Sisterhood and the Oheb Sholom Sisterhood are subgroups of congregations directly affiliated to each of their respective local synagogues. B’nai B’rith Women is an international organization for Jewish women with 120,000 members.² The Reading organization formed in 1946. It is not unheard of for members of either Kesher Zion Sisterhood or Oheb Sholom Sisterhood to also belong to the B’nai B’rith Women group since the latter is an overarching network of Jewish women who are involved in community service, advocacy and sponsorship of Judaism, women’s rights, and Jewish education throughout the United States and Canada. Hadassah, another women’s social organization, served as a means by which Jewish-American women could better affiliate themselves with their dual-cultured lives. In one local newspaper article, it is stated that “When an American-Jewish woman joins Hadassah she loses none of herself–she becomes more.”³ The major functions of these four women’s organizations are very similar in purpose and intent, only varying significantly in the scales on which adopted projects are completed.
B’nai B’rith as a whole has a much more widespread and global perspective of Jewish affairs compared to Kesher Zion and Oheb Sholom. Some of the most notable projects for women of the B’nai B’rith organization as mentioned on their website are Project Stork (prenatal education program), Everybody Needs Education, and the Children’s Home. Another aspect of B’nai B’rith’s efforts centers on aid and relief funding for global tragedies.

On the local scale, the sisterhoods of both Kesher Zion and Oheb Sholom host a local perspective of the values and traditions of the Jewish culture. The women’s organizations of these two synagogues help their members strengthen their Jewish identities. Like B’nai B’rith, the Kesher Zion Sisterhood and the Oheb Sholom Sisterhood exist to encourage cultural and communal participation among their members. For example, in 1947 the Reading Eagle announced a sum of $11,230 being raised to aid Jewish children throughout Europe by the Hadassah group. It is these charitable campaigns that have proven time and time again the generous personalities of Reading’s Jewish women’s groups.

The Reading Eagle has been a significant component of the sisterhoods’ exposure to the non-Jewish public of Berks County. Oheb Sholom’s Sisterhood had its first archived debut in the local paper on November 13, 1928 in an article concerning the organization’s commemorative dinner gathering in honor of “the boys who gave their lives for their country.” Further information is needed to understand the full context of the paper’s reference to “the boys who gave their lives,” as no specific names or details of their tragic deaths are given in the article. What can be drawn from the article is that the Sisterhood held a dinner in honor of Reading soldiers who died in battle. The point to be made here is that while the Oheb Sholom Sisterhood is a Jewish organization, it would oftentimes hold events that concerned affairs outside of the Jewish culture. Therefore, their efforts can also be seen as means by which they intended to integrate the Jewish community in with the holistic community.

Another important facet of the Jewish women’s organizations in Berks is their appreciation of shared accomplishments, festive occasions, and traditional ceremonies. The two women’s groups of the synagogues frequently hosted luncheons, teas, and social gatherings for new members to celebrate as a group. As on one of many occasions, the Kesher Zion Sisterhood would prepare for prominent Jewish holidays such as Chanukah together in the form of plays and dinners. Birthdays, weddings, baby and bridal showers, and engagements were also commonly notable events within Jewish sisterhoods. In announcing such gatherings to the Reading Eagle, the Kesher Zion Sisterhood and Oheb Sholom Sisterhood would go to considerable lengths to describe décor, attire, attendance, and music. Dresses were illustrated in terms of color and elegance, as were the decorations. One such event was a membership meeting regarding an upcoming fashion show held by Hadassah in 1961. Since the upcoming event was a fashion show, its theme of “Fashions for Your Trip to Israel” emphasized “an innovation in style showing coordinating time and place with dress and accessories.”

Attendance at such events usually took up, at the very least, the last two paragraphs of an article with the most notable attendants’ names denoted along with their spouses. The Kesher Zion Sisterhood had an article written about its “Silver Anniversary” event in 1953 and the list of guests more than doubles the details of the actual occasion. Attendance at such events often reached and surpassed several hundred guests, as made
evident by a Kesher Zion Sisterhood dance in 1935. These types of announcements are available for the Kesher Zion Sisterhood, the Oheb Sholom Sisterhood, and the Hadassah group and can be found in the *Reading Eagle*, though only in much earlier years.

One such announcement from October 8, 1952 is found in the archives available in the databases of the Jewish Community Center. The article “Dinner Tonight to Open Drive for Hadassah” announces a dinner sponsored by the Hadassah women’s group that “marks the opening of Hadassah’s fund raising campaign” for that year. A guest speaker is also stated, as well as over three dozen prominent community members who attended as guests; Mrs. Jack Dunitz appeared as a guest speaker for the Hadassah group in 1952, and Mrs. Moses P. Epstein spoke during that same decade.

Another example is also found in the *Reading Eagle* from the very next year, 1953, on January 20. “Membership Luncheon Held by Senior Hadassah” is spread across the top of the page in bold and italicized font. The body of the article reveals “an Israeli fashion show,” a theme of “design and fashion” with “two green wire dress forms attractively arranged on black tulle,” and ramps “gaily decorated with spring hats resting on colorful hat boxes with potted palms.”

The Jewish sisterhoods of Berks County have quite obviously contributed much of their time to the communities in which they lived. What is even more commendable is the fact that this generosity extended across the oceans to Israel. Trips to Israel were not only encouraged by the women’s groups, but were also sponsored by them. Much of the philanthropic donations made to Israel went towards the advancement of ethical and equal practice of Judaism. Matters of Israel’s economy were showcased at a Hadassah meeting in 1959 where members learned “that a tour of the country would give visitors the opportunity of seeing the work Hadassah is doing there.” Outreach programs have been initiated by each of Berks’ three aforementioned organizations to also advocate for religious freedom as well as the equal treatment of women.

Plays, musicals, and operettas were also an exciting aspect of the Jewish sisterhoods of the Berks area. Whether it was to encourage theater, to emphasize a moral message, to showcase the talents of the sisterhoods’ members, or just to have fun, the performances of each group have meant a lot for a long time. One such performance took place at the Kesher Zion Synagogue. Another *Reading Eagle* article (dated March 12, 1941) shows a picture with four of the Sisterhood’s young members dressed as Arabians and standing around what looks the star of the show—a young Mrs. George Gilman as a king. The types of performances, present in all of the women’s organizations, served as a fun way to encourage unity within the sisterhoods.

It is with this sense of unity that the women of the county’s sisterhoods carried out the affairs that enabled them to emphasize “that mutual understanding is a requisite for universal peace,” so states a Reading Eagle article from November 15, 1969. The article continues to denote the shared principle notion among all of the women’s organizations—that “membership stresses the study of public affairs and active participation in the community’s civic tasks to achieve a better world situation for the welfare of all mankind.” It is to this mantra that many lifetime sisterhood members still pledge allegiance.
Edith Mendelsohn, a lifetime member of the Hadassah Sisterhood, fondly remembers her time spent as both a member of Hadassah and as a secretary of the Ladies Auxiliary group. With more time spent as a Hadassah member, she recalls monthly luncheon meetings where the Jewish women of the community gathered to discuss current events ranging anywhere from popular books, to politics, to current events, or, as she says “whatever was in season.” The food for the monthly luncheons was prepared by the women members, as it was also a sought after duty of the organization. Each year, the Hadassah group hosted a donor luncheon that was considered the peak of the year’s events. Tickets cost $36 and everyone dressed in their best clothes. Mendelsohn warmly recollects that when it came to Hadassah, “everything was fundraising.” The donations from Hadassah’s donor luncheon all went towards providing aid to Israel. As a birthday gift, Mendelsohn remembers her mother-in-law giving her a lifetime membership certificate which, at that time, cost a hefty $150. Despite the price, Mendelsohn remembers that it was a great significance, an “honor,” to be a lifetime member of Hadassah.

Finally, Carol (Crane) Gerber was the first female president of the Berkleigh Country Club in 1996. She was the Chair of the Entertainment committee for many years. Gerber was responsible for bringing the Betsy King Classic Golf Tournament to Berks County beginning in 1996 which benefited many charities, including Bethany Children’s Home. Gerber is a board certified music therapist and directed the Junior League of Reading Songsters, a volunteer chorale group that entertained senior citizens of Berks County.

Notes

5. Ibid.
17. “Membership Luncheon Held by Senior Hadassah.”
20. “About RCOS (Reform Congregation Oheb Sholom).”
23. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.

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Chapters
Celia Schwartz Kornblit and Maurice Kornblit

By Alyssa Williams

This is the story of Celia Schwartz and Maurice Kornblit as told by them in videotaped testimony housed at Albright College Holocaust Resource Center.

Celia Kornblit was the sixth of eight children to Maurice Schwartz. His four eldest children were born to his first wife, and they were Martin, Lizzie, Herman, and Helen. The remaining four children were Nathan, Celia, Magda, and Hamish. Celia remembers her mother, but she had died when Celia was six due to complications from appendicitis. Their father had gone during Passover to bring her back from the hospital, but it didn’t turn out as expected.

“Mama just didn’t come back, that’s all. She went away and didn’t return.” Celia’s father was left with small children to care for, so Helen dropped out of school at age 12 to help with the children. Lizzie and Hamish, the oldest girl and youngest boy, had gone to live with a grandparent, but Lizzie was sent back. At 16 or 18, Lizzie took very good care of her younger siblings and ran the household.

The Schwartz’s lived on Hedvábí Ulice, meaning Silk Street, in their small town in Czechoslovakia. The street was a predominately Jewish one, although the town did not have ghettos. Everyone intermixed. There were several synagogues in the town, and Celia remembered every shop closing for Shabbat.

Maurice Schwartz was a very religious man, and Celia remembered always walking to synagogue. For a living, Schwartz worked in the fruit and vegetable business. The children attended the local public school and eventually gymnasium, so it was left for their father to provide them with the basic religious education.

Celia attended gymnasium an extra year to learn special courses not covered in the general curriculum. This extra program taught her various skills, including shorthand in German. Celia became the most educated of her family, and appreciated that value, “It helped me a lot. I think it saved my life.” Her first job after gymnasium was as a shop clerk in a book store, but she moved on to work in the office of a grain company. She stayed there until it became illegal for the Jews to work, and their licenses were revoked. This was not until the Heleinist party took power in Czechoslovakia, and everything changed.

Before that, as she and her siblings grew up in Czechoslovakia, Celia did not recall heavy antisemitism. She remembered some, and gave an example of a group of boys wanting to beat her siblings and herself as they crossed a bridge around town. One of the boys, according to Celia, would later become an SS soldier.

In 1933, when he started to come to power, was when Celia remembered first hearing of Hitler. She thought it was probably from the papers and radio. The Schwartz’s didn’t feel really threatened at the time, Lizzie even had a German boyfriend in Prague. She went to Germany with him for a time, but was forced to come back at the end of ‘39. When Lizzie was married, she was forced to have two ceremonies. She’d had a
“progressive” Jewish wedding, but their father wouldn’t accept that, so she got married again in their house by an orthodox Rabbi. Lizzie was pregnant at the time of the second wedding, and had a son. She and her family lived in their town for a time before moving to the town her husband was from.

In 1939, the Czechoslovakian government fell apart. Slovakia became the First Slovak Republic (‘39-’45) and a client state of Nazi Germany. Celia referenced a “Halinka Party,” or the Heleinist Party, and described it as their version of the Nazi party. Konran Helein, the head of that party died, and a Catholic priest, Jozef Tiso, took over leadership.

At this time was a military operation based near her town, and soldiers came for a time to be based there. Their purpose was to fly out of their town to bomb parts of Poland. This presence of the Germans in their town changed Celia’s life. She said she remembers the soldiers being nice and rather educated. At this time, Celia was still able (as a Jewish person) to go out and “promenade” in the evenings, and they would run into soldiers. The soldiers did not frighten her so much at this point, but did eventually stop and her and her sisters from going out with some curious comments.

The night that preempted all of their licenses being revoked reminded Celia of a Slovakian Kristallnacht. People were being run out of town, and there were sudden new persecutions being implemented against them. All of Jews had their licenses were taken away—business licenses, etc. There was no compensation for these losses. The Jewish shop owners were required to take in a non-Jewish person, teach him the business, and then sell the business via a contract that the new owner could pay for the store over ten years time. Essentially, this resulted in almost no compensation at all. Within the ten years, the Jews would not be left in their towns.

The Jews now had to wear yellow stars, were not allowed out after 5:00 pm, had to have identification cards (they could be stopped anytime and asked for it), could be arrested for anything, couldn’t sit in the front of the bus, and as Celia put it, “We couldn’t do nothing.” They couldn’t earn money or work…unless they could somehow find work with Jewish people or do work from home. Her brother worked as a baker, and her sister worked in people’s homes as a seamstress. This was how they survived. Celia’s religious father was also affected by the sudden prohibition of Kosher meat. Not only could Jews not own a butcher shop or service, but there were laws against the Kosher ceremonies altogether. Celia said that they were cut off from the world. They couldn’t go out after dark and couldn’t travel or afford to travel. There were soldiers brought in to enforce the new laws and “beat you up, arrest you—anything!”

To give an example of their cruelty, these soldiers would cut off orthodox Jewish men’s beards, and would have done this to her father if he ever left the home—which he no longer did. He never went out. Celia remembered not realizing that these troubles were coming, that she couldn’t accept the possibility of such events until it was actually happening. She’d known of Hitler’s rise to power in Germany from newspapers and radio, but she never imagined that he could actually attempt to wipe out the entire Jewish people.

In 1942, Celia went to a sister-in-law’s wedding. Celia was 21, and came for the wedding on Sunday. On Monday she took the bus back home. It was late in the afternoon already, and a minister sat with her. Celia
told him it was going to be late by the time she got home, and he told her not to worry, he would walk her home—and he did.

On Tuesday she went to the dentist. She had a tooth pulled. The dentist asked her why she was walking around like this, and Celia didn’t understand. According to the dentist, while she was gone, something started happening and all the girls had left town. The dentist told her she better go home and not be seen. Celia went home afterwards and told her family what he’d told her.

The family didn’t understand what was happening until they received a “draft certificate” saying that they had to report. They were going to be sent to work for six months (or so said the draft certificate), and then they’d be released. Meanwhile, the boys had already been working in camps. Girls were trying to avoid having to go, causing military guards to go out looking for them. Celia and her sisters went to hide in her brother-in-law’s home, because they had two sons, no daughters. There was an announcement saying that if the children did not go, they would take the parents. Celia and her sisters went home and decided that they would go. They were young, unlike their father, and could hopefully handle the work.

Lizzie, Helen, Celia, and Magda all were “drafted.” They were supposed to report to the train station, so they went there to gather. About sixteen girls showed up. Since there was just a few, they were told to go home that night and meet the next day at the gymnasium.

The girls were then told that since their father did not have a wife, one of the sisters could stay. Initially, it was decided that the youngest sister to stay, which was Magda. This decision changed that night when a large group of townspeople, Jewish and non-Jewish, came to their house because they wanted to help. These people helped them decide that Lizzie should stay because she would be able to send them packages. Celia finished that sentiment saying, “And that is how her death sentence was sealed.”

The girls were not given any notice as to where they were going, but they were given a paper to sign, which said they were being sold to the Germans. Celia negated this, and said it was the other way around. Tiso’s government was paying the Germans to take the Jews off their hands. “Never to return us.”

Before the girls were transported, there was an outbreak of typhoid fever. This prolonged their time at home before they were immunized and approved for transport. The Czech guards also brought in a few more girls who were hiding. They were then marched to the railroad and loaded onto a passenger train. By night they were taken to a military barrack, which turned out to be a sort of concentration camp/prison. Celia remembered that there were girls that had already been there for weeks, and that they were crazy. She’d said, “They were out of their minds.” There was no water, no toilets, no beds, straw on the floor. “They were running around…They were crazy.”

Celia said she was flabbergasted and just didn’t understand what was going on. They hadn’t known what to expect, and she told her sisters that she wanted to learn when the first transport out of there was, because they weren’t going to stay there.
The guards had this transport in mind for them anyway. They were soon put on a different passenger train. There was one guard that knew her from their hometown, and he wanted to let her go. According to Celia, “He said, ‘It’s night. I’ll let you go.’” But she told him that she wasn’t by herself. She had two sisters, and wasn’t going without them. The soldier told her that was too much, so nobody was going anywhere.

They went to Poland, where the Czech guards handed them off to the SS. The SS put them on cattle trains, and they were taken to Auschwitz. It was March 26, and it was raining.

“Before we came into Auschwitz, it was a man’s camp only,” remarked Celia. She and her sisters were among the first women in Auschwitz. Ten barracks were taken and a wall was built around it, creating a women’s camp. The male inmates already there probably built the wall before the women’s arrival.

Upon their arrival, the women were marched from the train station into Auschwitz. They were then marched into an unfinished wooden building (which would later become the laundry building) where there were tubs and they were sanitized. It was snowing, and they were standing naked for hours. Celia was with her sisters, one in front and one in back of her.

Celia remembers a particularly horrific portion of the ordeal, and talked about there being a doctor’s table and an SS attendant who was searching for gold and diamonds in the vaginas of those being processed to enter the camp. Barely able to form the words, Celia remarked, “These were kids… and he was tearing them apart.” “I had no idea what he was doing. He had this bloody cloth there, and he must have gotten sick of it. He said ‘Virgins step out.’ This is what saved us.” They were shaved and had to get into tubs to be “disinfected.” Afterwards, they received a Russian prisoner’s uniform and a pair of boots. It was night before they got out of there. They were taken to block 10. There was straw on the floor. “We just prayed to God we shouldn’t wake up anymore.” “But we did… wake up.”

Three hours before Celia’s transport came in, they brought in a 1000 prisoners from Ravensburg, Germany. These women had already been imprisoned for years. They were political prisoners, wearing red triangles; criminals, wearing green triangles; “Bible-study people,” wearing purple triangles; prostitutes, wearing black triangles; and women with Jewish boyfriends or husbands, wearing a black or yellow star.

Celia was able to speak German, so she could communicate with these prisoners. She commented that many of the prisoners, especially the political ones were very intelligent. These women were able to educate her. They said they didn’t know about any killing, didn’t know about gassing, but they did know how to behave in a concentration camp. They told her that they were brought in to help the Germans kill them. In fact, when Celia’s group entered from Czechoslovakia, the prisoners attacked them like animals.

In the morning, they had what looked like chicken pox. Their whole bodies were stung by the fleas. They were left to rest for two days or so, and then had to work. They were fed while working in Auschwitz, and the men’s camp did the cooking. 4 a.m. was roll call. Celia was told by the prisoners from the other camp that when they were called to roll call to be the first one there, “Do whatever they tell you, and you’ll be okay—But they didn’t really know what was happening either.”
The prisoner uniforms were infested with lice. The women were standing outside in the dark and cold, and other prisoners were telling them to move around or they’d get cold. One girl was out of her mind, and the SS came and took her away. She didn’t come back. Celia believes she was injected, but she doesn’t know for sure.

The SS guards would give the girls instructions during roll call, but many of the girls didn’t understand because they didn’t speak German. As a result, the SS would beat them. Celia started telling the girls what the guards were saying (turn right, turn left, etc.) and the capos saw this. She soon became an interpreter. Celia had been out working for about two weeks at “demolishing” buildings, before her language skills won her the position of interpreter. Girls continued to do the demolishing work, but they didn’t know what they were doing so walls would come down on them and they’d be killed or maimed. According to Celia, this was just what the Nazis wanted.

If a girl was killed, another prisoner had to drag/carry her back to the camp. If some-body was hurt, “that was it.” She’d be brought back to the camp, but nothing was done. The crematoria were there, but “not by the camp.” Maurice Kornblit, Celia’s soon-to-be husband, worked in the crematoria. As soon as he came, he was picked to do this because he was tall and strong. According to both Maurice and Celia, “They took him right away.”

Celia was in block 10, block 11 was a men’s block. Referring to the block, Celia said, “It was a punishing block. This is how I would describe it. There were beatings, hangings, there was shooting going on. In the basement lived the guys who worked in the crematoria. They couldn’t get in touch with anybody. They worked in the crematoria, and they came back straight to the basement. They couldn’t get with anybody else. At night they were out working.”

Celia didn’t have to go out to work for set daily hours anymore because she was an interpreter, instead she waited for instruction. One day, she went over to the boards separating her from the block. It was 11 o’clock in the morning and she didn’t know what made her do it, but she saw a guard standing there, and the block “ruler” was bringing out somebody and walking him to the back. This guard was shooting at the man as he walked. And there was a hanging, every day at 11 o’clock. Celia thought, “God can I stand on my feet and look at it? What they did… The following day I went to look again. Every day I got the chance. One day I looked out, and there were hundreds of Russian workers… and from my town, a doctor was standing on a wagon, no horse.” They were all killed, and the men were loading the bodies on the wagons to be taken to the crematoria. At night, when everyone else came back from work, it was clean. According to Celia, these were not any Jews, because the guards often said, “A bullet is too expensive for a Jew.”

Summer came, and they started bringing in one transport after another, 1,000 a day, sometimes 2,000. These were going directly into sorting, and many directly to the gas chambers. One day, they brought in mothers and children from Slovakia, and there were so many in this particular transport that the guards could not “finish them” in one day. These women and children were housed overnight, and the SS allowed mothers to reclaim their children. Celia spoke to them, and they told her what was going on.
“This is when I knew I would never see anybody from my family again,” said Celia, “And I prayed to God, ‘We are here. Please no more’… But they did it anyhow.” Celia learned that the women with the black triangles weren’t usually actual prostitutes. They were “made prostitutes” by the SS, but not because they wanted to take advantage of these women. While some probably did, it was the common idea that laying with a Jewish woman would “disgrace their superior race.”

The Bible-studiers, who were old women and “wonderful people,” were taken to work in houses around the camp where the SS lived. “They took them to raise the children, to cook their meals, clean the houses,” said Celia, “And our hideous SS women came at roll call especially to beat up these women because they would not stand up for roll call. They told the SS women ‘they don’t bow. They don’t stand for anybody, only God.’ They didn’t stand up, and were beaten up or knocked down—Just because it was a pleasure to do.”

Only the Jews were tattooed at the beginning in Auschwitz. Celia is #65. Her tattoo read, “1065.” Celia could not protect her sisters physically because they were not working in the same places, but there were exceptions because she was an interpreter. Once Magda passed out from working in the heat, and Celia rushed in with a little bit of water. Magda also reminded Celia of a panic that had broken out. She was being trampled, Celia came and chased everyone away so that it was possible she could stand up. Celia didn’t remember it at all. Magda had to remind her.

SS men with dogs would sometimes get bored, according to a horrific recollection of Celia’s. They would throw something past the border/line that the prisoners were allowed to cross. The officer would command a man to retrieve whatever he threw, but when the man would go, the officer would sic the dog upon him. The officer would then shoot the man, but only after the dog had gotten the victim. The officer would then tell his commanding officers that he had tried to escape. Other times, the SS would walk around with the dogs and let them take bites of prisoners.

Celia’s sisters worked in the “clothing store.” People from the trains would have their clothing brought into that building by the men, and then the women would sort it out. The clothing was then packed and shipped to Germany. Her sisters worked there with a little German woman dubbed a “prostitute” and a little girl named Herta, and she liked Magda. She was a little chubby, and Magda called her “little crumb.” Whenever she could, she made it easier for her.

The women sometimes came across items such as chocolate there, and once, Magda wanted Celia to have a piece of chocolate, so she put it in her pocket. She was caught. Magda was beaten, but she never told Celia about this until 1995. The SS woman came in, but knew Celia so she said that Magda would not be punished. Still, she could not come to work anymore. Celia remembers how thankful she was for that. If someone had done something wrong, they’d be killed. They were either shot or sent to a “punishment commando,” which was a farm with starving German women on it, as described by Celia. These starved women would kill the Jewish woman sent there for a piece of bread. There was a day when Celia was standing at a gate, and a prisoner who was Polish and German came over to her and told her that they brought in German Jews, and these prisoners were all going to be gassed. Celia told him, “You’re an Antisemite, and you’re trying to scare me.”
He told her no, he was telling the truth. It was the truth, but she couldn’t believe him.

One day they brought in the old women from Slovakia. The Nazis were building the crematoria, and it was then that they made the first selection. The guards came in at night in a truck. The SS woman was called Frau Mandel and no one was allowed out. The doors were locked. Jewish male prisoners were grabbing the selected women by the legs and throwing them into the truck. The SS lady came out and started yelling at the guard in charge, saying that she couldn’t let them do that. She was taken away and never seen again. The old women were being told that they were being taken to an old age home where they wouldn’t have to work anymore.

After that, they started to bring in non-Jews from Poland. Birkenau, the second Auschwitz camp, was finished and they started bringing in people from France by the thousands. People were coming from Holland, Greece, very few from Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany… They were coming “in such masses. You couldn’t keep up,” explained Celia.

Non-Jews all went straight into the camp. Many of the Jews went straight to the crematoria. They never saw the camp. There was one transport that came in from France, and these women marched in singing their national anthem. “They could do this. We couldn’t do that, but we weren’t in the mood to sing anyhow, “said Celia, “But this is how they came in marching, and that didn’t go on. Not many survived anyway.”

Celia and her sisters had actually been the very first transport into Birkenau. For a short time, the camp was fairly empty. One of the other girls from their transport, Kartya, became “the head of the whole camp.” She was a Slovak Jewish girl and knew who was coming, who was going, who was dying, etc. They all tried to help each other. More Slovakian women with children were coming in, and they tried to get them easier jobs.

In September of 1942, Celia contracted typhus. She remembered standing in the rain, barely being able to see or hear, but she knew that if you went to the hospital, you wouldn’t survive. Celia knew that if soldiers were short on their quota for the gas chambers, they would make it up with people in the hospital. In December of that year, an event Celia referred to as the “Great Selection” occurred. It was during Hanukkah. At 4 am the women were forced to line up at the end of Barrack 25. Beside that barrack was a massive ditch. Celia had been able to escape this selection because she’d been called to another block to help in the clean up of a body there, but her sisters were a part of the “Great Selection.”

What the women had to do was jump across this large ditch. If they made it across, they could live. If they didn’t, they died. Celia heard this from a woman who made it across the ditch and was allowed to start work, and instantly was afraid for her sisters. She made the decision that if her sisters didn’t make it, she would offer up her life as well. Fortunately, her sisters survived.

Out of the thousands that had been there, only 1250 women were left. Her sisters went back to work in the clothing store. Celia went back to what she’d been doing for a little while. It was winter and December. Life wasn’t about to get any easier for the women left, and Celia added, “They started to do experiments. It was Mengele.”
One morning, their guards were told to leave six or eight girls in the camp and not let them march out to work. These guards (who were not SS) forgot to do it. Soon, these guards came running back for the eight girls. Celia had climbed up to the second level of the barrack to attend to a sickly girl there. The guards didn’t care who they chose because it was their lives or the eight girls. They took eight girls non-discriminately, and those girls were taken to the hospital. They were gone all day long. Celia was on the second level, so she was safe.

What they did to the girls was sterilize them. All of the girls that had been sterilized died. There were men who were also taken and castrated, and they died except for one that Celia knew to be living in Philadelphia after the war.

The next time they collected girls for the medical experiments, Celia felt she would have definitely been taken. What saved her was the fact that the water was frozen. This somehow hindered the camp too much for the guards to take her.

All of these events occurred in Birkenau. Eventually, a canteen was opened for prisoners. Celia ended up working there almost until the end. She could sell powder, soup, and some other items to Jewish prisoners who worked there. She was a sales clerk, and just had to prepare the coupons that would function as money. Men would bring in the merchandise and do the bookkeeping. Celia met her husband there.

The transports started to flow in again, and many from her own hometown were sent in and she (and her sisters) didn’t even realize it. Celia said by the time she found those whom they know, their friends and family couldn’t walk anymore. They were too far gone, and were taken away to die.

Celia remembers one man, a Czech-Jew, who a locksmith at Auschwitz-Birkenau. His name was Erick Shon. He came with his toolbox, and in this he could smuggle in things. He was in contact with the underground, and he brought messages as often as possible. There was a little bit they knew, but they really couldn’t receive much information from within Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The camp was getting bigger and bigger, and they needed more space so they built another sub-camp. Into this sub-camp, they started to bring in whole families and put them on an “S.B.” or special handling. Celia and the other prisoners couldn’t understand why these people were being treated so well. They were able to live together, eat well, attend school, write letters, etc. This went on for 6 months. That was the end of the term in S.B. Celia knew a girl who had a friend who was in the S.B., and he was a painter. After the 6 months were up, Erick Shon’s wife was brought in along with a son of his. The SS did not realize the relation, but Shon was able to visit during his work and eventually his wife became pregnant.

The Nazis decided that they were going to empty that camp. The guards didn’t realize, but Celia and her prisoners knew. They informed the prisoners in the S.B. Erick Shon wanted to die with his family, but he was told no. They begged a teacher to kill the children—to do something for the children, maybe kill an SS man, but the teacher just killed himself. These people were pushed into the ovens. Erick took his son out and brought him into the men’s camp, but Erick could not save his wife, because she was pregnant.
Celia reflected on the handful of escape attempts that were made by prisoners at Auschwitz. There was a man who was supposed to escape, but found an SS soldier that he knew from before in his hometown, and thought he was the same person. The SS soldier said that if he gave him gold or other compensation, he would help him escape. The prisoner collected the money for the SS officer— and then the officer shot him and took everything he had prepared for him. He went in to the commando house and told them that the prisoner had tried to escape, so he killed him.

There were other prisoners who knew of the dead man’s plan, including one man who decided to carry it out. He saved food for three weeks. He put pepper or something around it so the dogs would not sniff him out, and then at night, he managed to get out. He managed to get back to Slovakia. He went there and told them what was going on, and the people there didn’t want to know about the camp. It wasn’t that they didn’t believe him—they just didn’t want to hear about it.

Eventually, there were a couple of escapes. There was a girl from Belgium named Mala, and she became the interpreter after Celia. She and a young man named Edek escaped together. They “organized” two SS uniforms, they dressed up, and they got on a motorcycle and drove off to Krakow. They were out four or six weeks, and Celia said they all prayed that the SS wouldn’t catch up and find them—but they did. The escaped prisoners were brought back and put into the prison barracks. One man smuggled Mala a razor, and she tried to cut her veins before she was hung. Edek wasn’t a Jew, just Polish, so he was shot. As Mala was hung, she yelled in Polish, “It’s not too long. Hold out. You’ll survive!”

Celia also shared what she knew of the Auschwitz-Birkenau uprising. According to what she’d been aware of at the time, Celia said that dynamite was smuggled into the clothing warehouse, and one of the girls handed it over to the male prisoners who came at night collecting bodies for the crematoria. When the uprising occurred, the prisoners killed a couple of the SS that were there. Celia states that all who participated were caught. They were all shot, and Celia thought they were going to shoot the other prisoners too. The SS caught the girls that had aided the uprising, including Rosa Robota, who worked in the clothing depot. They were all hanged, but before that they’d been questioned for months about the uprising. The young women never gave away any living Sonderkommando names. The *Sonderkommando* was the name given to the group of prisoners who worked in the crematoriums and gas chambers.

In December, Celia took her sisters out of the job where they worked in Birkenau and took them back to Auschwitz. There they did work a little bit longer, but they were being shown movies. These films were brought in by a Commander Hess, and he asked them to remember him kindly. Celia remembered they heard about the American bombers and flyers around then, too. Celia said they, “Prayed to God that they should come and smash all of Auschwitz. With us together, we didn’t care.”

The girls had wanted to be seamstresses in Auschwitz, but that didn’t happen. Instead, they ended up loading and unloading trains. In January 1945, they were put on the road to go marching. Celia says these death marches were made up of all the prisoners left from each camp. They were marching them to Germany, but the SS didn’t know there was nowhere there for them to go. During the march, they were given better clothes and food. Celia remembers washing in the snow, because they’d been called “dirty Jews” for so long, and
they wanted to be clean. If someone fell during the march, he/she was shot, regardless of what kind of prisoner the person was. They were never told where they were going, but Celia thinks that is because one actually knew.

They were put on coal trains, and taken to Ravensbrück. They didn’t have to work there, and it was on a Sunday that they were freed. Her sisters were there too, but they weren’t in the same barrack. Celia was serving soup there, and it was a beautiful day when she finished. She said she walked out the door and didn’t see anybody, but then there were people outside the perimeters. All the guards posted around the camp had disappeared.

Celia and her sisters left too. They gathered potatoes from outside the perimeter, and ate those using the stoves still there. They were initially afraid to go in case the Nazis came back and killed them all. They eventually moved out, and a different pair of sisters joined hers. They started to march into town. They didn’t know how long it would be, but they marched out of the woods and to the first town. They went to cross a bridge and ran into American soldiers. Celia didn’t know what or who they were at first, but saw the Germans throwing down their weapons for them. These Americans had saved them along with Russian forces. The Russian soldiers gave them potatoes, beans and cabbage.

While with the military, Celia got typhus for a second time. She was privileged to get some meat and milk because she got sick again. There was no medicine, but she also got bread. The Americans and Russians told them to eat and rest. That’s all they said they wanted them to do, but Celia eventually learned that the Russians wanted to take them back to Russia with them to help them rebuild.

Once they were rested up, they left the military. They were offered different aid from the military, but all they wanted to do was go home. Celia and her sisters returned to Czechoslovakia where she would eventually be reunited with her future husband.

Celia’s future husband, Maurice Kornblit, was born in 1914 in Garbacta, Poland. Only 115 Jewish families lived in this town. Maurice and his family lived there until 1938. In 1927, when Maurice was twelve, his father died. His father had been a butcher, and this would be the field that Maurice, too, would pursue in his adult life. His mother was left with six children, and it became very hard “to put food in mouths,” but Maurice helped his mother manage the butchering business.

Once, Maurice asked his mother a question, saying, “Mom you’re such a beautiful woman, why don’t you get married to get yourself a partner?” His mother laughed and cried, “My child, pleasure I’ve had enough, the proof is here. If I take another husband and he pushes around my children, I’ll die.” He was twelve; yet, he understood what she meant.

At 19, Maurice decided to get a degree in butchery. It was law that a butcher had to have a degree. He went to city hall to sign himself in, but he knew couldn’t get a diploma until he was 21. He told them at city hall that he was Maurice Moishe Kornblitz and that he was turning 21 and hadn’t been called for the military. The man said no such person exists, so Maurice turned to leave. In that same year, Maurice was called to the
calvary for two years as Moishe Kornblitz. He came home in 1936, and was married immediately. He and his wife also had twins right away. Sadly, his wife and children perished during the Holocaust.

In 1937, Maurice and his family were living in Punick, Poland for a short time. The previous year, Garbarcta had a ghetto installed and Maurice and his family returned there to live with his mother. Maurice knew that people were going to starve, so at night he gathered cattle and flour. This continued until 1939 when SS surrounded Garbacta because Poles were jumping trains and stealing ammunition and other supplies.

The SS had all of the Jewish men stand in a line, and began shooting them. Maurice’s younger brother was killed at his feet. An SS man had shot both him and his brother, and his brother asked, “Why are you shooting me? I want to work!” and the SS man just gave him another shot. “That was all,” said Maurice, “He was dead.”

75 Jewish men, including Maurice, were taken to a lumber yard where they were forced to lie face down. Maurice still had another brother and cousin with him, and they decided to say a prayer because they were sure they were about to be shot and killed. They were not killed. Instead the SS took their names and birthdays, and then the men continued to lay on the ground until a cattle train came. They rode the train all night and day, and Maurice remembers his brother growing “blue in the face” from not eating. Maurice still had a gold watch, and decided he had no reason to keep it. There was an SS man who took out a sandwich, so Maurice thought he’d be able to trade the watch for a piece of bread and salami. The SS officer agreed, and Maurice believes this helped keep his brother alive.

Finally, they reached Auschwitz. As Maurice phrased it, they were given new names there: a number. He was 5775. His younger brother was in line in front of him, and Maurice allowed him to rest against them. They saw another prisoner who had been there longer pass by, and Maurice asked him if they were going to live or die. The prisoner told him that if they survived three months, they would live. This was not especially reassuring news for Maurice.

He was put into a barrack with his brother and cousin, but the next day had to stand in line again. The head guard of barrack 11, the punishment barrack, saw Maurice and his cousin and had them assigned to his bunker. From there, they were not able to communicate with any of the other prisoners. Eventually six other prisoners came in, from Czechoslovakia, and they told them not to worry. They would be working in the crematorium. The camp was still only Auschwitz then, as Birkenau was still being constructed.

In Maurice’s words, “The work was bringing in people from their countries, from everywhere, and putting them in the ovens.” He continued, “When they were bringing them in they were telling them to undress to go into the bathroom. They put them into one big room and they put in gas from the ceiling and the people would hold on for maybe ten minutes and then they were dead. Then we would have to clean up the whole yard and then you take six bodies and put them in a carrier and shove them into the oven, and that was going on everyday. At night, they took us back to our bunker to sleep. That was going on every day until one day, I recognized an acquaintance of mine and a cousin of mine.” Maurice said a Kaddish for them before shoving them into the oven to be burned.
He had already worked in the crematorium for three months when he saw his little brother, but he wasn’t allowed to talk to him. Still, he told his brother to tell the men guarding him that he had a brother working in the crematorium and anything they want, he would bring them if he could talk to him. They told them that they wanted watches, gold, money. Maurice said no problem and gathered some of it in his hat to see his brother. When he went to meet with the man, he didn’t see his brother and the man said it was because his brother was being disinfected for lice. So Maurice took the gold and other precious items back. A SS officer came to search them and Maurice knew that if he was caught, he’d be shot. He threw the hat with the items into a barrel, but the SS saw it. They took him into the crematorium and “knocked the life out of me,” but they took him back alive.

After six weeks, he fell asleep at work and the SS came in. They kicked him and said “They want you, they came in for you.” A different SS man took him to a commander, and Maurice was assigned different work. This new work was digging ditches and a day later he was covering the ditches back up. That went on almost the whole winter, until he got sick from eating whatever he could get his hands on. Maruice came down with something involving terrible diarrhea. The frost froze his pants to his backside and then he solicited himself to go to the hospital.

After six months, Maurice was put under another commander. One day, around 6 pm, while he was still sick and in hospital block 7, the SS came and everyone was told to go out into the yard. Maurice said that the SS were reading “Haftling’s” (prisoners) numbers, and that he was waiting for them to read his number. He thanked God when they finally read his number, because the rest went to the crematorium.

In October or September, he was able to go into his future wife’s camp. By this point, he was certain that his first wife and children did not survive. He met Celia in Auschwitz and was often joking around with her, until he one day when he got very serious. He was at one side of the camp and she was on the other side, but on Sunday he had met another prisoner that was a gypsy singing to his future wife. He told Celia, “If God spares us, you’re going to be my wife. If you die you’re going to heaven a married woman,” because he had found her a ring. Celia wore that band her entire life, never knowing where it came from or who. There was an inscription on the inside, but she could not read it.

1944, they took 600 male prisoners, including Maurice, and put them into German cattle trucks. They brought them to a camp called Stuthoff. About 1200 men were brought there to work. One day they took them out to work and Maruice had no food, so when he saw a train with sugar beets, he took some beets and he saw a “Haftling” come after him for it. The “Haftling” found him and gave him a lecture.

In October 1944, the men were split 600 on one side and 600 on another side. Maurice was taken to an airport field in Germany, and thought that they must be there to die. Instead, they worked to break up mountains by day, and went back to the hanger at night. They did this from October to December.

During this time, Maurice became acquainted with a German who agreed to pick him up in his car and take him to a town called called Stuttgart. Maurice and the man agreed on a meeting place near the mountain, and from there, Maurice was taken to the man’s sister’s house. The townspeople recognized him as a prisoner,
and started to ask questions about why he was there. As a result, Maurice was taken to a friend of the man’s house. This man was a painter, and Maurice stayed there until the air raids became too bad for anyone to stay.

Because of the air raids, the group went to the country. At this time, Maurice went by the German name of Marion Lentz, but he couldn’t do anything about the number tattooed on his arm. That number would identify him to any SS. Maurice started to burn the number off of his skin using an acid called Proline. He would first sandpaper the skin with the number, and then put the acid on it. The pain was unbearable, but it was worth it to stay alive.

Maurice eventually became friends with a girl in a restaurant who offered him food. He’d already had a new girlfriend that he was sleeping and living with, and this restaurant girl made her jealous. She gave his name to the Gestapo and Maurice was arrested and held for seven days. The Gestapo wanted to find out who he was. He knew if they found out that he was Jewish, they would shoot him right away. They beat him constantly, but he wouldn’t give them his name. Next, they hung him by his feet till he turned blue.

Bombing was happening constantly during all of this. Maurice was then taken along with a group of escaped prisoners. Maurice remembers waving down a truck and telling the trucker he was just released from prison and he that he did not have the strength to go on. The trucker generously allowed him to hitch a ride. A short while later, the pair had to stop the truck in a forest to avoid bombers. They decided to abandon the truck because it was full of ammunition. While they were waiting for the bombing to die down, Maurice found out that the trucker was not German, but that he was Polish. He decided that he could actually tell the trucker about his true identity. Fortunately, the man reacted in a positive manner.

After the bombing ceased, Maurice and the Polish trucker returned to the truck. Due to the bombing a bridge that they had to cross was knocked out and they were unable to continue in the truck. Maurice decided to set out on foot. After walking several miles, he saw a gas station where he was able to make contact to return to Stuttgart.

He soon ran into his second girlfriend who put an exhausted Maurice to bed. While he was resting, he heard the news of the arrival of Allied troops and began to celebrate the arrival of the French and U.S. Armies, who had just marched into Stuttgart. His area of town soon became part of the French zone. Soon after the Allied occupation, Maurice decided to return to the mountain area where he was held as a prisoner. Now that he was a free man, he chose to live in a divided home in this area.

One day, Maurice runs into a man who was also in Auschwitz with him. This man mentions that he’s seen Moishe Kornblit’s girlfriend in Prague. Maurice also heard that his youngest brother and his oldest brother were in a town called Viden, not far from the area where the Germans and Russians were still fighting. Maurice went to the American troops and asked for papers which would permit him to go get his “wife.” He received the papers and was on his way shortly thereafter.

Maurice was able to reach his oldest brother in Viden. He told his brother that he had plans to go to
Czechoslovakia to find Celia. His brother had five dollars sewn into his pants which he gave Maurice to aid in his quest. The Americans then aided him by sending to the Russian side to get a car through the checkpoint. As he crossed, he remembers seeing people without papers laying on the border, waiting to cross.

In order to reach Prague, Maurice had to take a train from Pilzno. He was taken to the Jewish Federation in Prague where they gave him 250 koruna (Czech currency) to find his “wife.” He then went back to the train station to catch a train to Bratislava. At the station, he saw a lot of people standing around. He realized that he didn’t have enough money to get to Bratislava so he went back to Jewish Federation for more money. The workers at the Federation yelled at him but gave him money anyway because he refused to go away until he had enough money to pay for his fare.

When Maurice arrived in Bratislava, he met up with a couple of friends from Auschwitz. He told them that he is looking for his “wife.” He explained to his friends that he gave Celia a ring so she’s legally his wife by Jewish law. He told his friends that he needed money to get to Michalovice, the town where Celia was born. One of his friends handed him 2,000 koruna which prompted Maurice to exclaim, “I’m a millionaire!”

During his journey, he was stuck standing on the train for 29 hours during the trip to Michalovice. When he finally arrived, he asked around for the Schwartz home. He was sent to a house where he found Celia’s sister. Her sister took pity on Maurice after his long journey. She bathed him and put him to bed. Celia’s brother-in-law was a butcher who welcomed Maurice’s help. Meanwhile, Celia was sent a telegram to come to him from a small town on the Russian border. She arrived when Maurice was not home and she hid in a closet to surprise him. A short while later, Maurice came home and Celia jumped out of the closet and grabbed him. Maurice said that at this point he was the happiest man in the world. “I have my wife!” he said and he started crying. The newly reunited couple stayed at the home of Celia’s sister for a few more days before returning to Prague. Celia had a brother who was living in Prague and he treated the couple as best as he could. They decided to stay with him through the New Year and then return to Maurice’s brother’s home in Germany. They lived with Maurice’s brother for a short time and then he moved away.

In Germany, Maurice worked with the French occupying troops. He was taken to a Jewish American Captain and needed a translator to talk to him. Maurice remembers, “He wouldn’t talk Jewish [Yiddish] to me! I didn’t know at that time that maybe he didn’t know Jewish.” Through the translator, he tells the captain the whole story about Auschwitz, including who he was and where he was from. The captain asked Maurice how he remained alive which embarrassed him, so he left. Maurice decided to tell one of the French soldiers about his experience. He relays that at the airport where they were interned, 96 people died and were buried in a mass grave. Maurice told the soldier this because he wanted to help to get the victims a proper burial.

On February 26, 1948, the couple had a real wedding. It was a large affair. They had 50 quarts of whiskey and a dozen wedding cakes. Over 500 people attended their wedding, where they were entertained by a French singer and an orchestra. Over half of the occupying French army and some American soldiers were in attendance. Their daughter Eva was born soon after.

By 1949, organizations such as UNRA (United Nations Relief Agency) and HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid
Society) were helping people immigrate to America. Maurice’s two brothers immigrated first and then his name was called so he, a pregnant Celia, Eva, and Celia’s sister prepared to join them in America. The group first went to Ludwigsburg but when they arrived, the agency told them they were to take an airplane; however, Maurice refused to do this. Fortunately, they were able to find passage by ship.

Maurice’s youngest brother was living in Philadelphia so a cousin is sent to meet them at the harbor in New York City. The family, which is soon blessed with the birth of daughter, Susan, remains in New York City for about three months. Maurice was worried because he now had two daughters and needed a job. He was told by the local butchers to go to the butcher’s union for a permit that would allow him to obtain a job in his old profession. He goes to the union for a permit but they don’t give him one. Instead, the union sends someone else to take the job he was offered nearby.

Meanwhile, Maurice’s brother in Philadelphia had opened a meat market and wanted him to be a partner. The family moved to Philadelphia and Maurice worked with his brother for six months until his brother learned the trade and decided he didn’t need Maurice’s help any longer. Maurice bought his own meat market in West Philadelphia and worked there until 1957 when he saw an ad in the newspaper advertising a meat market for sale in Reading. The Kornblits decided it was time for a change. They made the move, bought the market and settled in Berks County. Maurice passed away in 1994 at the age of 80. Celia then moved to New York, where she passed away in 2007 at the age of 87.
Esther Bratt’s Story of Survival

By Meghann McGuire

This is the story of Esther Bratt as told by her in a videotaped testimony housed at Albright College Holocaust Resource Center.

Esther Bratt was born in Vilna, which was then part of Poland, on March 8, 1929. Vilna was a big city, with 1/3 of the population Jewish. Esther attended a private Polish school for which her parents had to pay. The teachers were mostly Jewish, and although most subjects were taught in Polish, the teachers did teach the Hebrew and Yiddish language as well. Esther also took French privately, because her mother’s family lived in Belgium, and they used to go there for the summers. In her home, the languages that were primarily spoken were Yiddish, Polish, and Russian. As Esther’s father progressed in business they gradually moved to larger apartments. They lived in a very nice apartment until 1940, when the Russians occupied Vilna. The occupying troops decided the apartment was too big for a family of three. They decided the apartment was needed for some communist officials, and Esther and her parents were sent to a much smaller apartment. They lived in this apartment, just outside of town, until they were taken to the ghetto in September of 1941.

Esther had a lot of friends, mostly Jewish girls her age. There were some children in the neighborhood that she played with that were not Jewish, but for the most part there was a lot of anti-Semitism. For example, one day Esther was playing with a neighbor girl and the girl invited Esther to her house. When they entered the home, the girl’s grandfather became very angry that she had let a Jewish girl into the house, and he told Esther to leave. She remembers being very hurt, but she explained that you simply had to get used to it.

Esther went to a Polish school, so only the Jewish children were off on Saturday and went to school on Sunday. This made it easy for the other children to identify and alienate them, and they would throw stones and call the Jewish children names. Esther remembers one time her mother found stones in her coat, and when she asked Esther why, she answered that they were to throw back at the other kids.

Esther’s parents were never involved in any political organizations, and they always discouraged her from belonging to any groups. They seemed to be worried, as everyone was, but didn’t realize it was going to be as bad as it would become. She recalled that they knew about Hitler at this point, but not anything close to the full truth.

Esther’s father, Samuel, was a businessman, and was primarily concerned with making a living and providing for the family. When the Russians came in 1939, Samuel lost everything he had as far as his business was concerned.

Esther’s maternal grandparents had moved to Belgium with one of Esther’s uncles in the early 1930s, so Esther and her mother would go to Belgium for two month periods during the summer. They went in 1935, 1937, and 1939. When they were returning to Vilna after the visit in the summer of 1939, it was an awful
time. Everyone knew that the war was going to begin. They returned on August 27, and the war began on September 1. According to Esther, “all over Europe it was terrible; it was like a volcano, you knew something was going to happen, something was going to explode.”

Most of Esther’s mother’s family was in Belgium, except for her oldest sister. Esther’s aunt lived in Vilna and was very close to her. When the Nazis came in 1941 her aunt’s son was killed. He was one of the first Jews to be killed in Vilna; he was only 18 years old and was the only son. Esther’s aunt was never the same afterwards. She and her husband were also in the ghetto with Esther and her parents, and were killed during their time in the ghetto.

The Russians and Germans divided up and occupied Poland in 1939 under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Under this agreement, Vilna was taken over by the Russians. The family didn’t make any plans to leave because they didn’t realize how bad it was going to become. There really wasn’t much of a way out at the time anyway. When the Russians appeared, they confiscated Esther’s father’s business and their home. They were given a small apartment, and the standard of living decreased considerably. Esther was also forced to go to a school with only Jewish children. She remembers the communist influence in the school, and she remembers drawing pictures of Lenin and Stalin in school. Esther notes that she could draw the profile of Stalin and Lenin in her dreams. There was an extreme amount of communist propaganda, and Esther remembers that as children they would fall for it. Esther’s parents always complained about their situation and always were very careful to tell Esther to make sure she never repeated what she heard in the home.

For a brief time, the Russians gave Vilna to Lithuania, but they quickly reoccupied the area when they decided to take over all of the Baltic States. Then, the Germans suddenly invaded Vilna on June 21, 1941. Esther remembers that it was a beautiful June morning, and she was going to a school picnic. She lived far from school, and when she finally arrived at school the doors were closed. The janitor told her there was a war.

She then heard sirens and ran to her friend’s house next door to the school. Her friend’s parents told Esther she must go home quickly because of the bombings. Getting home was a slow process because every time she heard the sirens warning of another bombing, she had to run to shelter until the bombings stopped. Esther and her family lived across the river from school, so on her way home she had to run over the bridge. She remembers that as soon as she got over the bridge, the sirens began again. By the time she was home, the bridge had been bombed. She made it across with minutes to spare, half an hour at most. When she arrived home her parents obviously knew the war had begun, but they did not know what to do. They ended up going to a shelter to be protected from the bombs, and within two days the Nazis occupied Vilna.

The Nazis didn’t waste any time; they immediately implemented laws against the Jews. All of their possessions were taken. They had to give up their jewelry, gold and silver. Esther remembers turning over her bicycle at the police station. Anyone could come into a Jewish home and rob the owner. German soldiers came into Esther’s home and started taking things, and after her father began talking to them, they softened a little bit and left a few things. Esther remembers the family even having to give up their radio.
One of the first restrictions that was placed on the Jewish population was the yellow Star of David that they were forced to put on the front and back of their garments. They were also not allowed to walk in the streets, but only in the gutter. They were restricted access to many places. Those who disobeyed were often shot by the police. They would also go into Jewish homes and take young boys and men. They would say that they were taking them to work, but instead would take them five or six miles outside of the ghetto to be shot. Men would often be beaten and shot in the streets, especially men with long beards.

Non-Jewish friends were afraid to help the Jews because in Vilna the occupiers had put up gallows in the main square, and they had hung a Polish man there with big signs saying that he was hanging because he helped Jews. Basically, everyone was fearful for his or her own life.

In September of 1941, the Germans established a ghetto in Vilna. Wires and barricades surrounded it, and there was one main gate through which you could enter and exit.

There were actually two ghettos in Vilna. The first was the large ghetto, and the second was a smaller ghetto where they put people when they ran out of room in the first. Most of the people in this second ghetto were killed. Luckily, Esther and her parents were sent to the first ghetto.

The day they were taken to the ghetto was unexpected. They could see Jewish people from the neighborhood walking with bundles on their backs. The Gestapo was going from house to house rounding up the Jews and taking them to the ghetto. When they arrived at Esther’s house, her mother opened the closet and told the neighbors to take what they wished because the family could not carry it all anyway. Esther remembers putting on a dress, a sweater, and a winter coat. It was warm outside, but they didn’t know where they were going, and it was difficult to decide what to carry. They took food, a pillow, a blanket, and whatever else they deemed most important. Esther remembers taking a small doll.

When the family arrived in the ghetto it was late and they were exhausted, both physically and mentally. The ghetto was already overloaded with people, and Esther’s parents found a small store with its doors open. They went into the store and slept on the floor for the first night. The next day they found a place to stay, it was a small corner of a room with some other people from their old neighborhood. There were roughly 16 people stuffed into the room. The family ended up staying in this room for a few months. Esther remembers that the women would all sleep sideways on the one double bed in the room, and the men would sleep on the floor. There was one couch in the room, and there was a young, pregnant couple that slept on the couch.

When the woman eventually delivered her baby, it was a little girl but it was announced as a stillbirth. Esther was only 12 years old at the time, but she doesn’t remember any children that were born in the ghetto that were not stillbirths. The Jewish doctors did this because the baby would not have any kind of chance in the ghetto. It was deemed best for both the mother and the child, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

There was little food in the ghetto, and there was a constant shortage of clothing, soap, and all basic necessities. There was a ration so the people would get some bread. Esther remembers that she was not exactly starving, but they never could eat as much as they wanted to eat. Her father worked outside of the
ghetto in a factory.

Esther remembers her father taking all of the family’s jewelry to a storage place where he had buried it. The jewelry was still there when the family went to the ghetto. While in the ghetto, the people would be forced to give gold, a watch, or piece of jewelry to the farmers in order to get small amounts of food. While they were in the ghetto, they needed the jewelry desperately. During the time Esther’s father was working outside of the ghetto, he thought he had found a German soldier whom he could trust. He told this soldier that he would give him some of the jewelry if he took him to recover it. One day when he was outside of the ghetto working, the German soldier said he would go along to recover the jewelry. Esther’s father took off his yellow stars and they went to the hiding place and started to dig for the jewelry. The German guard scared Esther’s father by saying he thought the Gestapo was coming, and that they had better run away. They left before Esther’s father had time to retrieve the jewelry, but not before the German guard could see where the jewelry was located. Esther’s father found out later from neighbors that the soldier had returned to the hiding place the next day and had taken the jewelry.

One time in the middle of the night, everyone in the ghetto was told to get up and register with the police. Everyone who worked was given either a yellow or a white schein, an identification card. They learned that those people who were given yellow scheins were allowed to leave the ghetto with four family members. It was usually a husband, wife, and three children. Those who were given white scheins had to stay inside the ghetto that day. Everyone quickly realized that the yellow schein meant life and the white schein meant death.

Esther’s father was given a white schein. The family knew that if they stayed in the ghetto it would be surrounded and they would be taken to the Ponary forest to be executed. Esther’s father decided that their best chance for escape from the ghetto was to separate. He went one direction, and Esther and her mother went in another. There were hiding places in the ghetto, but they didn’t know where any of them were. The women continued walking towards the main gate, hoping for an opportunity to leave. There were guards at the gate who were counting five people to a yellow schein. It was getting towards the end, and Esther could see the trucks and Germans with guns waiting outside of the ghetto. As soon as the people with yellow scheins had left the ghetto, they would enter and take all of the remaining Jews to Ponary to be killed.

Suddenly, Esther and her mother saw a couple with only one child that they slightly knew. They had a yellow schein, and Esther’s mother asked them if Esther could leave with them. Esther was holding on to her mother, and she doesn’t remember quite how it happened, but she didn’t want to let go of her mother. Then, the guard counted to five and let them all leave.

Late that evening they went back into the ghetto, and Esther recalls that as everyone walked back into the ghetto it was like entering a cemetery. It was eerily quiet. After they left the ghetto that morning, about 5,000 to 6,000 people were taken to Ponary to be killed. Some had survived by hiding and were still afraid to come out of their hiding places. When they realized that everyone with yellow scheins had returned, they began crawling out of their hiding places. Some people escaped from Ponary and had managed to come back to the ghetto to tell about it. Esther’s father rejoined them later that night. He had also escaped while the people
with the yellow scheins were leaving, and he had gone to his place of work and was hidden for the day.

The family remained in the ghetto from 1941 until September 1943, when the Nazis liquidated the ghetto. They established a labor camp where they would take roughly 1000 of the Jews from the former ghetto. The rest of the Jews were killed. Esther and her parents were fortunate to be sent to the camp, but Esther notes that it only meant that their lives might be prolonged a short while longer.

The people in the ghetto that were not sent to the newly established HKP 562 forced labor camp were either sent to Ponary to be killed or to other labor or concentration camps in Germany or Estonia. Esther’s family left for the camp a few days before the liquidation. They were sent by truck, and she recalls that it wasn’t far, maybe a half hour drive. When they arrived at the camp, they saw two large, grey buildings. They shared a room with two other couples. Esther’s father worked in a mechanical workshop in the labor camp.

The living conditions were basically similar to the ghetto conditions except the two buildings were outside the city, so it wasn’t as congested and there was a little greenery around. There were barbed wire fences and a gate guarded by Germans.

There was a main kitchen in the camp where soup was given out once a day. There was also a store that supplied bread and sometimes sugar or some kind of fat. These rations were all given out on a coupon system. Everyone wore whatever he or she had brought from the ghetto. Esther remembers that she still had her winter coat, but she had outgrown most of the clothing by this time. Her mother gave her some of her clothes.

On March 27, 1944, a horrible thing happened in the camp. The Germans took away all the children and killed them all. Esther remembers the gate opening and a big black truck pulling in between the two buildings. Germans soldiers with guns in their hands began running through the camp collecting children. They were ripping children out of their mothers’ arms, and they pushed all the children into the truck. Children were screaming and mothers were hysterical. The only reasoning behind this was that the children were not useful to the economy of the camp.

Esther remembers that during the incident, a German guard pointed a revolver at her head and tried to push her towards the truck. She was only 14 at the time, but fortunately she was tall for her age, and her father, who was standing next to her, had the presence of mind to tell the guard that she was not a child, and that she was in fact a worker. The guard let her go, but they took 30 to 40 children that day.

Esther worked in the sewing factory repairing the clothing of German soldiers. Her mother worked in the laundry, and her father fixed motors and other things. The main purpose of this particular camp was to refurbish motors.

They worked six days a week, and on Sunday mornings they were taken to buildings to be counted. One Sunday, when they went outside, they found a newly constructed gallows. The guards brought a family of three before the prisoners of the camp. It was a husband, wife, and a little girl. The guards said the family
tried to run away from camp and were caught in the city. They warned that if anyone else tried to run away they would get a similar fate. Esther remembers a guard picking up the small girl by the neck, like a cat, and shooting her in the head. Then they shot the mother for screaming, and put a rope around the father’s neck and hung him in front of the crowd.

In June 1944, it had become obvious that the Germans were losing the war. One day, Esther’s father returned from work and told them that the Russians were approaching, and that there was little doubt that the troops would be there shortly. At that point, the only way to survive was to run away because the first thing the Germans would do before retreating would be to kill all of the Jews.

Esther and her mother left in basically what they had been wearing and walked right out of the camp past the guard who was drunk and not paying attention. They immediately took off their yellow stars and walked on the sidewalk rather than in the gutters. Esther’s mother told her to smile, because she noted that at the time you could tell a Jewish face because they were always sad. They went to a friend of Esther’s father, named Nicoli. He got very scared when they approached him on his porch because if anyone had seen him talking to a Jew he would have been killed; however, he opened up his cellar door and let the pair inside. Esther remembers feeling secure in the cellar, just sitting there quietly, away from everything. They stayed there for a few hours, and when it got dark the cellar door opened and Esther’s father came in and joined them. Esther recalls that he was white as a sheet because within an hour of the women’s exit from the camp, German reinforcements were sent to the camp. When the people in the camp saw the guards, a huge panic broke out. People began running through the gate, and the guards opened fire on the crowd. Esther’s father was one of the people that made it out without being killed.

Nicoli took the family to the countryside to escape the bombing. Esther and her parents stayed in the cellar and hid. Nicoli left them some water and said he would return in a day or two. He wasn’t able to return for more than a week, maybe longer. There was an opening from the cellar to the kitchen, and Nicoli had left grain for the chickens, so they snuck in there when they could and took food. This, along with the water Nicoli had left, was enough to help them survive. Within approximately two weeks, the Russians liberated the city, and Nicoli returned and said that it was safe to leave the cellar. Esther remembers crawling out of the cellar and going into the apartment where she saw curtains on windows for the first time in years. She remembers thinking that the place seemed like a palace. They stayed with Nicoli and his family for a day or two, and then Nicoli took his family to Poland where they lost contact with him. When they regained contact, Esther’s father was always quick to help Nicoli and his family as much as he could. They were very grateful to Nicoli for saving them.

They instinctively returned to the camp to see what was happening, and many of the survivors had the same idea. They found out that some people had stayed in the ghetto and tried to hide. Some people didn’t realize that hundreds would be attempting to hide in the same places, and there wasn’t enough air. Many people who were hiding ended up suffocating. The Germans also found some of the hiding places, and they dug shallow graves in the yard and shot the people. When Esther’s family returned, these graves were barely covered.
The family stayed with Nicoli and his family for a few days until they were able to get situated. The Russians began to open some businesses and institutions, and Esther’s father got a job in an office. There were rooms in the back of the office, and the family stayed in one of these rooms. They found two of Esther’s cousins who had survived, and they lived with them in the room as well. They family stayed there for about a year, and Esther began going to Russian school. She recalls that this was a very hard year, and they still didn’t have much of anything, and the Russians didn’t really have much of anything either.

In May 1945, the war ended and there was a tremendous celebration in Russia. The family returned to their former home in Vilna and discovered that the Gestapo had sealed it for a time, and then later it was reopened and looted. There were new people living there, and some of the neighbors still lived in the building, including the woman who Esther’s mother had given a lot of clothing to before they left for the ghetto. The woman cried because she no longer had any of the clothing to return, but she gave Esther’s mother some navy blue fabric. The women went to a dressmaker and had two skirts and a jacket made, which was what Esther wore to school for an entire year.

Soon after, Esther’s parents decided that there was no sense in staying in Vilna, since wherever they turned there were bad memories. It wasn’t really home anymore. Since they were citizens of Poland before 1939, they could legally leave Russia and go to Poland. In July 1945, they went by train to Lourdes, a city in Poland. The trip, which would usually take about one night, took three weeks. There wasn’t enough fuel to pull the trains, and the engines kept leaving to get more fuel and return to pull the cars for a while longer. Three weeks later they arrived in Lourdes. There were many survivors there, and it became a meeting point of sorts. The family stayed there for six weeks, and at that point it was their aim to go to Palestine. There were young men in Lourdes who had illegally left Palestine to help the survivors. They gave Esther’s family documents saying that they were Greek Jews who were heading south back to Greece. They were briefed about what to do and what to say if the Russians stopped them. One night they illegally crossed the Danube with the documents. They arrived in Austria, in the British zone. They had wanted to be in the American zone, but had to stay in the British zone. They were eventually taken in trucks to Graz. The conditions in the British area were very poor. There was little food, and there was to drink except beer. They were then sent in open trucks to a place in the American zone. The conditions were much nicer, consisting of hotels previously owned by the Germans. They tried to teach the child survivors English and Hebrew hoping they would end up in either Palestine or the United States. Esther and her parents stayed there for about nine months, and they were some of the very first people to leave, when Esther’s mother made contact with an American rabbi, a Chaplin from the army, who helped her to contact Esther’s uncle in New York City. The family boarded an army boat and arrived in New York City on June 18, 1946. Esther remembers seeing the Statue of Liberty when the ship arrived, and she notes that most people on the ship were crying as they approached the New York harbor. A few of Esther’s mother’s siblings met them at the harbor.

The family made a home in Washington Heights, and Esther went to school at George Washington High School. The uncle that sent Esther and her parents the affidavit owned a hosiery factory in Reading, Pennsylvania and had a wholesale distribution center in New York. He passed away very young, and Esther’s aunt didn’t know what to do with the business, so she asked Esther’s father to run the factory for her. Esther’s father eventually started a lumber and plywood business in Reading, Pennsylvania.
Esther met her husband, Sidney Bratt, over Labor Day weekend on a trip in the Catskills with a Zionist youth group. They were married in April 1951 in a synagogue in Washington Heights. The couple lived in Esther’s parents’ original apartment in Washington Heights, since her parents had already moved to Reading. They stayed in New York for five years. Their oldest daughter, Evelyn, was born in New York and was about three and a half when they moved to Reading. During the move, Esther was pregnant with their second daughter, Corinne. Because Esther’s father had already started the company, Industrial Plywood, and the business had grown, Esther’s husband decided to join the business. Their youngest daughter, Lisa, was born in Reading in 1962.

Lisa received her degree from Reading Area Community College, and worked with children in a daycare center.\(^1\) Corinne received her degree from Drexel and is a registered dietician. She is married to Andy Wernick and has two boys, Brian and Aaron. Evelyn received her master’s degree in business from Temple. She married Jay Lipschutz and has two daughters, Michele and Stacey.

Looking back on the tragedies she endured, Esther notes that her faith in Judaism never wavered. She didn’t think she would survive, however, and was hoping to at least live to be a teenager. She notes that although she doesn’t talk about the events of her past very often, she does think about them.

Esther comments that after living for so many years in a free country like the United States, it is hard to imagine that in her lifetime one man was able to destroy the lives of so many innocent people. She ends by saying, “How did the world allow that to happen? Hopefully it will never happen again.”

**Note**

1. Lisa passed away on December 31, 2010.
This is the story of Eugene Abramowicz as told by him in a videotaped testimony housed at Albright College Holocaust Resource Center.

Eugene says that “If it weren’t for Adolf Hitler, I never would have known I was Jewish.” He remembers learning Hebrew in school, and attending the synagogue with his parents, but never recognized his family as being different from any of the others in Berlin. He would play with other children in the neighborhood, most of whom were not Jewish. He even remembers being invited to holiday parties with Catholic friends and receiving oranges from the church. He can’t remember a specific event that made him realize that some people looked at his family differently, but says that “They forced us to be Jewish; for the Jewish people in Germany, being German came first.”

Eugene Abramowicz was born on May 19, 1927 in Charlottenburg, a neighborhood of what was then the recently formed republic in Berlin, Germany. Growing up, he thought of himself as a German citizen; however, he recently applied to have his German citizenship reinstated and was denied. He reflects that he couldn’t obtain German citizenship because his parents weren’t born in Germany. His father was born in Russia, but sometimes the area was Poland. His mother was born in Poland, but sometimes that area was Germany. In a world of perpetually disputed borders, citizenship becomes blurred and political boundaries are constantly changing.

His family’s roots in Berlin began when his parents met there. His father had begun a business in the mass production of clothing, and his mother had immigrated to the city with her parents. The two met in Berlin and got married. They had two children; Eugene, born May 19, 1927, and Alexander, born June 23, 1928.

Eugene attended German public school and mentions that when “Adolf came to power, I was expelled from German public school in 1934.” He was then sent to an all-boys Jewish school. The family lived in an apartment in Berlin near his father’s business, but then purchased a bungalow on the outskirts of Berlin, which Eugene notes might have later helped them to stay alive.

As a Jewish businessman in Berlin, his father paid an exponentially higher rate of taxes than others, and as a result of not being able to pay in full, he was sent to Sachsenhausen, a concentration camp located outside of Berlin, near Oranienberg. His mother raised the money for his father’s release and together his parents decided that they had been put through enough. His father was a successful businessman and knew that a Jewish business would not survive in Berlin. In 1937, his father relocated to France with the hope of eventually sending for his family.

According to Eugene, the most memorable day of his experience during the Holocaust was Kristallnacht. This was the large-scale vandalism and arson of Jewish homes and synagogues on the night of November
9-10, 1938. He was in school the next day, where there was a synagogue next door, and he saw the cinders from the building still burning. “That,” he says, “I will never forget.”

After Kristallnacht, things became increasingly difficult for Jews in Germany. Eugene had to wear a Star of David to identify himself as Jewish, and remembers that his mother would wear snap-on stars, while Eugene and his friends would try to cover them up. He could find no other seats on the train but the baggage compartment. Luckily, Eugene had few encounters with Nazi officers because, as he says, he followed the rules. Jewish people had a curfew of seven o’clock, and were only allowed to purchase groceries between the hours of four and five o’clock. They had ration cards specially marked “Jude” (pronounced you-DAH) which means “Jew” in German.

In 1941, the all-boys Jewish school was closed down, and Eugene was put to work. Both he and his brother worked cleaning machinery, sweeping floors, and doing other manual labor jobs in factories. Their mother worked for Siemens at the time to support the family.

As was customary for Jewish people at the time, Eugene had to report to the police once a week. One week, he went to the police officer, and the man questioned why he was there. “I’m here to report, I come once a week.” The man looked at him and said, “Go home. You don’t look Jewish.” Eugene says that the Jews were portrayed “like vermin, like rats…low life…you know, big nose, big lips.” He remembered reading Nazi propaganda in the newspaper, but his family wasn’t allowed to own a radio.

One day, Eugene was taken from work and sent to the Mörs labor camp on the Rhine river by train. The camp was attached to a coal mine that had been blown up, and the prisoners’ job was to restore living quarters for German workers. Eugene did various jobs including digging holes, laying bricks, and plastering. During the work shift, they were surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by a labor organization called Todt. Todt, named after its founder Fritz Todt, can be attributed to major German infrastructure projects including the Autobahn. The Organisation Todt was notorious for its slave-like labor conditions and the frequent deaths of its workers. The camp employed forced laborers from Germany, Bulgaria, Italy, and other countries, all of which were men.

Eugene lived in barracks and was marched to work. He slept on a bunk bed with bed bugs. When the living quarters were bombed, there were no working facilities and officers had no intention of getting them fixed. Instead, prisoners had to sit directly on the pipes to relieve themselves.

At the end of winter 1945, Eugene remembers it as either late February or early March, he was liberated by the American army; specifically, the 31st Anti-Aircraft Artillery Brigade (31st AAA). He was afraid of the German troops, with nails in their boots, and found the troops that liberated them a “sight for sore eyes.” He says he finally ate good food when he was liberated.

After his liberation, Eugene was given the option to work for the American army. He was just seventeen years old at the time, and calls himself a “big shot.” He spoke German, English, and Hebrew at the time, and had a variety of skills. “You name it, I did it,” he says. “As a matter of fact, I have a certificate saying how
my performance was… perfect.” He was treated as an American soldier; the only difference was that his uniform had to be dyed blue to denote that he was a displaced person. He spent five years and three months working with the American army.

By now it was 1950, and Eugene was looking for a way to get to the United States. Luckily, his good friend Joe Najer, who had also been liberated, had immigrated to Berks County in 1947. Joe and Eugene had made an agreement a few years earlier: whichever of the two got to the United States first would sponsor the other. Eugene was ready to immigrate, and received even better news. The Jewish Community Center didn’t want to see him separated from his brother, Alexander, and sponsored Alexander’s immigration. The two brothers came to America together in 1950. Their mother also immigrated in 1955. His father would remain in France because he felt he was too old to begin a new life in another country.

He met his wife in 1945 when he was playing basketball in Germany. She had traveled from Latvia to cheer for her team, and he played for the German team. Her sponsor lived in New York, and she moved at almost the same time that Eugene did. They stayed in touch throughout their relocation, and she eventually moved to Reading. They were married in September 1950.

Eugene completed his education at Reading High School’s evening program, attaining his diploma in 1954. He worked at Bowers’ Battery & Spark Plug Company, the Reading Corrugated Container Corporation, and Freyhoffer’s Bakery. He then bought a franchise from Freyhoffer’s and handled baked goods for fifteen years. He spent another fifteen years working for American General Corporation, a massive insurance firm. He retired at 58. Eugene’s wife passed away in 1993. Today, Eugene lives in Muhlenberg. He has two sons, two grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

If there’s anything he wants children to know when learning about the Holocaust, it has to do with morality. “We’re supposed to learn from the past,” Eugene says, “but human nature does not seem to heed that advice.” He reflects on the fact that despite our wanting to understand history and learn from the past, we are still prone to mistakes. “You can interact with a hundred people in a day,” he says, “and if one is rude to you, and the other ninety-nine are nice to you, you will always remember that one exception. I think we as people need to change that.”
The Flight of Hannah Hammel Goldsmith

by Jarrod Ziegler

This is the story of Hannah Hammel Goldsmith as told by her in a videotaped testimony housed at Albright College Holocaust Resource Center.

The early life of Hannah Hammel Goldsmith was happy and comfortable. Though she was one of seven children in the Hammel family, there was not a struggle to put food on the table. While not incredibly rich, Hannah’s family lived a very comfortable life. This was made possible by her father’s dry wood shop and the family’s connections to the orthodox Jewish community. Hannah’s father was the president of the local synagogue for 35 years.

The lives of Jews were forever changed in 1933 with Hitler’s rise to power. Hannah’s orthodox family was no less impacted. By 1937, three of her brothers had re-located to the United States of America. Another brother went to what would later become Israel. The other female children in Hannah’s family were married off and waiting to emigrate. With mounting Nazi aggression, and the failing health of her parents, it was a dark time for the Hammels and all German Jews.

Late one evening, SS officers showed up at the Hammels’ demanding that the man of the house leave with them. Hannah’s father was too weak to comply; however, because he had a heart condition that left him in a fragile state. Her mother was of no help either, as she was paralyzed. The SS officers were insistent that the lights be turned on. This wasn’t possible either, because the Hammels’ lights were on an electric timer in accordance with their orthodox beliefs.

When this event occurred, Hannah was the one to answer the door. All she could think about was how to preserve the life of her father. She reasoned with the SS men as best she could, and they were eventually persuaded to move on. Yet they soon came back to complete the task. Again, Hannah attempted to talk them down. She tried everything she could think of, even offering to be taken in her father’s place. The SS men left a second and final time. Hannah counted herself as lucky. She did not believe it had worked.

On November 9, 1938 Jewish men from her city were arrested and sent to concentration camps. There were eventually let go on the promise that they would leave the country. Hannah recalls these downtrodden men returning home with their heads collectively shaved. It was during this time frame, amid all the rounding up and deportations of the Jews, that Hannah was married to Sol Goldsmith. Hannah’s mother and father also died over the next six months.

Already the brutal effects of war had ravaged the available manpower of the German workforce. This turned out to be a great boon for the Goldsmiths. Sol was a factory worker, and in light of that fact, they were allowed to remain in Germany during a time where Jews were being sent east towards concentration camps. Hannah’s husband vowed that he would never allow the Nazis to take himself or his wife alive. The only
logical conclusion was to escape from Germany to Switzerland.

However, the couple needed more than just the gumption to enact such a plan. Due to their status as second class citizens, travel had become dangerous. Neither had a passport. German Jews were forbidden from traveling under Nazi rule, so every leg of the journey would require planning in order to not get caught and sent east to a certain death. Luckily for the young couple, their Gentile tailor happened to be a great friend of the Jews. He allowed the Goldsmiths to take along another friend of theirs. This was a big deal, because at the time the penalty for transporting Jews was harsh. Another person meant a less stealthy operation and increased risk of getting caught. Together, the trio concocted a plan to get them from Nazi Germany to Switzerland.

At the time, the remaining Jews in Germany were crammed into tiny apartments. Several families were forced to inhabit the same apartment. This made planning for the Goldsmiths risky; however, they knew that they had to find some way to escape. One night they left with nothing more than the clothes on their back and a briefcase. They left a note behind to cover their tracks, explaining that they couldn’t take this life anymore, and that they were going to drown themselves. Meanwhile, the Goldsmiths had sent out their friend to do some scouting work. When their friend returned, he told them their plan was likely to work, albeit with much risk. Satisfied that they had found the way, the Goldsmiths, their friend, and their tailor-guide set out. The journey was difficult. Nobody spoke to one another. This served not only as way to not blow cover, but to quiet their fears should they be discovered and captured. The party primarily took milk trains in order to avoid tight restrictions. On the way to one of their destinations, the train which they had been riding was stopped. SS men appeared and began searching the train. Panicked, the Goldsmiths’ friend walked out of the train, hoping to avoid being viewed as a running criminal. The ploy didn’t pay off. He was asked for his papers, and when he couldn’t provide them, he was promptly carted away. The Goldsmiths never saw him again. Additionally, their guide went missing during the chaos. In an attempt to avoid the inspection, Hannah and her husband resolved to disappear to the bathrooms for half an hour and meet up afterwards.

Initially the pair thought themselves as doomed; their ploy had failed. They needed to go through the ticket master in order to get off the train. They thought they would be carted away due to their lack of papers; however, they were able to slip through without detection. They were able to escape to another train by hiding in one of the cars.

After the train episode, the Goldsmiths found lodging. Germany was being bombed, and rooms for rent were readily available for everyone, as there were many refugees from the bombings. The Goldsmiths ran into their former guide while eating breakfast at a local diner. They were happy to see one another, and commiserated over the loss of their friend. The whole experience had shaken up the tailor; he no longer wanted to assist them, and the Goldsmiths didn’t blame him. The tailor told them everything they needed to do and returned home.

Hannah and her husband finally made it to a lake bordering Switzerland. Unfortunately, this area was heavily patrolled by Nazis with spotlights. The Goldsmith’s only choice was to flee into the woods. After being drenched in an all-night downpour in the woods, the couple was forced to return home.
They returned home on a series of trains and waited for name’s French contact to arrange for a new path to Switzerland. After a long time, they feared the friend would not pull through. One day, the phone rang, and it was their contact, ready to execute the plan. The Goldsmiths traveled to a place bordering Switzerland, where they had to jump on trains in order to cross over. At first Hannah did not make it, so they had to take a second train. This time she made it, and the two rode safely into Switzerland where they lived for eight years before emigrating to the United States.
From Austria to America: Siegfried and Fanny Kemlot

By Alyssa Williams

This is the story of Siegfried and Fanny Kemlot as told by them in a videotaped testimony housed at Albright College Holocaust Resource Center.

Fanny and her future husband Siegfried escaped from Nazi Austria in 1940. Fanny was still a Gerhard then, and both had only known each other a short time before fleeing the country together. Their lives in Austria were completely up-heaved by the Nazi occupation, and at 20 and 21 years of age, they found themselves fleeing their homeland for new lives in different countries.

Fanny was born in 1920 in Qurna, Austria. Her parents had lived in Kohn, but moved north to raise their son and three daughters. In 1938, Jews were being persecuted throughout Austria. In October of that year, Fanny remembers one night that she and her mother were walking across a large lawn to their apartment. She remembers looking up at her mother to see her face white with fear. Fanny’s father had been sick in bed at home, and when she looked across the lawn she noticed that all the lights in the apartment building were on. According to the account told by Mrs. Kemlot, “two strapping men” had come to arrest her father solely because he was Jewish.

To this day, Fanny cannot understand what came over her, but she argued with the men that her father was too sick to go with them. The men could have killed her, but instead they ended up telling her that if her father wouldn’t come, they would take her instead. She was then taken to a different apartment where she waited in a crowded room until she was called forward. The men there asked where her father was. Fanny explained again that her father was too sick to come, and they told her that there was no such thing. He had to come.

Fanny was escorted back to her home for her father, and then they were both taken to the train station. She recalls being crowded into the station with other arrested Jewish members of the community, and one young man in particular who tried to ask the SS some sort of question. Fanny remembers thinking how stupid that was, and she wanted to tell him to keep away. The SS officer kicked the man in the back and sent him sprawling from one end of the room to the other.

At one point during the night, the SS moved the people out into the train yard. It had been pouring, and yet they stood there for hours. A young man, around 17 years of age, walked around and asked who wanted something to eat. Those that had it gave the boy money, and two hours later he returned with a quarter of the food promised. Fanny says she remembers there being mold on the bread, but her father was so concerned that his daughter hadn’t eaten, he offered the boy some of his own money for a portion for her. The boy responded by viciously beating her father. Fanny remembers, “The blood was running all over him.”

Around four a.m., the S.S. put a light across the yard. They started to separate people, and Fanny says the
“policemen” were very nice and tried to quiet the individuals who were upset by the sorting. Eventually they let the people on the right side, which included Fanny and her father, leave. Those that were on the left were put on trains for Poland, but the Polish government refused their entry over the border. Germany didn’t want them back, and so they were killed.11 This was the perception of Mrs. Kemlot; however, historical accounts show that the refugees were stuck on the border until they were ultimately taken to concentration camps or let back in to various areas of Poland.

The winter was cold and bitter that year, and Fanny recalled a story about a Jewish boy who had fled to France. The boy was angry about his family being stuck on the Polish border so he snuck into the German embassy and shot and wounded an official. It was relayed that the boy’s father said that if the official died, “God help the Jews.”

The official, Ernst Vom Rath, died in November, and Fanny stated quite plainly, “That is when Kristallnacht came.”

Fanny had an aunt that lived in a part of Vienna that was “90% Jewish.” Fanny had been able to continuing working for a Jewish employer, and her mother came to pick her up there. They then picked up her younger sister from kindergarten because it was quickly decided that they needed to stay with this aunt in Vienna. A neighbor of theirs had been friendly with the police, and these officers had warned the neighbor to tell her Jewish neighbors to disappear. Her mother told her to go to her aunt’s ahead of her because men had already been to her house looking for her father and things. On her way to her aunts, Fanny said she heard “such a noise.” What she saw was a synagogue being vandalized as a crowd jeered and laughed at the desecrated temple.

Siegfried Kemlot spent his childhood in Vienna, Austria, but the family was originally from Galicia, Poland. When the Russians came to Galicia during the first World War, many of the Jews fled to Vienna. After war, Siegfried’s mother’s family had returned to Poland, but his father’s family did not. They stayed in Vienna.

When Hitler came to Vienna in 1938, Siegfried was 19 had been working at a store for about three years. The store had sold motorcycles, bicycles and other small electronic devices of the time (such as radios); and Siegfried was fairly well trained in the business. It was a Jewish shop, and overnight Nazis came and emptied the store. Police stood by and watched as the entire store was left barren.

He continued to live with family in Vienna for a time, but it was virtually impossible to find work. He could only be hired by a Jew, but so many had lost their places of business and livelihoods. The strain affected the entire Jewish community, and for a time, both of his parents were estranged. Because of his Polish birth, Siegfried applied for a passport but was denied.

Siegfried and four of his friends who were also Polish decided that they couldn’t stay in Vienna any longer, regardless of their inability to obtain passports. They knew there would be a war, and devised a plan to illegally cross the border into Yugoslavia. The five went by train to the border, but at the border were Gestapo agents.
According to Siegfried, these agents assisted the boys in crossing the border. They not only let them cross, but told them of a family in Yugoslavia that would help them go further. The boys didn’t have money, so they were directed to a “Jewish fellow,” who gave them the advice to head to Zagreb in Croatia. This Jewish man gave them pocket money and hired a taxi to take them to Zagreb. There, the five friends stayed with two families as they planned their next move. “They were very nice people,” remarked Siegfried.

The head of the Jewish community in Zagreb told the boys that he would try to make arrangements for them all to find passage on a boat that was heading to Palestine to deliver cattle. The head of the community assured the boys that they had connections in Palestine that would help them to “disappear” there.

Unfortunately, they never had a chance to get on the boat. A different member of the Jewish community reported the five boys to officials. Siegfried said that he and his friends had been sitting down to dinner with one of the families they’d been staying with when police came and arrested them. They were then put in prison for about six weeks.

Siegfried remembers receiving very little food while in that prison, just a cup of soup and slice of bread, and they were given nothing more than a wooden board to sleep on. It was also October when they were arrested, and it was very cold. Their fortune took yet another turn for the worse when a map was discovered among them. It was an Austrian military-issued map one of his friends had brought along, and so the guards erringly assumed the five young men to be Austrian spies. Because of this, the five were put on a train to send them back to Austria.

Siegfried managed to leave the train just as it crossed into Austria. He was in the middle of nowhere, an area of mostly farmland, and remembers eating raw potatoes as he began his trek back to his parents in Vienna. The closest town had been Graz, and it was a few days walk from there to Vienna. When he finally arrived home, Siegfried remembers the shocked look on his mother’s face. Ironically, according to Siegfried, that was a day before Kristallnacht.

The next day he was arrested and sentenced to prison again. Half of the inmates at his prison were selected for transport to the Dachau concentration camp in Germany. The other half was to be released. Siegfried said that they shaved his head, indicating an eminent fate, but instead he was among those left go.

Siegfried returned to Vienna. There he went to a kibbutz, or Jewish gathering, and met Fanny. They connected immediately, and both were fortunate enough to obtain visas to England. Siegfried went first, in February. Fanny joined him a month later.

Siegfried’s mother’s family all died in Poland. His mother had been traveling with a legal transport to Palestine, but she was stopped in Yugoslavia. As Siegfried depicts it, the Jews that were caught there were, “killed like rabbits in the wood.” His father was also among the Jews that did not survive. He died in a concentration camp in Slovakia, but some of his father’s family did survive and make it to America.

Of his four friends, only two survived. Two made it to Israel, while the other two died in Mauthausen, an
Austrian concentration camp. Siegfried and Fanny acknowledge how lucky they were. They were in Dover, England when the war broke out. German refugees were looked at as enemies of the states, but they had the Polish heritage on their side.

The refugees were moved to London, and were distributed from there. Fanny was able to stay in London, but Siegfried was taken to a farm in the countryside. In another show of irony, he was trained there as a taxi cab driver. He eventually heard of a culture committee that needed people to grow food for and because of the war. Siegfried and a friend of his were given a position there cleaning machinery. They were promoted to tractor drivers, and Siegfried married Fanny in Reading, England in 1941. They stayed at the culture committee from 1940 until 1949.

From there they moved to New York before establishing a home in Berks County, Pennsylvania. Both feel very lucky. They lost their families, their friends, and all of their possessions—but they were alive. When the interview was conducted, the Kemlots had three “beautiful children, ten grandchildren, and one great-granddaughter.”
Hilde Gernsheimer: Transport from Terror

This is the story of Hilde Gernsheimer as told by her in a videotaped testimony housed at the Albright College Holocaust Resource Center. In addition, I have obtained information from Hoppa, a video directed by Hilde’s son, Jeff Gernsheimer in 2011 and available at http://vimeo.com.

Hilde Gernsheimer was born Hildegard Hanna Simon on May 2nd, 1926 in Cloppenburg, Germany. Hilde remembers a fond childhood in her small town, but it wasn’t lasting. Her family was among the many Jewish people who faced the injustice and inhumanity of the Holocaust, and she was one of the fortunate children to escape through the Kindertransport.

Hilde Gernsheimer was born Hildegard Hanna Simon on May 2nd, 1926 in Cloppenburg, Germany. Hilde remembers a fond childhood in her small town, but it wasn’t lasting. Her family was among the many Jewish people who faced the injustice and inhumanity of the Holocaust, and she was one of the fortunate children to escape through the Kindertransport.

Hilde was one of four girls born to Karl and Selma Simon. Second youngest, her oldest sister was Edith, who was known as “Edie.” She was four years older than Hilde, and then there was Ruth at 15 months older than Hilde. The fourth daughter, Ilse, was two years younger. Karl would spend evenings listening to his four daughters sing, and their mother would remark that they didn’t need a radio when they had so much sound coming from their children. Hilde remembers playing often with her sisters, and the girls were very close.

Karl was a Pferdehändler, or horse-dealer. He raised and sold labor horses. The business was run from their property, and Hilde recalls, “We had a large home with a big yard, and the stables were connected to the garden.” Karl’s customers were both Jewish and non-Jewish—it did not matter to them. Most customers would travel to their home, but he would make occasional trips to market as well. Hilde doesn’t recall anti-semitism existing in their small town before Hitler came to power, and her father enjoyed success in his business. The family was able to keep a maid and a second woman to care for the girls.

There were less than a dozen Jewish families in town, none of which were their neighbors. There was simply not a sufficient number of Jewish families in the area to support a fully Jewish school. Because of this, the girls attended a private Catholic school instead of public. Hilde says she was ten when they were informed they could no longer attend classes there. The Catholic sisters told the girls they weren’t allowed to continue teaching Jewish students, but were willing to take a risk with Edie because she was so close to graduating.

Hilde remembers how her parents perceived Hitler’s rise to power in Germany. There had been a general consensus of fear, but she feels Selma was more concerned than her husband was. Karl did not believe that Hitler and his antics would survive. A whole race could not be annihilated, and so he wanted to wait and see what happened. Hilde remembers him saying, “As long as there is a dry piece of bread in Germany, I will stay in Germany.”

In respect to Hilde’s mother’s feelings, “I think my mother was very much affected. She was very worried and scared, more so than my father.” This mindset would prove unfortunately more accurate than Karl’s. In order to continue their education, Hilde and her sisters were able to attend a newly-assembled Jewish school in Oldenburg. Because of the distance and regulations against the Jewish, the girls had to get up at six a.m. to take a bicycle to the train station before taking the train to their new school. After the school day was done,
they would arrive home between four and five in the evening. Every week, someone would be missing—meaning they had emigrated. The school was small, with only two classrooms, but they attended for about three years until the Kristallnacht pogrom. After that, they didn’t attend school again in Germany.

On the morning of November 10, 1938, Hilde remembers waking to “terrible noises” downstairs. She had not been attending school due to recent surgery she’d had on her arm because of blood poisoning. Their mother, Selma had yelled for Hilde to stay upstairs. From the window, Hilde saw the SS taking her father away. This would be the last time Hilde ever saw her father, and the men hadn’t even given him a chance to dress properly. Karl had an injured arm and was unable to tie his shoes quickly. Hilde’s mother said later that one of the soldiers apologized to her, saying, “I’m sorry I have to do this.”

Ruth, Hilde’s older sister by a little over a year, had attempted to go to school on Kristallnacht. She had left before their father’s arrest, and arrived at the building to see the synagogue on fire. She told her family that she took the train back home without speaking to anyone.

It wasn’t long after his arrest that Karl sent a letter to Selma saying it was “time to send the children on a trip.” Before this, Karl had applied for visas for his entire family to travel to America. Hilde believes that her aunt in Florida helped arrange it, but they had to wait for their quota numbers to be called. This was not happening nearly as quickly as needed, but Selma received word of the Kindertransport from a woman in Oldenburg saying that England was prepared to take children. They did not want to take two children, but both Hilde and Ruth were able to go. Edie was not able to leave yet at that time. She went on one of the last Kindertransports to England after the St. Louis incident, before Holland was invaded, and then to the U.S.A. before Ruth and Hilde. Ilse was the youngest and suffered some bladder problems, so she was chosen to stay with their mother. Selma had thought it would be cruel to send a little girl with Ilse’s problem out into the world by herself. “Plus, she probably wanted to keep the baby at home,” says Hilde.

On November 12th, before either girl left for the Kindertransport, they were frightened by a banging at the door. S.S. officers had already been through their home confiscating possessions, but this time it was two of Hilde’s cousins. Their father was killed during Kristallnacht. A teacher, he had wanted to perform Kaddish over a body and was murdered for it. Selma welcomed the young men to stay in their home, but she was terrified they’d be discovered. They were still with them when Hilde and Ruth left for the Kindertransport.

On December 2nd, the girls traveled to Hamburg, and then Oldenburg. Edie was sent to check on them, and took them to the train. “I cannot even describe the horror of that time,” said Hilde of the trip. She had been 12, her sister 13, when they were forced to flee their home and family for England. According to Hilde, the Kindertransport was organized by the Jewish Federation and ended up taking some 10,000 children to England.

“It was well organized,” remembers Hilde, “But such sadness, such terror, not anticipation—just fear. I cannot describe how terrible it was to leave your family, especially knowing your father was in a concentration camp.”
Ruth was older, and felt a need to be responsible, but Hilde says that in truth, they were responsible for each other. She doesn’t remember if the adults were comforting or not as they traveled to the ship that would take them to England, but she does remember the Dutch giving them candy when they stopped there. “Everyone was extremely kind.”

The sea voyage itself was terrible for the girls. The seas were rough, and both Hilde and Ruth suffered terrible seasickness. They had shared a bed, and when one was sick, the other was soon to follow. Hilde describes the trip as “an absolute nightmare.” They landed in Harwich, which is near Dover, England. The children were then placed in a camp until they could be relocated. They were assigned cabins, but there was no electricity or heated water. Committees of people came to offer places in Jewish or non-Jewish homes, or the opportunity to live in hostels. Hilde and her sister decided to go to a religious children’s home because they felt it was their best opportunity to remain together. They went to Harrogate Children’s Center, which was in Yorkshire. It was a home originally for poor children, and it was a “magnificent building.”

All of the girls staying at the home then were from the Kindertransport. Hilde says the oldest girl might have been between the ages of 16 and 17, while the youngest were eight or nine. She compares the home to the musical, “Annie.” According to Hilde, the beds and bedrooms were the same, but only a few of the matrons working there were “as bad as Annie’s.”

Families would come to pick up children, and Hilde is not sure if the children were able to choose which families they went with, or if the families picked them. Hilde and Ruth had come from an observant household, and they continued to be so in England. During Passover, the sisters went to stay in a boarding home when the children’s home was closed for the holiday. Hilde remembers enjoying the holiday, and the woman there would have adopted them but they told her, “No. We have parents. We’re not ready to be adopted.”

Hilde and her sister bonded very closely. She also said that the 28 other girls living there grew very close to each other. While they lived in the children’s home, Hilde remembers other girls being visited by their mothers (not really fathers) and being jealous that they had families still. Hilde believes they were living in the home roughly four years.

In late December or early January of 1939, the girls received letters from their family saying that their father had been released. They were going to try to get to America via Cuba, and were actually given the choice between a small freighter or on a liner; the infamous S.S. St. Louis. Tragically, they chose the latter. Selma had believed that traveling on a cruise liner would be a wonderful experience for her family.

Through cables, Hilde and Ruth learned immediately of the dilemma that ensued when the S.S. St. Louis was denied the right to harbor in Cuba, as was the initial plan. The visas that had been issued by the Cuban government were declared invalid and the government refused to reconsider. The ship then began circling Florida, but could not obtain permission to land in the United States either. Eventually they were sent back to Europe. Hilde says that while it was terrible news, neither she nor Ruth realized the gravity of the situation. It was a relief when they heard that England, Holland, Belgium, and possibly France were going to
take on the people from the S.S. St. Louis.

Despite requesting to be sent to England to be with their daughters, the girls’ parents and sisters were sent to Holland to live with another aunt and cousin already there. This was originally believed to be an excellent alternative to returning to Germany, but then Holland was invaded too. Hilde received letters that her parents and little sister were sent to Westerbork, which she described as a “layover” concentration camp located in the Netherlands. Through a relation in Switzerland, the girls were still able to receive letters from their mother and father. The last letter Hilde ever received arrived shortly after her seventeenth birthday in 1943. Her parents and sister were afraid, but persevering. Hilde quoted the letter, “Mother wrote, ‘Things are okay. We are worried, but we have faith in God. Don’t worry about us. God will help us.’ Unfortunately, God did not.”

It was 1950 before Hilde, Ruth, or Edie learned the fate of their parents and little sister, Ilse. A letter was sent to them from the Red Cross, and it stated that the family had been sent to Sobibor concentration camp in Poland. There the three were asphyxiated in the gas chambers. “Ilse was, I think, 15 at the time when she was killed. She was a lovely young woman, and it is tragic to think that somebody that young—or anybody—that had to die this way.” Ilse had, indeed, been 15 years old.

When Hilde and Ruth first arrived at the religious children’s home, they soon had to begin their schooling. They were originally placed in separate classes, but it was soon apparent that both girls were fluent enough in English to join the other children. Hilde said she doesn’t remember feeling pity, just that people were interested in helping them. Hilde also said that while they received hand-me-down clothing and didn’t always get what they wanted, she still believes they were treated well.

Selma had always told the girls that if they learned a vocation, they could make a living. Hilde and her sister graduated from their formal education at about 16 years old. From there, Hilde and Ruth remembered their mother’s advice and went looking for an opportunity to learn a trade. Ruth found work at a clothing store and learned millinery. Hilde was hired as a shampoo girl at a high-class beauty shop in Harrogate. There she was trained to cut and style hair, and her talent awarded her more training than what a normal shampoo-girl would have received. When she was through with it, the hairdresser than trained her would tell her she was skilled enough to cut hair anywhere. He would say, “You’re good enough to work in Hollywood.”

In December of 1944, Hilde and Ruth received letters stating that their visa numbers had been called. They were finally allowed to travel to America. They left England on the 28th of December, and traveled for 18 days on a Canadian Red Cross liner. Hilde remembers enjoying this voyage very much, saying, “We had better food than we’d had in years.” Because of the war, England had severe rations implemented, and the food on the ship was much preferred by the sisters. What Hilde says she and Ruth didn’t know what the amount of danger they were in as they traveled. When the ship landed in Halifax, Canada, the sisters learned that two ships in their convoy had been sunk by enemy fire.

When they arrived in Halifax, the sisters were greeted by a monstrous snow storm. It was more snow than Hilde had ever seen before, and neither she nor Ruth had brought warm enough clothing. They took a train
from Quebec to New York, and Edie and Roz Babich met them there. Roz was soon to be Edie’s sister-in-law, and the Babich’s were very good to Ruth and Hilde. They purchased coats for both of them, as well as purses. They stayed in New York for a week before taking a train out to Chicago.

From Chicago they traveled to Forreston, Illinois to live with their aunt and uncle there. Hilde exclaimed, “It was wonderful seeing family again.” Edie was already living there, and had met Ruben Babich at a USO dance. Hilde soon found a position with a hair salon in Freeport, near Forreston, and due to the skills she’d acquired in London, quickly had an impressive list of clientele.

Still, Edie’s fiancee, Ruby Babich, was soon to be returning from the war and wanted Edie to move to New York City to marry him. Edie, in turn, was hesitant to move across the country on her own—so Hilde and Ruth moved, too. Hilde says that she and Ruth lived together in New York, and remembers going to the movies often and eating apples or bananas for dinner.

Hilde applied for work at Helena Rubenstein’s beauty salon in NYC. At the time, she didn’t realize how unlikely it was that she would be hired; however, she displayed confidence because she truly believed what her mentor had told her in England—that she was good enough to work in Hollywood. On the day she applied, she was told to come back the next day for a trial. Apparently her training was good, because she ultimately received the position. While it was a prestigious position, she only stayed with them for nine months. In September of 1945, the girls visited some people who knew their parents. It was during one of the high holidays, so they accompanied the family to a German-Jewish synagogue in Brooklyn. During the service, Hilde noticed a man sitting on the opposite side from them continuously looking at them. When they went to leave, he followed them asked if they were the Simon girls from Cloppenburg. His father had been a client of Karl’s, and Hilde recognized his accent immediately. The man was Joseph Keller, and their fathers had been good friends. Joseph Keller’s family invited them to come to dinner at their home. Hilde’s future mother-in-law, Johanna Gernsheimer was a neighbor of theirs, and made sure Hilde would meet her son when he got out of the service. His name was Solly Gernsheimer, and theirs was a very fast romance.

Hilde met him in January, they were engaged in February, married in the end of March, and in December had twin sons, Jack and Jeff Gernsheimer. Hilde remembers wishing her father could have seen the boys, as he had dreamed of boys for so long. In 1951, they had a daughter, Sharon. Hilde feels truly blessed. “I’ve had some truly tragic days in my life, but I’ve been blessed.” Hilde and Solly lived in Bernville, Pennsylvania until his death in 1987.

In 1995, Hilde met Manfred Jakobs, one of her classmates from Oldenburg, Germany. They were married in 1999. Manfred passed away in 2005, and Hilde moved to Wyomissing, Pennsylvania. There she enjoys her family and friends. Among the newer family members are five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Today, Hilde spends time speaking to local schoolchildren about her experiences, often with the assistance of her sons who have also begun to relay her stories to others.
Richard Yashek: Giving Meaning to Survival

By Alyssa Williams

This is the story of Richard Yashek as told by him in a videotaped testimony housed at Albright College Holocaust Resource Center.

Richard Yashek was born Juergen Jaschek in Luebeck, Germany on Feb. 15, 1929. He was the eldest child of Lucy Judith Jaschek, née Hummel from Frankfurt am Main and Eugen Jaschek from Kattowitz, in Ober Schlesien. He had a younger brother named Jochen. As a young child in 1933, he and his family resided on the second floor of an apartment house located “near the Linden Platz along the Moislinger Allee in Luebeck.” Yashek recalls visits from his father’s sister, Aunt Meta and her family, including his Uncle George and cousins. At that home, he also remembers his mother preparing food for an out of work stranger. There was also the occasional band of Gypsies who would camp in the empty field near their home.

In 1934, the Jasheks moved into an apartment in the Wald Schloesschen in Bad Schwartau. That year, Richard Yashek began first grade. He attended St. Annenstrasse Juedische Gemeinde School, a 30-35 minute streetcar ride away. Being unable to attend school where he lived in Bad Schwartau was the first time that Yashek realized that Jews were treated differently. School was something he looked forward to and Yashek fondly remembers his teachers and purchasing school supplies. When he looked at the world around him, he remembers being interested in the make of the cars he saw, window shopping with his mother, watching the blacksmith work at his anvil, “unusual and neat” mechanical toys given by his father who sold farm implements, and hearing people credit the Hitler regime with providing good work conditions and more housing development in Germany. He also remembers “some talk” of Zuchthauses, or prisons, and of people being arrested as Communists or “otherwise working against the Hitler regime.” He recalls that Konzentration camps and Zuchthauses were common topics of adult conversation as was the fear of incarceration if they weren’t cautious enough to avoid being caught speaking negatively about the Hitler regime.

Despite burgeoning fears and feelings of separation inside the community, the Jaschek family made efforts to be together during visits made to Richard Yashek’s grandparent’s home in Brieg, Ober Schlesien. Richard and Fannie Jaschek were Eugen Jachek’s parents and the visit to their home included Yashek’s aunts, uncle, and cousins as well. His Uncle Wilhelm’s family along with his grandfather emigrated to Argentina in 1936 or 1937 and his father chose to emigrate to Brazil in 1937 with plans of sending for Yashek, his mother, and brother. Eugen Jaschek returned to Germany in 1938 after discovering overwhelming anti-German sentiment that prevented him from finding work. After the return of his father, Yashek remembers witnessing an abundance of parades of soldiers as well as the emergence of political posters reading, “Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer.” Yashek recalls, “that summer my German playmates went to Hitler Jugend camp and upon their return, they refused to associate with us or let us join them as they played.” He also lost his job as ball boy for a local club and both he and his brother were barred from the local swimming pool. To make up for the boys’ humiliation, the Jascheks took frequent trips to the beach and bought their sons many toys. While he
noticed that many Jews were leaving Germany at this time due to work restrictions, discrimination, and fear. Yashek says that he “did not comprehend the enormity and consequences of these actions until much later.”

The morning of November 10, 1938, the two Jaschek brothers rode the streetcar to school and took note of the destruction of various buildings and the SA men that guarded them, but were unaware of what had transpired. They did not know that he night before was Kristallnacht and were sent home from school without understanding what would come next. That evening, their father did not come home. He would not return for several weeks due to his imprisonment in a concentration camp along with other Jews from Luebeck. Despite having been awarded and Iron Cross during World War I, Eugen Jascheck could not find a way to have himself released quickly. Yashek’s mother was forced to find work in a bag factory in Luebeck operating a sewing machine. Richard Yashek has no clue as to identities, but remembers neighbors anonymously leaving food for his family outside their apartment and is still grateful they risked breaking the law by helping the Jascheks during extremely troubled times. Possessions such as silverware and radios were seized by the Nazi forces and Yashek reflects on the Juden tax they enforced. He “finds it ironic that the victims had to pay for the damage done to their property.” When his father returned, he was forced to work on the improvement of a stream in Luebeck along with other Jewish men. In 1940, there were British air raids in Bad Schwartau and Luebeck. After 1941, the Jews in Germany, including the Jascheks, were forced to wear yellow stars of David with Jude beneath them that Yashek describes as “very noticeable” because they were the size of an adult’s hand. Life was increasingly difficult for them under the Nazi regime and they soon worked alongside forcibly relocated Polish who were forced to wear purple and yellow quadrangular patches to identify themselves as well.

As the seasons turned from summer to fall of 1941, the Jascheks received notice to report on “December 3rd or 4th with two suitcases, 50 pounds each, and a Rucksack to the Juedische Gemeinde building for transport to work in the east.” They were given no clues as to where they would be headed or what kind of work was waiting for them except for a warning to bring warm clothes and a week’s worth of food. The Jascheks became close with the Kendziork family and questions grew among them. These included: would families be separated? What must be left behind? How do you hide money or valuables? After the war, in 1945, Richard Yashek and the two Kendziork girls, Inge and Erika, would be the only ones to return to Luebeck. When December arrived, 120 “Luebeckers” were bused to a train station in Haupt Bahnhof with their baggage following them in a truck. They boarded a “few passenger railroad cars from a train that had started in Hamburg with over 800 people from that city. This later became known as the Hamburger Transport.” Richard Yashek remembers this as being more of an adventure for him and the other children. They rode three days and nights without stopping to arrive in Skirotawa, Latvia and were marched through the snow toward Jungfernhof, a camp four or five kilometers away. The Jews were escorted by Latvian SS guards who were brutal to those who fell behind, shooting an elderly man in the head. Yashek could not seek comfort from his parents when he saw the man being executed because he “was too embarrassed and shocked to discuss the incident with my parents or the other people near me and they too silently marched on.” When they arrived at Jungfernhof, Richard Yashek remained with his father because he was twelve years old while his younger brother, who was only ten, remained with their mother. The men and women were separated. Their personal belongings were confiscated. A black market situation arose that also included the Latvian SS. Yashek and his family were settled into poor house and suffered from cold and hunger. The “barn” he was
housed in also housed six to eight thousand others and they slept on bunk beds layered six or seven tiers high. He is not sure, but he believes there were at least several pot-bellied stoves for warmth. The food they were provided with was coffee and military bread in the morning, soup in the afternoon made from fish heads or horse meat, and coffee, two slices of military bread, processed cheese, mashed potatoes, and sausage or some other cold meat. During the winter, Richard Yashek worked with large groups to maintain the railroad tracks near the train station they had arrived at. Physicians were set up in the camp, but “out of the 7,000 people who were brought to Jungfernhof, about 800 died from hunger, cold, or illness…everyday corpses were wrenched from the narrow bunks.” On March 26, 1942, a selection was made of 400 men and 400 women to be relocated to a fish factory by the Duena River. Yashek’s brother was selected to go and his mother went with him. Yashek remained at Jungfernhof with his father. He was continuously bothered by these turn of events and recalls, “To this day, I become numb remembering the thoughts that raced through my head: am I a traitor to my mother and brother, because I preferred to stay with my father? Would I see my brother again, my mother?” Yashek worked redistributing topsoil for farming that summer while his father was appointed as a Collonen Führers, or a foreman of work detail. Sometimes Yashek and the other boys on his work detail were able to play soccer with a tennis ball someone had brought. They were less supervised because of their age, but they always suffered from hunger and exhaustion. When three workers from another detail were caught trying to trade clothing in exchange for food from Latvians, they were accused of trying to flee the camp. The three were sentenced to death by hanging and the execution was carried out by other prisoners whose own lives were threatened if they “played games.” After breaking a board while working on a roof, Yashek was summoned to the commandant’s office “to receive a severe beating around my head because of this broken board.” He and his fellow captives endured cycles in their treatment from leniency that brought on monotony of work and whatever little food they could get to more extreme demands of more work and more beatings for any perceived infractions.

The Jaschek father and son were relocated in November of 1942 to the Riga Ghetto, “an accumulation of houses on a few streets.” The living conditions remained poor with several people forced into one room. Yashek was assigned to work maintenance on locomotives in a roundhouse outside the ghetto. He was assigned to a Latvian worker who was not happy with the German occupation. When Yashek was forced to abandon his pride and beg for food, he found himself denied. When returning to the ghetto one night, Richard Yashek was “shaken to his core” by a police inspection looking for “contraband bread, butter, potatoes or any other foods, that may have been traded on the ‘black market.” Prisoners who did obtain some of these food items were forced to quickly devour them and those who couldn’t were beaten and publicly hanged.

In spring of 1943, Yashek and his father moved to a small camp along with a few hundred other able-bodied prisoners near a cement factory, a limestone quarry, and a harbor. By the end of that summer, the father and son were moved again, this time to Koncentration Camp KZ Kaiserwald near Riga, Latvia. This camp housed prisoners from various backgrounds. There were Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, and political dissidents. Their former occupations ranged from prostitutes to members of the clergy. The population was many thousands, much more than the camps the Jascheks had been previously incarcerated in. The prisoners were allotted clothing taken from suitcases on arriving prisoners and identified with white crosses painted across their backs and white stripes running vertically on their pant legs. Richard Yashek and his father’s work there was composed of three 24 hour shifts separating the carbon components in flashlight batteries from the acid and...
the aluminum. They were constantly afraid of vicious beatings from the SS, and he recalls, “we were always hungry, there were a number of suicides by hanging in the fall of 1994.” Still, Yashek says their spirits were lifted when word reached them of “the German fiasco at Leningrad” and the surrender of General Paulson and his 6th Army. Typhoid fever broke out that summer, and Yashek’s father was stricken with it, but survived. Another selection was made in October of 1944 and in his recently ill state, Eugen Jaschek was separated from his son. Richard envisions the Nazi officers casually deciding who gets to live or die and condemning his father to wait out the last of his life in a barn waiting to be transported with the other “walking skeletons” facing death.

Yashek’s first move alone brought him to Danzig, Poland by boat. His new KZ camp was Stutthof. This camp was even harsher than the previous one. Their meager clothing was taken and replaced with thin cotton “Zebra Striped” uniforms that did nothing to shelter them from the cold. Yashek was “one of a dozen or so kids between 14 and 18 or so who decided to stick together.” These boys strove to survive bitter cold, hunger, massive workloads harvesting cabbage or working at a paper mill, and avoiding the advances of administrators who favored boys of their age.

Yashek did not remain at Stutthof long. His last selection resulted in being transported along with 100 to 200 others crammed into cattle cars without water, food, or anywhere to relieve themselves. An estimation of about half of those transported were Polish prisoners who cursed the Jews they were transported with. Richard Yashek maintained hope for survival by secluding himself in his own corner of the cattle car. He recalls, “I saw persons being pushed down, but I no longer cared and there was nothing I could do.” When they were finally released from the cattle cars after two days and two nights, Yashek saw “the floor of our car and the other cars covered with several layers of bodies. Only fifty to sixty people survived transportation to Burggaben Camp. According to Yashek, “we were ashamed to look at each other, wondering what we had done, who we pushed or choked to get a space to breathe and sit on top of others, some of whom were now dead.” The camp was a small one that had imprisoned the families of the governments of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. These families were able to remain intact and had special privileges such as plenty of food, good clothing, and warm beds. For the winter of 1944 to 1945, Yashek was left with the same “zebra striped”, thin cotton clothing to protect his body with a yellow and black triangle to designate him as a Jew. His imprisonment was unbearable and as a prisoner, Yashek realized “nothing mattered to me except surviving, which meant find a warm place and food and getting out of the work details by finding a place to hide for a few hours.” At the beginning of March, typhoid fever broke out in the barracks and the guards and block wardens were weary of venturing too close. This allowed the prisoners to work more leisurely. A morning came when the guards were encouraging prisoners to leave camp, and some went with them, but Yashek and his friends chose to remain at the camp. The war was not far from the camp. The prisoners saw German Army units outside the camp and heard cannons in the distance. Then, without warning, the guards disappeared and the gates were left open, but the prisoners had nowhere to go. Shells began to be fired upon the barracks, especially the one housing government families. Yashek and his friends found a stash of potatoes and a stove for cooking and warmth in a potato cellar, but the smoke would draw more fire from the Russians if it became visible.

On March 22, 1945 at about 8:00 pm, the cellar door was kicked open by two Russian soldiers demanding to
know who Yashek and his friends were. He was free at last. Yashek claims, “We had survived by sheer luck and desire…Our survival was not a demonstration of strength of character. It was just the desire to survive for another day, escape the bitter cold by staying in the confines of a building, get through the night and then survive another day.” Richard Yashek was a survivor weighing only 97 pounds, unable to step up onto a stool or eat all of the bread, soup, and meat the Red Army’s field kitchen offered him. He was taken to a Russian field hospital because he suffered from an inflamed diaphragm. When he recovered, he was placed in a camp with Italian soldiers who had already surrendered, next to the German prisoners of war camp. Days were spent playing chess and learning a bit of the Russian language while viewing plays on the glory of Stalin. Even though he was encouraged to head to Russia, Richard Yashek was determined to make his way home to Luebeck.

He was approved to travel back into Germany and was given part of a British uniform to wear. As he and many others made their way westward, he was often mistaken for a liberated British prisoner of war, but the mistake was always short lived because he spoke no English. When he reached Berlin, he was surrounded by the wartime destruction of flattened buildings. Despite the lack of any compassion or civility Yashek dealt with during his imprisonment, when he witnessed a young woman in a Luftwaffe uniform unable to pay for train tickets, he was moved to help her pay with money he had previously found. She was being harassed by young men and Yashek was sympathetic to her plight in comparison to how he would feel in that situation. He finally made it back to Bad Schwartau in August of 1945 and found food and shelter with his former non-Jewish neighbors, the Schultzes. His mother had left suitcases of linen, silverware, a sewing machine, and portraits with people that Yashek was able to contact. Disappointingly, the linen had disappeared, a few pieces of silverware had been used as children’s toys for digging outside, and the people refused to give the sewing machine back. For Yashek, “it was another heartbreaking experience, being rejected again.” He was able to retrieve bundles of letters and pictures. Richard Yashek knew where his father had met his end, but did not know what happened to his mother or younger brother. He says, “unusual as it may seem, many of us just couldn’t believe we could be killed at a whim and that the Germans could or would be able to direct and carry out these atrocities…However, after I came to the States and talked to other survivors, my hope finally gave way to the realization that no one who was sent to Duenamuende survived.” He was able to contact family members from his father’s side, and this lead to his opportunity to move to the United States. One evening, while in Luebeck, Yashek missed that last streetcar that would take him home to Bad Schwartau and decided to sleep on a desk in a meeting house. He was discovered by Norbert Wollheim, a manager of Jewish affairs of Jewish survivors of the camps, who declared to Yashek, “You will no longer ever have to sleep without a bed, mattress, or pillow,” and invited Yashek to live with him in Luebeck. There were other survivors living with Wollheim also waiting for exit visas. In October of 1948, Yashek was able to move to Sweden. The quota of immigrants from Germany to the United States had a long waiting list, and Yashek had a better chance of getting to the United States from Sweden. There he lived with his Aunt Meta and cousin Hans in a country not destroyed by the war.

On November 10, 1949, Richard Yashek arrived in New York Harbor. He stayed with his Aunt Beatrice and Uncle Arthur Hammel at their apartment in Jamaica. He experienced a theatrical performance and movie at Radio City Music Hall and soon became eager to assimilate, find a job, and learn English. He arrived in Pottsville, Pennsylvania on December 20, 1949 and began work the next day in his Uncle Arthur and Uncle
Simon Hammel’s exterminating business. Yashek continued to live in the Reading area of Pennsylvania and married Rosalye Levine at the Kesher Zion Synagogue in 1954 and together raised two daughters, Linda and Kimberly. In his testimony, Richard Yashek expressed his gratitude to his family in America and he expressed that he is “forever thankful that they found the kindness to offer me a home and family. Why they did it I have not to ask, but this story may be a good opening to do so,” and he explains the sentiment by continuing, “When I arrived, I was eager and all prepared to talk about experiences to someone, anyone. There never was an opportunity to do so. Eventually I reasoned that people had their own problems they didn’t talk about. I resolved to try as best I could to put my experience behind me and to try to forget.”
The Story of Esther and Chaim Kuperstock

By Lacey Lott

“We are grateful to the Federation of the Jewish Community Center in Reading, Pennsylvania for giving us the opportunity to tell our story. Our task and our obligation are to remind the world, and especially young people, to study the History of the Holocaust and the atrocity of the horrors the Nazis inflicted on us. Six million men, women, and children were wiped out and the only known reason was because they were Jews. We must prevent this from happening again.”

This is the story of the life of Esther Kuperstock and her husband, Chaim Kuperstock, as they survived the Nazi persecution from 1934-1945 as told by them. The Kuperstocks tell their story in a videotaped testimony housed at Albright College Holocaust Resource Center. Interestingly, Esther talks for a vast majority of the time. At times during the testimony, Chaim asks Esther to stop talking when the memories became too graphic.

For Esther and Chaim Kuperstock, the story begins in Janów Lubelski, Poland, a town of about 35,000, including about 2000 Jewish citizens. The couple met in 1934, where they attended synagogue together.

In the late 1930s, their friends began to shy away from them, and Esther says that the only known reason was because they were Jewish. She reflects that the two had a lot of non-Jewish friends, but that things started to change. For example, during the day, they saw their friends on the street and say hello, but “at night, the same friends put stockings on their faces and beat us up. There were nights when we couldn’t go out.”

Esther remembers hearing of Kristallnacht in the spring of 1939. Word had taken several months to travel to Janów Lubelski from Germany and Austria where the pogrom had occurred. Better known as “The Night of Broken Glass,” it is notorious as the most widely-reported event of the early Holocaust era. All the windows of Jewish homes and stores were broken, synagogues were ransacked and burned, and Jewish men were snatched from their homes in the middle of the night and sent to concentration camps. Esther remembers that “In 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. And then, the real, real, tragedy started for us Jews in Poland.”

The couple attended synagogue on Fridays, and on one particular cloudy Friday, their rabbi had warned them not to come to the service that day. The congregation deemed it strange, and didn’t want to miss their service, so the majority of them were in the service that day. That day, Friday, September 8th, 1939, the city was bombed by a fleet of German planes. Esther narrates that the city should never have been bombed by the Germans: “there was nothing strategic there, there was nothing there [Hitler] could take… [Hitler bombed the town] just for the sake of killing people.” In the September 1939 attacks, more than three-quarters of the city was burned and destroyed. The next year, the city saw a Nazi invasion and the mass arrests and executions of Jews. In 1940, the Nazis launched a criminal labor camp in Janów Lubelski.

By this time, it was extremely difficult for a Jewish citizen to make a decent living in Poland. Chaim rented a
room with his mother and sister in Janów Lubelski, but because conditions were so dangerous in the
devastated town, Esther was taken in by a family about 40 miles away. These conditions led to their
marriage; in several testimony tapes, Chaim smiles when he looks back on his devotion to his wife. There
was a 7:00 pm curfew for Jewish citizens in Poland at the time, and they were easily recognizable because a
required bright yellow Star of David adorned every Jew on the streets. Chaim would occasionally ride his
bicycle to see his sweetheart of seven years—70 miles round trip—but family and friends cautioned that if he
didn’t make it back to Janów Lubelski by 7:00, he could be arrested or even killed.

Thus it became increasingly difficult for Esther and Chaim to spend time together. Esther reflects, “the
reason we wanted to get married was because we couldn’t see each other.” Finally, their families decided
that the best choice would be marriage, and after a seven-year courtship, Esther and Chaim were married on
June 5, 1941.

Since Chaim had worked in the lumber industry, he was able to obtain a modest amount of building material,
and the newlyweds built a small two-room house where Chaim’s mother lived with them. Esther remembers
that their home had a bedroom and kitchen as well as a small foyer, and that they used to grow and harvest
vegetables in their backyard. She says that they did “just enough to get by” at the time, because there were
no Jewish businesses, and most synagogues had been burned. Their house was within eyesight of a labor
camp, and they remember seeing routine assemblies of the village elders in which Nazi officers would cut off
their beards and shoot them, one by one. Luckily, Chaim was able to wear a green armband, which signified
his employment in lumber and allowed him to travel without extensive questioning by Nazi officers.

Just one year later, in October 1942, the couple received an order to leave their home. Ironically, the couple
remembers that the order came on the Holiday of Tabernacles. In Jewish culture, this holiday is part of
Sukkot, a harvest festival, and is so markedly joyful that it is referred to in Jewish prayer and literature as
“The Season of Our Rejoicing.” The Kuperstocks had just picked the crops that they had toiled over all
season, and were preparing to harvest them. They received the order and asked, “What can you take?”
worried that they would be unable to salvage the few belongings they had kept and those they had managed
to buy after the bombings and German invasion in 1939. “Take what you can and go.” Esther remembers that
at this point, she was in her third trimester of pregnancy, and her concern was that she wouldn’t be able to
bring the necessary food and supplies to take care of her baby if it was born when they were in hiding.
Knowing that diapers were a luxury, she packed a few linens to swaddle the baby. She says that “we didn’t
have much because everything had been burnt anyway. We didn’t know the destination, we just knew to
go.” Esther and Chaim each took one pack on their backs and a bag in each hand. They bid farewell to the
home they had built together, which Esther describes as being so beautiful it was “like a picture,” and Chaim
led his mother and wife on a journey to hopeful safety.

Esther remembers; “We went marching. Where to, we didn’t know.” The three of them marched on the
roads and sometimes in the woods to avoid being seen, and Chaim’s navigational skills brought them to his
brother’s home roughly thirty-five miles away, where they received the news that he had been accused of
having a radio and was taken from his home for the alleged crime. Esther remarks, “My brother-in-law was a
religious young man, and he wouldn’t, in his life, have an idea to do something like that, but they accused
him and took him away not long after our wedding.” Esther and Chaim sent his brother a package, but they never knew he received it.

The family continued to a nearby lumber yard, where Chaim’s remaining family, including his sister and his brother’s wife and children were hiding. Esther calls her nieces “beautiful, beautiful, little girls with chestnut hair” and cries every time she mentions them. They dug a ditch under a pile of lumber where they managed to fit, and through connections with families they knew though business, they arranged to have food delivered to them. This lasted for two and a half weeks until late November. A snowfall accumulated, and for three days they didn’t receive any food because footprints in the snow would reveal their location to Nazi officers patrolling the area. They had one frozen bottle of water left, which they held against their shivering bodies until it melted and they could take a sip.

Late one night in November, they heard footsteps outside of their tiny hiding place. Two men with stockings on their faces discovered the family and gave them no mercy, beating them and taking the meager assortment of belongings they had left. Esther lost a necklace, her linens for the baby, and her blouse; Chaim’s boots were yanked off his feet, and their blankets were stolen as well. The little food they had was stolen, and they were left bruised and shivering.

That morning, they heard a dog barking, and Chaim warned them that the worst was coming. They looked outside of their hiding place and sure enough, three Schutzstaffel (SS) officers were marching straight towards them. “Heraus, Heraus, Heraus!” They screamed at the family, “out” in German. They were ordered to begin marching on the road, when Esther addressed one of the officers; “Can’t you see I’m having labor pains?” She had become so emaciated that even at eight months, her pregnancy was barely detectable. They forced her to march at first, but because of her labor pains she was having difficulty keeping up. The German officers showed a bit of pity and allowed her to ride on the buggy behind their horse. After roughly twenty miles, they arrived at the destination: a labor camp known as Budzin where many Jewish professionals were sent to work in their trades.

At this point in time, Esther and Chaim were separated. Esther, her mother-in-law, and Chaim’s sister were sent to a basement with feather beds and air mattresses containing “lice as big as flies,” where guards told Esther to lay down because she was going into labor. They were told that the basement was vacant because its previous occupants had been evacuated and killed, which left them wondering about their own fate. The pain was excruciating for the next two days, and she begged for a doctor to come and help her.

Finally, after about forty-eight hours of pain and crying for help, Esther’s mother-in-law cried out the window, lined with barbed-wire, that her daughter-in-law desperately needed a doctor. A nearby officer heard the plea, and went through the camp in search of a doctor. Hours later, the doctor arrived in pajamas and, in Esther’s words, “pulled the baby out.” The child was immediately taken to the lavatory, and Esther was never told whether it was a boy or girl, though the doctor had implied that it was a stillborn. Esther wasn’t allowed to bathe after giving birth but was only given a lukewarm cup of tea.

They stayed in the basement for two and a half weeks. By then, 64 people resided in the filthy basement. One
evening, the man in charge of the barracks ordered all 64 to line up outside of the building, and he began counting them. Esther remarks that she knew why they were counting, but asked anyway. The man replied, “We have to know how much food to prepare.” Knowing this was a lie, they feared for their lives.

The next morning, a truck arrived in front of the building. An SS officer evacuated them, lined them up in rows of five, and began a selection process. “From the 64 people, he selected 10 women, and 10 men.” He said that he would be back later to take the other 44 away, and that 20 would go to a different location. Esther was the only one in her family selected by the SS officer. Unsure of whether the selected were chosen to live or die, the women said goodbye. That was the last time that Esther saw her mother-in-law, her aunt, and her sister-in-law.

Esther remained in Budzin, where she befriended a younger woman named Elsie. The two had been assigned to sleep in the same bunk, which eventually occupied as many as six to eight people. Elsie’s father was a dentist, and he took Esther as an employee so that she wouldn’t have to work in the most brutal conditions. Esther came down with typhoid fever, and her 103 degree temperature lasted for seventeen days. Luckily, Elsie was immune to the fever because she had it as a child, so she came to the infirmary to visit, and occasionally brought baked potatoes and tea.

At the end of February 1944, they were transported to Majdanek, a notorious death camp, to work there until June, where they did repairs, laundry, and other tasks that the officers didn’t want to do. On June 20, they heard shooting and saw flames out their windows. At 11:00 pm, they were rounded up in the main yard and told to get a blanket and two cans of food from the trucks that had arrived, and to retrieve a pair of shoes from the mountains of them stored in the warehouse. Esther remembers that some people got the wrong size shoes, some got two lefts or two rights, some got shoes with holes in them, but that didn’t matter to the officers.

They began marching. “Some people couldn’t keep up,” she says. “They were shot.” It started raining and they threw off their shoes and blankets, and after an exhausting journey, the guards finally let them rest in a building where bricks were burned. She remembers overhearing the guards’ discussion of what they would do with the people; some wanted to leave them in the building to die, some wanted to try burning them in the brick ovens. One officer remarked that the Luftwaffe had ordered that they march them to Auschwitz, so the Luftwaffe’s orders prevailed.

After three more days of marching, they arrived at a railroad and were packed tightly into boxcars to travel by train for a day. Eventually they arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the large death and concentration camp next to the Auschwitz concentration camp. In Birkenau, she saw four massive chimneys emerging over the camp, though she didn’t know their purpose. She was ordered into a room to undress and shower in a disinfectant mixture, and women had their hair shaved. She was branded with a number which marked her arm for the rest of her life: A-13890.

Esther recalls that the first few days, the work wasn’t terribly difficult, but that eventually, she caught on to the environment of the camp, and realized that she might not make it out alive. She remembers the daily
routine at Birkenau: at 5:00 in the morning, everyone came to roll call. Rain or shine, the SS officers required that all prisoners were in attendance. They stayed at roll call until daylight, and people were delegated to different work areas. “Every night,” she says, “they came into the barracks and took out people. We never saw them anymore.”

For about six months, Esther lived short-term in a total of three different camps. In October 1944, Esther was transported to Bergen-Belsen. From Bergen-Belsen, she was taken to Rangoon, and from there, she was taken to Theresienstadt. She remembers that people looked like “walking skeletons” by then, so famished that they could barely be recognized. “Thank God that the Russians came in that Friday, and we were freed.” She was finally liberated on May 8, 1945. By this day, she had been through a total of six camps. Esther had escaped a mass extermination by two days; Theresienstadt was slated to build a crematory on May 10 for all prisoners who had arrived from other camps.

Liberation, however, didn’t guarantee a life of health and happiness for the prisoners. “After the liberation,” Esther begins to weep, “all kind of sickness broke out. Typhoid fever. Dysentery. People were dropping like flies.” She began working with a doctor (who later contracted dysentery and died), and supplies were being sent from “the wonderful U.S.A.” She was given some clothing and two suitcases with necessities. She took a train in order to look for her husband, but fell asleep and woke up barefooted and missing her suitcases. She had been robbed.

Luckily, Esther recognized a few people on the train, and found a cousin who took her in and gave her a pair of shoes. She traveled with her relative, who “took her in like their own child.” She stayed with them for a while, hoping that her husband was still alive.

By this time, Chaim had seen unbelievable horrors. Chaim recalls, “it went on for six years, and every minute in the day was a different punishment.” He also remembers the morning roll call, but for him it was a sadistic routine. The SS officers would line up the prisoners and choose a few of them, then shove a stick through their throats until it came back out the other side. Sometimes they would line up against a wall, and a horse would walk across their toes, breaking their bones and leaving them with swollen, bloody feet. He remembers having work assignments as meaningless as digging holes and filling them back in again. Chaim simply thought, “Hitler will be king of the world, and we won’t make it.”

But he did make it. He had been through a total of 18 camps, and was a meager 82 pounds at liberation. He was liberated in 1945 by the Americans in Bavaria, and sped back to Poland on a train in search of his beloved wife.

It had now been nearly two and half years since Esther and Chaim had seen each other.

It took about three months until Esther and Chaim were reunited, but at that long awaited moment, the joy was immeasurable. The couple was among very few Polish Jews who had survived; Chaim was the only survivor of 69 close relatives. The two met in Poland and ended up in a displaced persons (DP) camp in Germany, where the Joint Distribution Committee took care of them.
They made arrangements to come to America, where Esther’s sister was living. Arriving in New York in 1947, they took a train to Reading, Pennsylvania. Chaim went to the Safety Table Company plant at Eighth and Oley Streets and began speaking German, wondering if there were jobs available. The man there spoke Pennsylvania Dutch and understood, and Chaim began the job that he would have for 50 years.

Looking back nearly half a century later, Chaim doesn’t think that the memories of the Holocaust can ever leave a survivor of the horrific events. “I still have Hitler’s hand on my head. You can’t take him away. I’ll have him for the rest of my life.” He says he used to think that “they were educated people… how can it be, where is it written… that Germans and the educated are the highest in society? Why? What did [the Jews] do to them?”

Today, we try to retell the stories in hopes of understanding. For Chaim Kuperstock, it is impossible to give justice to the true horror of Hitler’s regime, because “no human being can describe” the atrocities that he inflicted on millions of innocent people. In the words of Esther Kuperstock; “Six million men, women, and children were wiped out and the only known reason was because they were Jews. We must prevent this from happening again.”
A Survivor’s Story of Escape on the Kindertransport: Sidney Bratt

by Meghann McGuire

This is the story of Sidney Bratt as told by him in a videotaped testimony housed at the Albright College Holocaust Resource Center.

Sidney Bratt was born on August 22, 1928, in Guttstadt, in the same house as his father. Guttstadt was part of Germany after World War I, and was located in East Prussia, almost on the border of Lithuania. In order to get from Germany proper to East Prussia at the time you had to go through Poland, through what was then called the Danzig Corridor. Today, Guttstadt is named Dobre Miasto and is owned by Poland.

Sid remembers a very lovely childhood, with two brothers, a sister, and quite a few friends. There were two rivers flowing through the town, and there was a lot of recreation centered around the rivers. There was boating, fishing, and swimming. Sid recalls that the smaller of the two rivers flowed right behind his family’s house.

The Jewish population of the town was quite small, with 25 to 40 Jewish people. It made up only about one to two percent of the town’s population. Sid recalls that the relationship between the Jewish people and others in town was excellent: he never knew as a child that there was really a difference between them and others. He remembers walking with his father in town, and he knew everyone and everyone knew him. He remembers going to a small school, the same school that his father went to, where three classes were conducted in one room. He remembers two teachers. The older teacher was very nice, but the younger teacher was the first fascist that Sid remembers meeting. It was about 1934 at this point, and Sid remembers the way that the younger teacher acted towards the Jewish students was very different. He ignored them and put them in the worst seats. He remembers fairly bad discrimination from that teacher, and he was the first person Sid remembers who would say “Heil Hitler.” This was the first anti-Semitism that Sid noticed, and he didn’t really see it happening anywhere else at that point.

Sid attended Hebrew school when the school day ended, and then he went outside and play around the river. He also always had plenty of homework to do.

Sid remembers his mother, Elsa, always cooking. She was busy from early morning until night it seemed, and she always made their clothes, cleaned, and did just about everything else around the house. He recalls that Jewish holidays were always very exciting, and his mother always prepared for them far ahead of time. Sid notes that his favorite holiday celebration was Simkha Tora when the Jews walked around with little flags, and candy was thrown from the balconies as kids ran around and picked it up.

Sid’s father, Alfred, was a trader. He had a horse and buggy which he took around to farms and to buy things and bring them back to town to sell. He mostly sold his purchases to wholesalers. Usually, he would leave on a Sunday or Monday and return on Friday. If he had a full load, he would return sooner. Sid remembers that
his paternal grandmother always spoiled him, as he was her first grandchild. She always had something for him when he went over to visit. She gave him baked apples or whatever else she could save for him.

Sid was the oldest child in his family, with identical twin brothers born on September 20, 1929, and a younger sister born on February 21, 1931. The twins, Heinz and Erwin, were so close that they could not be separated. They even tried to send Heinz, the older of the pair, away to get healthier. Sid remembers him to be a sort of sickly child. However, they had to bring him back a few days later because both of the twins refused to eat while separated. Their sister, Irma, was a beautiful little girl with blonde hair. She injured to her hip during birth, and as such she could never walk right. Most of her life was spent in and out of hospitals. Sid was also very close with a cousin on his mother’s side, and many people said that they looked very much alike.

Slowly, the family began to see the SS on the streets, and people were starting to treat the Jews like dirt. They began to hear speeches by Hitler on the radio, and the Jewish men were starting to talk about the need to leave Germany. They spoke of leaving for America, for England, leaving for anywhere. At this time, old friends began to throw stones at the Jewish children. They also spit and hit them. They were the same boys with whom Sid used to play and go to school. The adults acted similarly. There were signs on the storefronts that said “No Jews.” It was very uncomfortable to even be outside of the house.

The family began to see these traces of change, but the major change occurred on November 9, 1938, which was known as Kristallnacht. Sid’s family lived very close to the synagogue, on the same street. One night, they heard a lot of noise and went to the window to see what was happening. They saw flames shooting up from the synagogue, and another bonfire on the street in front of the synagogue. They then noticed that people were throwing things out of the windows of the synagogue onto the street. It seemed as if everyone was having great fun trashing the place. This is when his family became scared, because they were beginning to have an inclination of what might be happening. About an hour after the family saw the synagogue on fire, the SS broke into the house and arrested Sid’s father. They grabbed him and just took him away. They wouldn’t say where they were taking him; they wouldn’t give the family any answers. All that they said is, “you’ll find out, you’ll find out.” Sid didn’t see his father again until three years later. The SS took him away and he was put in the local jail for a few days, and then they transferred him to Kenisburg, a concentration camp where they took most of the Jews that were arrested. The authorities locked him up there.

The family was not forced to wear the Star of David, but this was simply because there were so few Jews in the town that everyone already knew who they were. By this time the Jews were no longer allowed to own businesses, and they had to do the job they were given. Esther’s father worked in a brick factory, where he was in a pit with clay where they took the clay out and wheel it over to another section of the factory where Sid’s uncle worked. They put the clay into brick form, and then in the part of the factory where Sid’s cousin worked, they put the brick molds into the kiln.

After Kristallnacht, they were no longer allowed to go to their old school or to walk on the sidewalks. Sid was forced to ride a train 45 minutes each way to go to school. He attended this school until June of 1939. By this time Sid’s mother had heard about a Jewish organization in Germany that was encouraging families to
send a child or multiple children to England on a “kindertransport.” The Kindertransport was sponsored by a Jewish welfare organization in Germany. His mother filled out an application to get exit visas and papers, but the family was only allotted one child for the program.

The spot ultimately was Sid’s, because his brothers couldn’t stand to be separated, and his sister was too infirm to be sent alone. Sid’s mother had to fill out the forms for the German organization, and then she had to get him to Berlin to meet up with the people in charge of the Kindertransport.

When Sid thinks back on that day, he remembers his whole family, other than those that had already been arrested, going out to the railroad station to say goodbye to him. He remembers all of the children, his mother, his aunt, and his grandmother. Sid got on the train and his mother kept saying “you lead the way, we’ll follow you, we’ll see you in England.” He went on the train reluctantly, as he did not want to leave his family. He will never forget looking out of the train as his family waved goodbye. He notes that he didn’t realize at the time that this would be the last time he would see them.

The day he left on the train was June 15, 1939, and he arrived in Berlin the next day. In Berlin, his aunts and cousins met him. There was a big committee of people collecting the children from various trains as they rolled in, and they would take them to places to stay overnight. In the morning, his aunts and cousins saw him off as the train left for Hamburg. From Hamburg, Sid embarked on the S.S. Washington ship, which took the children to South Hampton, England. Sid recalls 200 to 300 children on the ship, and he didn’t know any of them. The children were rarely older than 10 or 12, and they all wore tags for identification. The adults were all German Jews, and seemed very experienced in this type of ordeal. They left Hamburg on the S.S. Washington on the June 17. It was a five-day trip, with a stop in France on the way.

Sid arrived in South Hampton with one small suitcase. There seemed to be a very large crowd of kids running around at the dockside. Sid was very shaken and worried because he didn’t know a word of English. He had no idea what would happen, or even where he was going. There was crying all the time, especially at night when the children tried to go to sleep. Sid recalls that everyone was under the covers crying.

Sid was first taken to the Warbrook House in London, where the adults were very nice and tried to calm the children down. They then divided them into groups and took a smaller group by train to Ipswich. Sid was then taken to a little town nearby called Clayton. In Clayton, he was sent to a huge camp with over 3,000 boys. It had a lot of buildings, cabins, and tents pitched. It wasn’t permanent it was more of a place to keep the children safe until they could figure out what to do with everyone. Sid stayed at this place for about eleven months, and he slept in one of the cabins. The camp always had food, which was never a problem. He recalls that he didn’t particularly care for the food, but there was always plenty of it. Sid also notes that he “only had one cold in England, it was from the day (he) arrived to the day he left… it was so bitter cold in the cabin it seemed you could never warm up.” They gave him simple clothing, and he had no complaints about how he was treated. The boys were also given a little bit of pocket money.

The boys were outside digging trenches after Poland was attacked, and then on the September 3rd England declared war on Germany. Sid didn’t really have any kind of communication with his family, but he does
remember receiving a brief postcard saying that his father had arrived in England in August 1939. Alfred was taken from the prison in Kenisburg, right onto the ship to go to England. He was not even allowed to go home to say goodbye to his wife and the remaining children. Alfred was first sent to a huge camp for men, and then ultimately interned on the Isle of Man because the British government interned any immigrants as enemies of the state, regardless of their religious status and reasons for immigration.

Sid began to cope a little better when one of his cousins ended up not too far away from him. He got to see this cousin a few times, then at the end of 1939, his cousin was arrested and dragged away as an enemy alien, and once again Sid was alone and had to make his way back to the camp. These arrests were due to the fact that Nazi spies had infiltrated the refugee movement to England, and so all men over 16 were taken to the internment camps, so the English could attempt to locate those that were German spies.

The only correspondence Sid had from his mother was about 25 words, and due to the brevity, it was mainly saying that they were well and that she hopes he was well, and she wished him good luck. She was planning to take a transport to Holland with his brothers and sister, but she was on her way when the war started and she couldn’t continue on, and also couldn’t return home. She eventually ended up in Berlin with the children, and waited there until the battle was over with Poland. She then returned to Guttstadt with the children, and they were picked up on February 21, when the entire Jewish population of Guttstadt was taken away. Sid never found out anything more about what happened to his mother, brothers, and sister. He notes, “they disappeared off the face of the earth.”

Sid left Clayton in May 1940 when they tried to get the children into more manageable groups. He remembers that they questioned all the children, and Sid must have mentioned that he was deeply involved in Judaism, because he ended up being taken to a very religious hostel call Tyrus Green. It was a hostel of 30 to 35 children, run by a Jewish couple, Mr. and Mrs. Baer. It was an old vicarage, and it was very orthodox.

The group basically lived as a family in the vicarage, which consisted of a large number of rooms, and had an individual kitchen and a nice little dining area. There was also quite a bit of staff there. They received a lot of Hebrew education at home, and Sid also attended the local elementary school. By the middle of 1940, Sid was starting to get proficient in English.

Sid would receive, from time to time, generic printed forms that his father had been allowed to send from the internment camp on the Isle of Man. They usually just said whether or not he was doing well.

By this point, bombing could be heard in the distance but Sid remembers they didn’t feel too much danger. He remained at the vicarage until 1943. In 1941, Sid was trained for his bar mitzvah. He was able to read from the Torah and he could do all of the prayers by himself. His bar mitzvah was the first time he had seen his father since Kristallnacht. His father had just been released from the internment camp, and Sid remembers how fragile he had seemed at that point. Alfred seemed to have changed greatly during this time. He almost seemed like an old man, but he was only 41 years old.

Sid notes that at that point in his life, it was his dream to go to Palestine. After expressing this sentiment, he
was transferred to a training establishment for Palestinian life located in Scotland. It was a large physical facility and there were 35 to 40 boys and girls living there. Since many of the men were drafted into the army, the children helped with the farms. One time when they were at a farm picking brussel sprouts because it was one of the few vegetables you could pick in the winter, and he looked back at the row he had been picking and there was red all over the plants. He had cut his hand on the ice and didn’t feel it because his hands were numb from the cold. Sid noted playfully that to this day he is not a great lover of brussel sprouts.

Sid stayed at the farm until 1945 when they began emptying out locations to prepare to bring liberated concentration camp prisoners for rehabilitation. Sid went to London to be near his father. At this point, Sid was almost 17 years old. He rented a small, furnished apartment on Abbey Road, which was not too far away from where his father was living. Sid started off by making belts, and then was trained to become an automobile mechanic. He also went to night school and took general subjects. Sid remained in London until he immigrated to the United States in 1948.

In 1946 and early 1947, Sid and his father put out their names and also tried to get information from the rest of the family. From all of the lists that came through, there was nothing about his mother or his siblings. A few of his cousins were found, but by this time Sid had basically given up all hopes of seeing his mother and siblings again. At this point his father was living with a lady by the name of Margot. His father, with no hope of ever seeing his wife again, got a divorce and married Margot on May 30, 1947. She had a sister living in the United States in San Antonio, Texas, who offered to help them come to the States. Sid’s father and stepmother approached him and said they wanted to go, and that they wanted him to consider coming along. He agreed to go along to the United States under the condition that he would eventually leave to go to Israel. Sid’s father seemed to be very concerned about was what Sid’s reaction would be to him marrying Margot. Sid felt that it was wonderful because he realized that there was very little chance he would ever see his mother again.

Sid recalls that his first six months in the United States were very difficult. It was hard to get used to the change from the United Kingdom’s social system to the United States’ social system. But after the initial six months, Sid came to really like it. He recalls finding a job that paid 65 cents an hour making cases, and then egg timers. He eventually paid back every penny that had been spent to help him get to the United States. The family took a large apartment, and Sid, his father, stepmother, her sister and young son, who was about five years old, all lived together.

Sid started going to night school, and then he went to art school where he took a drafting class. In 1950, he went spent a weekend in the Catskills with a Zionist youth group. This is where he met his future wife Esther, whom he married six months later. They had a very nice, simple wedding at their synagogue in New York City. The couple lived in an up-town Manhattan apartment that belonged to Esther’s parents before they moved to Reading, Pennsylvania. Esther’s parents had moved to Reading in order to maintain Esther’s uncle’s hosiery business. The young couple often considered moving to the new state of Israel, but as they started to work their way up the economic ladder, and as their children started coming along, they decided against the idea. They have, however, visited Israel many times. Sid and Esther have three daughters who were born over a period of ten years.
They moved to Reading in 1956, in order to help Sid’s father-in-law with the wholesale plywood distribution business, and worked with him for about a year and a half until he began running a wholesale business for siding located in Sinking Spring, a Reading suburb. In 1963, Sid started his own business. Two years later he bought out his father in law’s business, Industrial Plywood, and the Bratts have owned both businesses since that time.

Sid explained that he always wanted to ensure that his children never had to endure anything such as he and his family endured in Europe. He notes that he and his wife place a very great value on family, and he always tried to give his children every opportunity that they didn’t have as children.

Sid ended his testimony by explaining that although it is very difficult, he tells his story in the hopes that “this oral history can prevent it from ever happening again. I hope that is what it will do.”
Ben Austrian, World Renowned Artist

By Britany Maack

World renowned Jewish artist, Ben Austrian, was born November 22, 1870 in Reading Pennsylvania. Austrian’s father, Raphael Austrian, owned a dry goods store at 527 Penn Street, and was instrumental in founding Reading’s Oheb Sholom Synagogue in 1864. Raphael Austrian emigrated from Germany to the United States. Ben’s mother, Fannie Elizabeth Dierfross, was related to the well-known Drexels of Philadelphia. Anthony J. Drexel, cousin to Fannie, envisioned an educational institution that correlated with the needs of the industrial world, and in 1891 his dream became a reality when founding Drexel University.

As a child, Ben was challenged with health issues; therefore, he was not allowed to play outside like his friends. Consequently, Ben taught himself how to paint, and dedicated most of his time to making works of art, but at the age of fifteen, Ben went to work for his father, where he became a traveling salesman in the tri-state area. Even though Austrian enjoyed his job, he still had a passion for painting, and would persuade customers by offering them originals of his artworks.

When Raphael Austrian died in 1897 Ben took his father’s position, and realized the dry goods business was not for him. Austrian decided to pursue his passion for art, and sold his father’s business, giving the profits to his mother. Austrian began to receive recognition for his paintings and in 1895 his painting, “After the Race” won prize money of one hundred dollars from the National Horse Show Association. Austrian began painting reoccurring themes of animals and country life which appealed to the urban public earning for a simpler and purer life. Austrian’s first exhibit was at Earle’s Art Gallery in Philadelphia in 1898, and “A Days Hunt” was his first great success.

However, Austrian’s area of expertise was painting hens and chickens; he enjoyed this so much that he even attempted to train chicks to pose for him. Finally, in 1900 Austrian’s chick paintings received recognition from A.W. Erickson, who paid Austrian to use his chick paintings for advertisement. Austrian’s chicks were used in advertisements for Bon Ami Cleaners, a company that started in the 1880s. The company is in business today and using Austrian’s “Chick that Hasn’t Scratched Yet.” Bon Ami allowed Austrian to paint his wife, Mollie, in their advertisements.

Later, Ben founded the “Ben Austrian Art Publishing Company” to handle all requests for paintings and lithographs he received from the United States and Europe. Austrian divided his time between two cottages, one he named “Clovelly” in northern Berks County, and another in Palm Beach, Florida. Ben Austrian died suddenly of a heart attack on December 9, 1921 at the age of 57. He was buried behind the Lutheran Church in Kempton, where he used to watch the sunsets.

Notes

1. Weible Robert, “Historical Markers,” Explore Pennsylvania History, June 17, 1995,

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
7. Weible.
10. Flippen Paula, “These Chicks are Chic” Reading Eagle (Reading, PA), March 13, 1982.
11. Weible
Robert Katz: A Jewish Farmer in Bernville

by Tiffine Malamphy

Robert Katz’s life story has been pieced together through a videotaped testimony of his son, Lee Katz, who died March 21, 2011; an interview with his nephew Joseph Goldstein; and several articles in the Reading Eagle.

On January 7, 1900, Robert Katz was born in Giesson, Germany. He was the youngest of his siblings with two older brothers and two older sisters. While Robert still lived in Germany, he served as a soldier in World War I. Shortly after the war ended, Robert moved to the United States in 1923. The main reason Robert moved to the United States was his absolute dislike for Germans and their politics. Even though Robert was Jewish, he did not leave Germany for that reason. Robert had an older brother who lived in the States which guaranteed that he would have somewhere to live once he made the transition across the ocean. Robert’s older brother, Solly, worked as a farmer and was a gateway to his eventual career. Robert hung a sign on his door that stayed there for many years; it read, “Robert Katz Cattle Dealer.” His life as a German Jewish farmer in Bernville is a fascinating story.

Robert returned to Germany in 1927 so he could meet his future wife. He attended a meeting with a woman, Paula, who would eventually become his wife. This occurred through the old Jewish custom of arranged marriage. On May 15, 1927, Paula came to the United States and nine days later she married Robert. After finding a wife, Robert never returned to Germany.

In 1928, Paula gave birth to their first and only son, Lee. Lee was Robert’s closest relative in the United States. Lee eventually followed in his father’s footsteps and became a livestock dealer. Robert was also very fond of his nephew Joseph. He essentially raised Joseph since Joseph’s father died when he was only 13. Robert became a father figure for Joseph and taught him the most valuable lessons a person could learn. He taught Joseph how to work and there was no reason to be afraid of it. He also taught Joseph how to work smart. Robert exemplified that he was a smart man by teaching Joseph math while they rode in the cattle truck. He truly cared about his family and wanted to teach both his nephew and his son valuable life lessons in the hopes that they would eventually love farming as much as he did.

Farming was a major part of Robert’s life and the reason that he was so well known in Bernville. He was a livestock dealer and an avid farmer. Robert knew a lot about livestock. At one point, he bought a lame cow because he realized immediately that the cow only had bruised hooves. Robert tended to the cow by treating her feet. While he waited for the cow’s hooves to heal, he milked her lying down. Eventually, Robert sold the cow to a farmer who did not have stony fields. The main way that Robert earned his money was by buying and selling farms. He eventually built himself a large operation. Robert had both dairy cows and beef cattle. Joseph recalls that at any time Robert would be running at least twelve farms. He had four hired hands and a truck driver to help him with his farms. In fact, Robert had five farms right on Garfield Road which is where he lived.
Joseph recalls a story that describes how Robert was always looking for a deal for his farming business. Robert went to a public sale to purchase cows, but by the end of the sale he had bought both the cows and the farm. While Robert enterprising he was not frugal with his money. At a farmer’s market one day, Lee received a phone call from his wife and learned that one of Robert’s farms was on fire. Lee was afraid to tell his father in case he reacted poorly while in the market. When asked what the call was about, Lee replied that his wife wanted him to bring home potatoes. Later, on the car ride home, Lee asked what his father would do if one of the farms were on fire. Robert said that even if the farm burned they were all insured. After hearing this, Lee decided to tell his father that one of the farms was on fire. Robert arrived at the farm only to see his barn destroyed. He eventually decided not to rebuild the farm.

Robert was a very successful farmer. It helped that farming was his passion. He truly understood livestock and what it took to have healthy cattle. One story that Joseph recounts is how Robert’s wife, Paula, wanted a new car but he refused to buy it since he needed to buy new farming equipment. Farms were truly his love and they absolutely came first.

Robert was more than just a farmer. He was also an impressive man that had an essence about him that was difficult to describe. Robert had a quirk that required he dressed a certain way every day. According to his nephew Joseph, Robert wore suspenders or wear bib overalls every day. On his feet, Robert wore either high leather shoes or half boots. His style of dress made him seem very unassuming. Joseph claims that anyone who saw Robert on the street would not suspect that he was an affluent man.

Both Lee and Joseph have an almost unending list of positive ways to describe Robert. His nephew says he was the first one up and the last one to bed at the end of the day. He was also very honest. Joseph also describes his uncle as being very lucky. It seems from all the public sales that Robert advertised in the Reading Eagle that he was lucky in many of his business ventures. Robert was a very smart man. He never went to college which may have been a result of being a soldier and immigrating to the United States. Despite not being formally educated, Robert was very secure in his ability to conduct business. This is a real juxtaposition to his feelings about his ability to speak English. Robert was very self-conscious about his accent when speaking English. He also was not able to write very well. Joseph indicated that Robert only shared this knowledge with close relatives. Overall, he was a very shrewd businessman.

Robert also had a softer side that he wanted to remain private. He was very charitable but preferred to remain anonymous. Joseph said that, “if someone was in need then somehow they got.” One story that Joseph told was of the time that Robert found out a man could not afford fuel to heat his house. Robert got in his car and drove to the store. There he told the clerk to send a significant amount of fuel to the man’s house but to keep it anonymous. Robert then charged the heating fuel to his account.

While Robert was a charitable man, he was also well known as a prankster. He would go through a lot of trouble to pull a prank on someone. One story in particular exemplifies how much Robert enjoyed pulling pranks. Robert really did not like one of the local constables. He owned a goat that looked very similar to a doe. Robert decided one day that he would slaughter the goat and strap it to his car so it would replicate how other hunters would strap deer to their cars. He then drove around town showing off his prize. He even made
sure that the constable saw his new prize. Later that day, state police arrived at Robert’s house and demanded to see his hunting license. Robert, of course, obliged the police. When the constable wanted to arrest Robert, he pointed out that if the constable could not tell the difference between a goat and a doe then maybe he should be the one who was hunted. Robert was very proud of this story. Joseph claims that he must have heard that story “at least 700 times.”

Robert also pulled several other pranks that both his nephew and son enjoyed retelling. Joseph recalls a time when Robert had acquired a significant amount of land. A real estate agent eventually called Robert and inquired if he could purchase the land. Robert was asked how much he wanted for the land. He replied with a ridiculous number that he must have known he would never get. The real estate agent laughed at Robert’s number and told him there was no way anyone could make that deal. Out of curiosity, the real estate agent asked why Robert decided to ask for that number. Robert simply replied that he had never sold anything for that amount and wanted to. While some would consider Robert’s pranks mean, his family says he was truly a loving man.

Although Robert never returned to Germany after moving to the United States in the 1920s, he still helped many German-Jews during the Holocaust. During the Holocaust, a person needed a letter indicating he or she had a place to live and a source of income to move to the United States. This ensured that the refugees would not be a burden to the American people. Lee speculates that Robert provided close to 100 such affidavits to German-Jews. He saved many of his friends and family from being sent to concentration camps. After Robert distributed the affidavits, he sent one of his hired hands to pick up the refugees from the boat. The affidavits likely saved many people from dying.

Robert was a practicing Jew. He attended Temple Oheb Sholom while he lived in Bernville. In Bernville, Temple Oheb Sholom was known as a German-Jewish synagogue. Joseph speculates that this may have been one of the reasons that Robert chose to attend this synagogue since he is unsure which sort of temple Robert attended in Germany.

Robert Katz died September 9, 1976. He left the bulk of his estate to his wife Paula and his son Lee. A portion of his small fortune was donated to various charities in the Reading area. According to his obituary, from his work as a livestock dealer, Robert left his family a sizable estate.
Across the Turbulent Sea: Hilde Bodenheimer

by Jonathan Rivera

This is the story of Hilde Bodenheimer, a Jewish immigrant and Holocaust Survivor, who came to America seeking refuge from the terrors of Nazi Germany. The first time I went to the Albright Holocaust Center, I thought I was going to listen to the story of a battle-worn Jewish survivor who escaped the camps, eluded the evil Nazi SS, and fought for survival. Instead, what I viewed was a different kind of heroism.

Hilde Bodenheimer came to the United States in 1939. She was married to Herman Bodenheimer in 1941 and had one son, James. She opened The Fashion and Sewing Studio in Reading, teaching young girls the knowledge she found and refined using all her experiences in America. Through the tragedies and hardships of her life, never once did Hilde back down or give up. She survived the Holocaust and Hitler, and survived life in the Great Depression in America, being her own woman and never letting the darkness of the times bring her down. And though the death of her parents was something she remembered deep in her heart, she persevered.

Germany

Hilde was born in 1913 and raised in Munich, Germany, an urban, cosmopolitan area rife with diversity and enterprise. Childhood was kind to her; she was born into a middle class family with plenty of advantages and a strict upbringing. Money wasn’t a problem, and there always seemed to be enough to go on ski trips, learn the piano and foreign languages. They lived in a beautiful home maintained by maids and housekeepers. It was the ideal life of a child, free from worry and pain and problems.

Hilde’s father became widely successful in silk manufacturing, more than able to provide a comfortable lifestyle for his family. Her mother took care of the children. As a little girl, Hilde knew little of the crisis the world outside her little bubble was facing until her teenage years.

Her mother and father seemed to be from two different worlds. Her mother came from Gutenberg, a city in Germany. She was born the youngest of five other siblings, with four brothers, and a sister. Her father was the middle child of a family of four. Unlike his future wife, he was raised in an environment where the family had to struggle to survive. However, despite this, he grew up to be a successful entrepreneur.

Even in her childhood, Hilde was strong-willed, ambitious, and eager to learn. These traits became more defined in her as she grew up, and would prove valuable as she stepped through the doors of childhood and out into a Germany filled with prejudice and anti-Semitism towards her and her people.

It was difficult to hide in High School, where classes were separated by their religion. Hilde and her fellow Jews were constantly troubled by their classmates. Somehow, in the face of these difficulties, Hilde began studying at Munich Academy, one of the most prestigious colleges in Germany, to become a clothes
designer. In her testimony, she states that she was the only Jew to attend the Academy that year. Though it was difficult, she studied for many years and excelled in her classes. Finally, the day came where she took and passed her final exam. But anti-Semitism had invaded even the halls of the Academy, and she was denied her diploma solely because she was Jewish. However, even this enormous disappointment wouldn’t stop her. With the help of her friends and family, they fought the system. In 1937, she was sent her diploma in the mail. Though she wasn’t allowed to participate in the graduation ceremony, gaining her diploma remains one of her greatest achievements.

In 1933, just after midterms at the Academy, Hilde was with her family in Vienna. They were walking downtown when they saw the news on a nearby kiosk. It was the same news on every kiosk, echoing from every radio and newspaper boy, printed in large, ominous black letters on the front page of every newspaper. It was the news that Adolf Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany.

People gathered by their radios and street corners and newspaper kiosks, and they saw this news, and Hilde watched as they shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads. “Ah, he’s not going to last,” they said, “two weeks and it’ll be over.” But the moment the Third Reich took control of the government, Germany had already begun to change. The Nazis loomed over the nation, watching every citizen. She remembered when they started the Hitler Youth program, taking children away from their families and warping their hearts and minds. If their parents spoke ill of Hitler and his philosophies, tried to turn away from him or go against him, the children denounced them. The SS soldiers arrested the parent, and put them in concentration camps to work or be killed.

For Hilde and her family, it seemed impossible to escape. Then, suddenly, an opportunity presented itself. Her father had a cousin in the United States, a man that he didn’t even know existed, but with whom he shared the same name, Blainger. It’s unknown how the cousin was able to find or contact Hilde’s father. This man lived in America, Baltimore, to be exact, and had heard of the Jewish persecution in Germany. He contacted Hilde’s father in a letter, saying that if he could save at least one person from Hitler and the Nazi party, he would be admitted into Heaven when he passed away and offered to help them travel to America. For Hilde and her family, this seemed to be a gift from God himself. The family agreed that, after she graduated, Hilde would be the one to go to America, an ocean away from Nazi Germany, to start a new life.

It took months to prepare for the voyage. Hilde’s parents and many of her other family members wanted her to get married first, so that she could have some added security. But she was dead-set on going alone, even though traveling to America was like traveling to the moon. She was strong enough, and when the time came, her belongings packed, she got on the boat to the United States with confidence. She was carried by the hope of escape to Ellis Island, and found the Statue of Liberty, torch shining against the grey skyline like a lighthouse beacon, showing the way to a new life. Her parents, who stood on the docks and waved her farewell, became farther and farther away, until they were nothing but a thought. She couldn’t have known at the time that she would never see them again.

**America**
When Hilde arrived in America, the United States was destitute and crippled under the burden of the Great Depression. She didn’t know how to use a telephone or a pay station, and though she spoke English well, she often had trouble communicating with the locals. Even the climate was so different from Germany’s that she would often feel sick for no reason.

Hilde stayed with her uncle and aunt for a time, finishing her mandatory two years of college in America, which all immigrants were required to complete. Sometime after the tragic loss of her aunt to brain cancer, Hilde decided to move out of her uncle’s residence. She began hopping from boarding house to boarding house, now completely on her own, trying to find work. In her testimony, Hilde didn’t go into much detail on this part. She remembers going to the employment offices, waiting in a line behind thousands of other men and women looking for work, with more people piling up behind her every second. She visited that office and others like it many times, looking for employment. One notable place she was employed was a Lord & Taylor women’s clothes shop. Hilde never forgot her old boss, who was also German, and who gave her a piece of advice that stuck with her through her life. “Don’t tell them what you can do, let them figure out what you can do.”

Through this difficult time, Hilde was undeterred. She wanted to become a full-fledged American, immersing herself in the lifestyle, adjusting to the everyday living strategies of Baltimore and learning how to cope in the economic crisis. She preferred boarding houses with American tenants instead of German ones, and over the years, her understanding of her native German language atrophied in favor of English. Eventually, though it was monumentally difficult, Hilde was able to fully assimilate with American culture and society.

She had been living in America for some time when, one day in August, she was contacted by her sister, who had stayed safe in Germany and wanted to come to the States to pursue a career in nursing. Hilde didn’t say how her sister avoided being shipped off to the camps, or of her time in Germany. The date is also unknown. At the time, she was looking at a job opportunity for Henry Carnegie, who was in need of a clothes draper for his fashion business. Both her sister and Carnegie would be in New York, and Hilde saw this as an opportunity to acquire a high-paying career. On her way to pick up her sister from Ellis Island, she would visit Carnegie and his associate, who would be staying at a house on Madison Avenue, to see if she was qualified for the job.

The day she arrived at Carnegie’s house was one of the most memorable days in her memory. She remembers walking up the steps to the door of the beautiful house, and the face of the woman, Carnegie’s associate. She wasn’t clear on if she met an associate of Carnegie or Carnegie himself, but she referred to the person who administered the draping test as a woman. who opened the door. Hilde was lead to a room with a dummy and given several sheets of muslin. The test was simple: drape the muslin over the dummy in the best and most fashionable way possible. She did her draping, which took hours to finish. When she was done, the woman observed her work, her eyes scanning every last detail. The uncertainty in the air stole Hilde’s breath from her lungs as the woman’s evaluation seemed to turn seconds into hours. Finally, she turned to Hilde and said “Well, I would like to have you.”

In the first two seconds, Hilde was ecstatic, but the feeling was momentary. Her experiences in America had
taught her, “If people didn’t need you anymore, they laid you off,” and it seemed like that would also be the case this time. Though the pay was generous, $30 per week, the woman stated that they only needed a draper for the fall, and Hilde’s future with their company would be uncertain after that. Not wanting to go through another jobless stage, especially with her sister coming to stay with her, Hilde declined the job.

Much later, Hilde learned that clothing companies in the United States were searching for highly trained European designers because no designing was done in America. If Hilde had accepted the job, the chances were very high that she could have stayed with the company for a long time. Hilde regretted this decision for the rest of her life. Had she accepted the offer, life for her and her sister might have been much different and easier.

After meeting her sister in New York, times once again became tough for Hilde. Now having to support her sister as she went through nursing school, Hilde had to take on another job to cope with storm of incoming bills. Once again, she becomes a little unclear at this point in the testimony and skips to the meeting of her husband. At some point, she lost one of her jobs and, unable to pay for living expenses, was forced out of her place of residence at the time. But Hilde eventually found another well-paying job and put her sister through all the required years of nursing school. She later helped her sister find employment at Mt. Sinai hospital.

Sometime after these events, Hilde met the man she would one day marry. Hilde did not mention the date in her testimony. At first, it was only a meeting in passing. Henry Bodenheimer was a friend of a friend, and Hilde wasn’t interested at all in his advances. She told him “no” the moment he tried to ask her out, and didn’t even think twice about it. Later Henry tried again, this time with success. The two started seeing more and more of each other, and Henry often drove from Reading, Pennsylvania to Baltimore to see her. They would date like this for half a year before finally getting married.

On their wedding day, Hilde got the news that her parent’s bodies were found in a concentration camp in Germany. Sometime after her voyage to America, her parents were taken by the Nazi soldiers. Her mother died in the gas chambers and her father worked himself to death in the camps.

It was an unbearable shock but because of her wedding, Hilde decided not to talk about it. She kept the sadness and pain buried inside of her, not even telling her husband, until after she walked down the aisle and was married.

Neither Hilde nor her sister knew where or when they her parents taken or when they died. And they never wanted to know. Discussing it, the memory of receiving the news, was too painful. Hilde had urged her parents to come to America, to escape with her from Germany before the state-sponsored massacre of the Jews. But they had gotten comfortable and refused to leave.

For 50 years, Hilde and her sister stayed quiet about their parents’ fate, never talking about it, never thinking about it, out of shame and sadness and fear. They feared that, somehow, someday, the Holocaust would be repeated in America, and the Jews would once again be oppressed and persecuted. It was only during the interview, in a white room with a camera, that she was finally able to open up, even just a little, about this
traumatic event in her life.
Helping the Jews in Poland: Zosia Gerlicz

by Suzanne Venezia

In March 2011, I viewed a videotaped testimonial by Zosia Gerlicz, and this is her story. Zosia’s testimony is part of the collection housed at the Albright College Holocaust Resource Center. The information provided below was provided by Zosia. Little is known about Zosia other than what she tells in her testimony. We do know, however, that she was a Spanish professor at Albright College in Reading. She is since deceased.

Although Zosia Gerlicz is not Jewish, her story belongs in a book of local Jewish history because Zosia played a prominent role in helping Jews and other victims of the Holocaust. Zosia was member of the resistance movement.

After the Germans invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, the resistance movement was formed. The invasion established how life would drastically transform for the next five years for people living in Europe. According to Zosia, the Polish army attempted to oppose the invasion of their country, but was unsuccessful and nearly gave up within a short five weeks. The underground army of the resistance movement took on the major responsibility to restrain the Germans as much as possible.

Like hundreds of other families, the Gerlicz family had to leave their homes and were separated from family members. Leaving behind their lifestyle of a mansion, servants, and their massive estate with a private lake and horses, the Gerlicz family was only permitted to depart with the clothes on their backs and a few small items. Uncomfortably condensed into a small train car along with many other families, they were sent away from their homes. The train stopped at no particular location to let the families out. The people on the train were given the freedom to choose their new destination. The people were naive to believe that they would have this type of freedom handed to them again for a very long time. From that point on, the families could go where they wished. Zosia’s father contacted his cousin who lived in the appropriate part of the country for Jews and the Polish.

Zosia chose a different path, however. At age 17, she was certain that she had the ability and maturity to survive on her own. She no longer wanted to be a burden on her parents and began earning her own living and went straight to work. Zosia had no tolerance in letting the Germans take advantage of her country and immediately involved herself with the resistance movement.

Putting a restriction on education caused the first major resistance movement of German control. Zosia moved to Warsaw, Poland and was almost immediately exposed to the strong resistance movement. Although not directly involved with the first step of the resistance movement to re-establish education, she was able to see the risk that teachers and students were willing to take to fight back. At this time the several teachers that were still in this area organized courses that were held in private homes. This type of education was referred to as “flying universities,” due to the constant relocation to either a new part of the city or a completely new city. The “flying universities” continued to be a successful component of the resistance
movement until the Germans became aware of what was going on. When the teachers were caught, they were sent to political prisons or deported to Germany to work in the concentration camps. Despite these risks, the teachers continued with the education.

Another major aspect of the resistance movement was to keep continuous communication among the Allies and the Polish people. Since only German newspapers were being produced, the Polish people took the initiative to create their own newspaper to distribute to other Polish people. This helped keep everyone informed of reliable news, and avoided the misinterpretations of the German propaganda. If caught, those involved were sent to concentration camps or were even made an example of. The Germans created groups called “fighting squads.” In this circumstance they would execute the guilty Polish distributors on the streets so the public could watch to teach a lesson.

As Zosia explains, the methods of communication became much more intense as time went on. The members of the resistance movement were convinced it was necessary to send important materials to the Allies. These important materials consisted of building plans and microfilms. But the only way to transport these materials was by foot through the mountains across the borders of Czechoslovakia and Hungary. The plans for ammunition and arms factories on Polish grounds were the main topics of the plans sent to the Allies. The leaders of the resistance deemed that if the Allies had a better understanding of what the Germans were planning and the exact location, they could have an upper hand in their defeat. Zosia took on the dangerous duty to personally deliver these plans to the Allies in 1941.

Eventually, Zosia took on riskier tasks: helping British and American prisoners of war. These prisoners of war were captured by the Germans and put into camps. However, they managed to escape through underground tunnels, which lead them to Poland. This became a major issue for the Polish people, because they were obligated to assist them to hide, nourish and quarter them. The language barrier was a concern and the Polish people believed it was much safer to bring them back to the British and American embassies, rather than housing them in their private homes. Just as the microfilms and plans were transported on foot through the mountains, so were the prisoners of war. Zosia was only 19 years old at this point. People began to respect her and look past her young age. The prisoners listened to her cautions during their travel across the mountains. Smoking and talking was not permitted at certain places and they were compelled to walk through the bitter cold stream to help silence the sound of their steps when the Germans were in close proximity. In a way she became a hero to her people and also to the American and British prisoners of war. Zosia was tempted to never go back to Poland so she could finally lead a peaceful life. However, after each trip, she went back to Poland to continue to gain a deeper involvement in the resistance movement.

The third component of the resistance movement was to help the Jews as much as possible while they were living in the ghettos. Ghettos were enclosed cities, which isolated the Jewish people from the non-Jewish to live under despicable conditions. The Jews were enclosed by barbed wire fences and were constantly being patrolled by the Germans. Zosia and other members of the resistance movement threw food over the fences or sent it through the sewers to help aid in the survival of the Jews while in the ghettos. The sewers were also the only way of communication to the Jews.
Zosia remembers the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto. Flames and clouds of smoke covered the city for a few days. German planes bombed the ghetto from above, which left little hope for Jews. With no arms or ammunition they were basically helpless. The Germans showed no mercy. Zosia described a case in which she witnessed herself. A Jewish man was trying to escape a building that was fully engulfed in flames, and as he was trying to get away a German General stood on a tank, shooting and killing the man and several others as if he was hunting “wild ducks and geese.”

Just as the resistance movement was preparing the people for the uprising, they had also been training the members for a variety of different situations they may be forced into. This came in use in 1944 when Zosia was captured by the Germans and arrested for an unknown reason. Initially, she didn’t realize what the charge was against her, until they explained to her that a mountaineer boy confessed that Zosia had been transporting prisoners of war and confidential information across the borders to the Allies. The Germans tortured this boy to give Zosia’s full name and address, and soon enough he confessed. Fortunately, Zosia was thoroughly trained on how to react to such an interrogation. In the underground training they educated her on how to respond to questions if captured. Zosia explains that these seven powerful words, “Yes I know, but I’m not telling,” should never be said to a German official when being questioned. Instead, Zosia made up an elaborate story about the boy. She proceeded to justify herself by telling the Germans that this mountaineer boy was her ski instructor who had a crush on her. She went into more detail and rationalized that the only reason he mentioned Zosia’s name was because he was being tortured and needed to give someone’s name to protect himself. The Germans naively believed her tale, but still mercilessly locked her up in solitary confinement in political prison located in Warsaw. They persisted on torturing her with the assumption she would provide them with information. Although ineffective, they sentenced her to death and she was reassigned to a death cell. Without pleading for grace and forgiveness she hesitantly yet willingly got into the van that would bring her to her execution. Along the way the loyal underground army rescued the van full of Jewish and Polish prisoners by setting off a grenade close to the van. The grenade killed German guards, and Zosia ran away from the van and her execution.

After escaping the van, she chose not to find her parents due to the amount of danger she would bring to them. With her clever personality she dyed her hair red and stayed far away from Warsaw to try to avoid recapture. Zosia was quickly reunited with her brother, who was also involved in the resistance movement. During the time with her brother in the resistance movement they were preparing themselves for the uprising of Warsaw. Zosia Gerlicz was a remarkable woman whose bravery and maturity served her well during the time of the Holocaust. She helped many, many people, including Jews, survive unspeakable horrors.
Writers

Ryan Edwards graduated in December 2010 with a B.A. in Professional Writing.

Barry Foster will graduate from Penn State University in May 2011 with a B.A. in Professional Writing. He plans to move to Alaska.

Aaron Griffith will graduate from Penn State University in December 2012 with a degree in Professional Writing. He plans to pursue a degree in conflict journalism after graduation.

Stephen Groller is majoring in Professional Writing.

Michael Henderson will graduate from Penn State University in May 2011 with a B.A. in Communication Arts and Sciences. He is planning to move to North Carolina and will pursue a job in television.

Christine James will graduate from Penn State University in May 2011 with a B.A. in Global Studies and a minor in Professional Writing. She worked as the assistant editor on this project. She was awarded a Fulbright scholarship in Taiwan. Christine also plans to attend graduate school.

Rattanpreet Kohli graduated from Penn State University in December 2010 with a B.A. in Global Studies.

Erin Koller graduated in December 2010 with a B.A. in Professional Writing. She is pursuing a career as an editor while planning on writing children books on the side.

Kara Lindley graduated in December 2010 with a B.A. in American Studies.

Lacey Lott will graduate in May 2012 with a B.A. in Applied Psychology and a B.A. in Communications Arts and Sciences. She plans to attend graduate school for Psychology.

Britany Maack will graduate May 2012 with a B.A. in Communication Arts and Sciences. She plans to pursue a career in public relations or marketing.

Tiffine Malamphy will graduate May 2013 from the University Park campus with a B.A. in Psychology. She plans to pursue a career as a clinical psychologist.

Meghann McGuire will graduate May 2012 with a B.A. in Communication Arts and Sciences. She is a Penn State Schreyer Honors Scholar.

Allison Owens is majoring in Professional Writing.

Jonathan Rivera is majoring in Professional Writing.
Kristen Rulli will graduate in December 2012 with a B.A. in Communication Arts and Sciences. She plans to become emergency certified in teaching for the Reading Public School District and would like to teach elementary students. She also plans to obtain her Master’s degree in Special Education from Arcadia University’s online program.

Andrea Stennett is majoring in Communication Arts and Sciences.

Blaine Turner graduated in December 2010 with a B.A. in Professional Writing.

Suzanne Venezia is transferring to the University Park campus to major in Health and Human Development.

Razvan Viteazu will graduate in May 2011 with a B.A. in American Studies. Razvan will begin a Master’s degree program in American Studies at Penn State Harrisburg in Fall 2011.

Mary Ann Watts graduated with a B. A. in Professional Writing in 2007 and continues to take classes.

Alyssa Williams will graduate from Penn State University in May 2011 with a B.A. in Professional Writing. She plans to pursue a career in public relations or editorial work. She also hopes to write and publish the next great-American novel.

Sara Williams will graduate from Penn State University in May 2011 with a B.A. in American Studies. She plans to continue her writing career using the experience she has gained from this project.

Jarrod Ziegler is majoring in Professional Writing.