

Pittsburgh: from the beginning

Even before the War of Independence, Jews came to Pittsburgh. As early as the 1750s, people like David Franks, Levi A. Levy and the Gratz brothers supplied the British at Fort Pitt, and were rewarded with property in Wilkensburg, but they never lived in Western Pennsylvania.

Jewish communal life really began to take root in 1847. By this time, about a dozen Jewish families lived near the Point, on crowded streets between First and Third Avenues and between Market and Ferry Streets. The community's first public religious services were held that year in a hired hall. For holy day services, they met upstairs in the Vigilante Fire House, and their reader was William Armhold.

These families, representing the first wave of Jewish immigration to the Pittsburgh area, were part of a general German migration to the States. They hailed from southwestern regions of the German Empire, such as Bavaria, Baden and Wertenberg. Others emigrated from Posen in the eastern reaches of Prussia.

The community's inception was also marked by the formation of the Bes Almon Burial Society, which established the Troy Hill Cemetery, that same year. Other groups were to follow, some of them still active in some form to this day. The Hebrew Men's Benevolent Society, Hebrew Ladies Aid Society, the Ibn Gabirol, Saar Sholem and Jericho Lodges of B'nai B'rith, four congregations and more burial societies were all formed before 1880.

In the 1860s, the German Jews in Pittsburgh were moving to the Manchester section of Old Allegheny, now known as the North Side. Their social life, centered at the Concordia Club (1874), featured card games, dancing lessons for the children, and dinners and dances

for the adults. The few Eastern European Jews who came before 1880 settled on 'the Bluff' and around the Court House.

By 1856, a conflict arose in the first congregation, Shaare Shemayim, concerning the language of prayer (German vs. Polish). William Frank led a group of Germans out, and that same day, they organized Rodef Shalom, Pittsburgh's oldest extant congregation. Armhold became their reader and Josiah Cohen was hired to teach Hebrew. (Cohen, who ran the city's first Jewish day school, was admitted to the Bar in 1866, became a member of Pittsburgh's Select Council and eventually a judge.)

Rodef Shalom began as a German Orthodox synagogue, but adopted the Reformed American service of Rabbi Wise in 1864. At that point, Gustave Grafner and 14 followers broke with the congregation and organized Etz Chaim, or Tree of Life -- Pittsburgh's second oldest congregation. They wished to "perpetuate traditional Judaism," yet "keep pace with the modern spirit," and affiliated with the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1886. In 1906 they modified their services to conform "to the Conservative Jewish faith."

The origins of today's Beth Hamedrash Hagodol--Beth Jacob -- the only remaining downtown congregation -- lay in Pittsburgh's two oldest Eastern European congregations. B'nai Israel on Grant Street, chartered in 1873, was renamed Beth Hamedrash Hagodol, or 'the Washington Street Shul' in 1894, with the dedication of a new synagogue. Beth Jacob dates back to 1879.

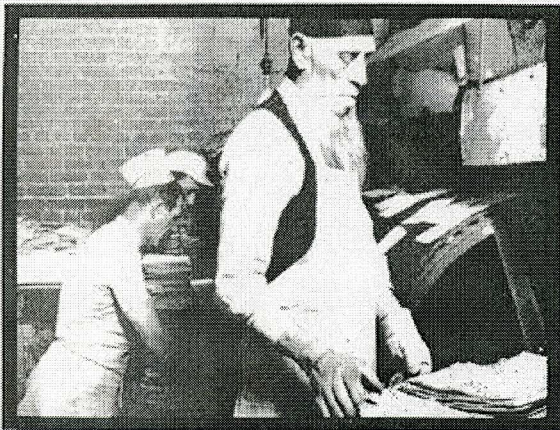
Whereas in 1860, a few hundred Jewish people lived in Pittsburgh, by 1880 that number had grown to over 2,000. A great wave of Jewish immigration from Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Rumania, and Austria-Hungary began in 1881, including two and one-half million who sought to escape persecution and pogroms. By 1910, over 30,000 Jews lived here.

Thousands of immigrants settled in the Hill District, where they formed nationality-based 'shuls' for prayer and study, and burial and mutual aid societies. In 1920, 25 congregations worshiped on the Hill: Russians, Hungarians, Poles, Galitzianers, Rumanians and Litvaks all organized congregations, and some congregations were composed of 'landsleit,' those from the same Old Country village.

While poor, noisy and congested, the Hill was a lively center of business, social and intellectual life. Ninety percent of the city's Jewish community lived there in 1910. Its immigrant residents, ranging from the religiously devout to the politically extreme, worked as peddlers of dry goods, laborers in cigar and pants factories and stores, as bookkeepers, shoemakers, butchers and tailors.

Girls worked at sewing, children attended cheder (traditional religious school), and secular education came from public school, library and settlement house. In the 1920s, over 200 youth clubs met at the Irene Kaufmann Settlement. Yiddish filled the air, the newspapers and the theatres; Jewish food, conversation,

(See Next Page.)



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(From Preceding Page.)

argument and advice were all part of the unique atmosphere of the Hill.

At the same time German and Eastern European Jews came to Pittsburgh, they were creating thriving communities in many small towns in the vicinity, based on the expanding steel industry. Opening retail stores and offering services, these Jews built synagogues and community centers, and began religious schools, clubs and athletic teams. Although many outlying congregations have closed or merged, their remnants are still scattered throughout the vicinity and their members are active in Jewish community affairs.

Immigrants and American-born Jews created many institutions between 1880 and 1912, separately and together, culminating in the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, which began in 1912 for the purpose of consolidating and directing Jewish communal services. Earlier groups were the United Hebrew Relief Association, Gusky Hebrew Home and Orphanage, the Columbian Council of Jewish Women, Talmud Torah, Hebrew Free Loan Society, House of Shelter, Hebrew Free Burial Society, Jewish Home for Aged, Montefiore Hospital, Bickur Cholim, Irene Kaufmann Settlement, and Jewish Home for Babies. The Zionist presence was felt through Hovevey Zion, Tiphereth Zion, Blossoms of Zion, Mizrahi, Labor Zionists, and the Zionist Institute. Thirteen congregations, the Workmen's Circle, the Pliskover Society and the Podolier Society also appeared on the scene.

Established families began to move eastward; by 1901, about 500 Jewish families lived in Oakland, East End and Squirrel Hill. By 1930, Squirrel Hill had become Pittsburgh's most popular Jewish community, and Jewish businesses, organizations, congregations and families were moving there. Taylor Alderdice High School had a large Jewish student body.

Meanwhile, the ethnic shuls of the Hill moved, merged or disbanded; people began to join congregations based on location and branch of Judaism. New Reform, Conservative and Orthodox congregations formed, which served as religious, social and intellectual centers for second-generation Jewish families.

From 1913 until 1945, social service agencies were consolidating and hiring professional leadership. After WWI, relief programs sent aid to refugees in Europe, and to the Middle East; during the Depression, they assisted locally. The YMHA, organized in 1910, and the YWHA (1911) merged to form the YM&WHA and they moved into their building in 1926.

As the situation of Jews in Germany and Europe worsened before WWII, the United Jewish Fund was created. In the pre-War years, about 500 Jewish families escaped from Nazi Germany to Pittsburgh, their affidavits signed by children of this city's 19th century German Jewish settlers.

Pittsburgh's Edgar Kaufmann chaired the Council for Jewish Rights, created out of four national Jewish organizations, in response to anti-Semitism. Pittsburgh's Jews mobilized to serve in the military and on the home

front during the War.

Other organizations begun in these years were: B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League, Southwest District Religious Schools, Hebrew Institute, Girls' Bureau, B'nai B'rith Women, Hadassah, Jewish Big Brothers, Pittsburgh Bureau for Jewish Children, Conference of Jewish Women's Organizations, Jewish Family Welfare Association, Pioneer Women, Industrial League, United Business Services (predecessor to VRC), and Jewish Social Service Bureau.

The devastating losses of the Holocaust — one-third of the world's Jews — strengthened Jewish commitment to survival and democracy. Jews became active in community relations and civil rights; support for Israel and Jewish education blossomed. Since the 1940s, Pittsburgh Jewish community relations groups have played a leading role in promoting human rights and understanding between different religious, ethnic and racial groups, locally and nationally. (See *Taking Action* section.)

In the 1950s, 1500 Holocaust survivors joined the Pittsburgh Jewish community. The most recent waves of immigration have come from the Soviet Union — 749 individuals arrived between 1974 and the close of 1981. Since 1988, in the current wave, over 374 have arrived in Pittsburgh.

Some key organizations to develop since the '40s include the United Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh (formed from the FJP); and the former Y-ICC, which combined the YM&WHA with the Irene Kaufmann Center in 1960, and evolved into today's Jewish Community Centers (including Henry Kaufmann Family Recreation Park and James and Rachel Levenson Day Camp). Jewish schools include Yeshiva Achei Tmimim, Hillel Academy, the School of Advanced Jewish Studies and the Community Day School/A Solomon Schechter Day School. Local branches of national organizations — ORT, Israel Bonds, Technion Society — were founded. But this is just a sampling, as glancing through this publication will show. (See *Next Page*.)



HOLOCAUST survivor — a Torah rescued by Beth El members.

Pittsburgh:

Squirrel Hill, one of the few vibrant Jewish neighborhoods remaining inside a major American city, continues to play a special role in Pittsburgh Jewish life, by supporting Jewish lifestyles that span the range of religious, cultural, social and political inclinations. Truly a 'walking community', the eruv allows Orthodox residents greater freedom within a wide range of the neighborhood on the Sabbath, when carrying restrictions ordinarily apply. Today, Squirrel Hill is the home of most of the major Jewish congregations lying within city limits. Other large congregations are located in the eastern and southern suburbs.

Pittsburgh has also contributed far more than its share to national Jewish leadership. Some of the leading lights include: Dr. Walter Jacob, current president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis; the late Sholom Comay, immediate past president of the American Jewish Committee; Donald Robinson, past president of the Joint Distribution Committee; and the late Amos Comay, past president of the National Jewish Culture Foundation. Others are: Ivan Novick, past national president of the ZOA; Rabbi Baruch A. Poupko, past national president of the RZA; Gloria Elbling, immediate past president of Na'amat USA; and two past national presidents of BBW, Dorothy Binstock and Lillian Holstein. The late Albert W. Bloom, editor emeritus of The Jewish Chronicle, served as president of the American Jewish Press Association.



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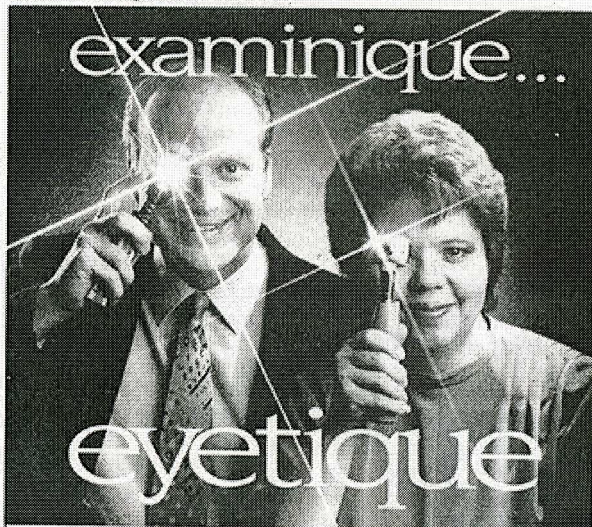
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Although many have made important contributions both to Pittsburgh and its Jewish community, two men, Rabbi Aaron M. Ashinsky and Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof, stand out as major figures. Rabbi Ashinsky, who came to Pittsburgh in 1901, was a guiding force in founding many Jewish educational, health and welfare institutions.

Rabbi Freehof of Rodef Shalom served as president of the World Union of Progressive Judaism, the Reform movement's international organization. A prolific author and expert on responsa, he dealt with all kinds of halachic problems arising in modern society.

In addition to building a religious and cultural community, Jewish people have been involved in all stages of Pittsburgh's development, from trading fort to hearth of the nation to the corporate, medical and software center of today. Jewish accomplishments in political reform, education, pollution control, human needs and rights, involvement in public and private civic endeavors, and contributions to art, commerce and industry, medicine, science, culture, sports and entertainment have helped this city to become what it is today.

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