

MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY

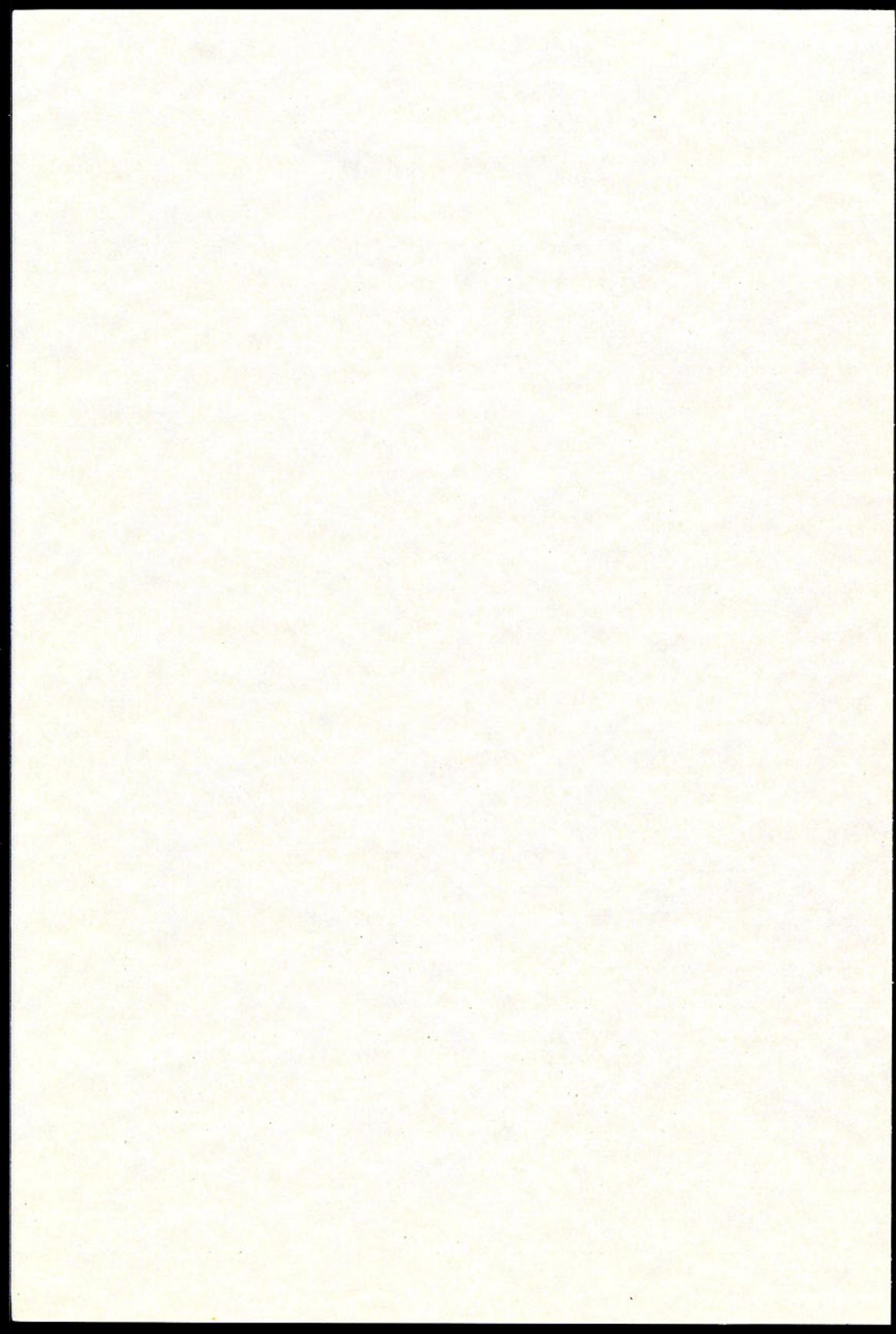


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MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY

... אשר ישאלוך בניכם מחר את אבותם
יהושע ד:כח

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

Joshua 4:21

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JEWISH FARMERS OF THE BENTON HARBOR AREA

by Ceil Pearl Schnapik

Last summer in mid-July I traveled twenty-two hours on a Greyhound bus from my home in New York City to a place in Michigan that had become my second home, albeit one that I had never seen: Benton Harbor. This town bordering on Lake Michigan is the focal point of my current novel, based on the story of three generations of farmers who lived on the land and cultivated it with their own hands, cherishing every hard-earned inch of soil. These Jewish farmers were apple growers, and their wide and mighty orchards were the pride of Berrien County. I knew that I had to see the orchards and the last of these farmers.

The story of Benjamin Rosenberg and his family is also the story of the Jewish agricultural experience that began in northern Berrien County, Michigan, about eighty years ago and of the Jewish community of the Benton Harbor area. In an exchange of correspondence that had begun in October of 1981, Rabbi Joseph Schwarz, rabbi emeritus of Temple Beth-El of Benton Harbor, reported that of the twenty or so Jewish families that had farmed in the Sodus, Berrien Springs, Dowagiac, and Eau Claire regions (ca. 1950), only one family remained in full-time farming. The Jewish population in and around Benton Harbor had decreased from roughly 250 families in 1940 to 150 families in 1965; a population of 900 reduced to 700. In addition, Rabbi Schwarz wrote that there were probably another fifty to one hundred



Rabbi Joseph Schwarz (left)
and Ben Rosenberg

Essentially, this is a study based on oral history. Most of the material was obtained through interviews and telephone calls made to Ben Rosenberg and Rabbi Joseph Schwarz, and through correspondence. This assistance is gratefully acknowledged, as is that of Rabbi Moshe Saks of Temple B'nai Shalom and Barbara McKie, Benton Harbor Public Library.

CEIL PEARL SCHNAPIK, a New Yorker, was graduated from the University of Michigan in 1952, and is a resource teacher of blind teenagers. To complete her novel about a family of Jewish farmers in southwestern Michigan, she plans to spend a year in Ann Arbor, beginning in September of 1983.

families who were part Jewish but who had no affiliation with Jewish organizations.¹ Today, after an additional loss of one-third, the Jewish population stands at about 250, most middle-aged or older. But there remain a father and two sons who have continued a three-generation tradition of farming. It was with the Rosenberg family that the rabbi had arranged an interview.

Along the ten miles or so between Benton Harbor and Benjamin Rosenberg's home in Sodus, the gently rolling countryside blossomed with corn, grapes, and orchards of freshly ripening peach, cherry, and apple trees. At Rosenberg Brothers, the only orchards in the area still farmed by Jews, not an inch of land was wasted, and the rows of fruit trees were planted right up to the back windows of the Rosenberg modern brick ranch. Ben Rosenberg answered the doorbell and greeted us warmly, a hint of a mid-European accent still clinging to his crisp Midwestern tones. Tall, handsome, with a full head of white hair, there was a sense of pride and courtliness about him. In a family-living room we settled ourselves around the sofa under the gaze of Harry Truman and John Kennedy. Between Truman and Kennedy was a reproduction of the Western Wall; Ben had taped a familiar photograph of Anne Frank, now yellowed with age, to a lower section of its pastel stones.

We went right to work. Ben brought out a sampling of delicious home-grown fruit, delicate apricots and bright red cherries, all the while keeping up a steady flow of conversation. Information—dates, names, events, anecdotes, personal triumphs and tragedies—came tumbling out so fast that I had a hard time keeping up. Everything came out spontaneously and in no particular order. Ben's memory was uncanny, and thanks to it I am privileged to record his story and to some degree the history of the Jewish farmers of southwestern Michigan.

* * *

Ben Rosenberg was born on December 25, 1899, in the town of Motele, near Pinsk, Russia, twenty-five years after its most illustrious citizen, Chaim Weizmann, was born. Ben is very proud of the fact that he knew Weizmann and maintained a friendship with him over the years. Ben was one of six children born to Samuel (1860-1939) and Gitche Rosenberg. Samuel was a harness maker, and an expert Yiddish singer and dancer. Ben remembers his father as a kind and warmhearted man who loved people and who also loved the soil. He recalls that even in Europe his father had enjoyed planting fruits and vegetables. His heart had always been in farming, but in Russia it had not been possible for him to farm. In 1906 Samuel brought part of his family to America and settled on the south side of Chicago, near the stables, enabling him to continue to earn his living making harnesses. He made four trips back and forth between Motele and Chicago to fetch his wife and children, Ben, Joseph, Bessie, Lottie, Florence, and Mamie. During this time, many of Samuel Rosenberg's Lithuanian-Russian friends were busy preparing to leave for Palestine. Labor Zionists all, they had opted for the Middle East instead of Samuel Rosenberg's Middle West.

¹ Rabbi Joseph Schwarz, letter to author, October 10, 1981.

Around 1911 Ben's father began to get restless; he longed for the soil again. One day he saw an ad in the Yiddish *Forward* for a farm in Sodus, Michigan, across the lake from Chicago. With a loan from the Jewish Agricultural Society, he bought the farm, complete with 78 acres and 10 Guernsey cows, and moved the family across Lake Michigan to Berrien County. Here he began raising peaches and apples, gradually adding strawberry plants, grape arbors, and pear and plum trees. The milk from the cows was sold to neighbors.

Everyone in the family worked the farm, including Ben's mother, who helped to sort and pack the strawberries and cherries and other fruit. Theirs was a hardworking but close-knit family. Ben recalls his father taking the horse and buggy to Benton Harbor early every Thursday morning to buy the family's weekly provisions and to bring live chickens to the *shochet* for their *Shabat* dinner. During the summer, as the fruit ripened, Ben would go along with his father to the Benton Harbor Fruit Market on the city wharf, traveling in the wagon and carrying their produce. The market, a symbol of southwestern Michigan's fruit industry, was established in 1870 and is known as the World's Largest Cash to Grower Market; in 1967 it was relocated on Territorial Road, on a former Indian trail that now links lower southwestern Michigan to Detroit. When Ben was a youngster the fruit was generally bought by large dealers and hauled to the docks on Lake Michigan by the Interurban Electric Railway. It was shipped across the lake by freighters to the South Water Street Dock in Chicago and from there was distributed throughout the Midwest.

When he was close to seventeen years old, Ben left Sodus and lived as a hobo hopping freight trains and traveling throughout Kansas and Missouri, supporting himself by doing odd jobs on various farms. For a while, he even worked winters for International Harvester, making binders for cutting machines. But Ben always returned to the family farm in the spring, staying on to help plow, plant, cultivate, and harvest. His favorite story about his wanderings concerns a job in Cicero, Illinois, he held with Western Electric, whose hiring policy excluded Jews. Ben worked for the company for several years, and only when it was time to leave did he reveal that he was really Ben Rosenberg, a Jew, and not the Christian, Ben Kolenko. As the first and only Jew among thousands of workers, he had hoped that his excellent record and warm, friendly ways would endear him to the company and open up employment to other Jews.

Ben returned to the farm to stay when he was about twenty-six to marry Rose Dunaetz, the daughter of one of the oldest Jewish farming families in Berrien County. The Dunaetzes first settled in nearby Millberg in 1904 and left in 1906 to cultivate their own fruit orchards in Sodus. Ben, now a widower, is very proud that Rose was the first Jewish girl to graduate as valedictorian of Eau Claire High School. That was in 1925, the year she and Ben were married, the year that Ben bought sixty acres of land near his father's farm and planted his own fruit orchards.

One of Ben's sisters, Florence, married Rose's brother, Louis Dunaetz. When Florence and Ben's father, Samuel Rosenberg, retired from farming

in 1939, Rose and her husband bought up the acreage and added it to the Dunaetz farm. Unfortunately, as a result of a series of tragic circumstances, none of this land now belongs to the family, and it is no longer farmed. It is, Ben ruefully remarked, "just a dumping ground."

* * *

Meyer Berliner was probably the first Jewish orchardist in the Benton Harbor area (ca. 1895–1900). Like most of the immigrant farmers who followed him, he had originally settled in Chicago after coming to America. Tiring of city life, he crossed Lake Michigan to work the soil instead of in the sweatshops.

The next two farmers to come to this part of Berrien County were Sam Shapiro (who settled in Dowagiac) and the Friedman family. They were followed by Joseph Levinson and Moses Hatosky (1900–1905). Those who farmed after them were the Dunaetz family (Nathan, the father, and Louis, the son) in 1904, Samuel Rosenberg, Max Lutz (from Bloomington, Indiana), Morris Zaban, Abe Ravitch (who farmed part-time and raised cattle and chickens), Sam Braudo, and Morris Price. In addition, there were brothers who farmed separately—Charles and Louis Zarestsky—and brothers who farmed together—Motele and William Marcus, and Harry and Wolf Shapiro from St. Joseph. Other Jewish farmers were Joseph Flamm, Mendel Kirschenbaum, Joseph Daken, Isaac Krupp, Mr. Denn, Max Kritt, Morris Cohen, Charles Tobiansky, Meyer Gardener, Oscar Shapiro, Charles Schpok from Dowagiac, William Pollyea, Ted Nimz, and Martin Sorkin.

In the 1920s a number of farmers had owned small farms of about 20–30 acres from which they were able to make a modest living. Many of these men farmed only on a part-time basis, resorting to other trades such as carpentry, bricklaying, tailoring, and house painting to supplement their incomes. Most, but not all, raised a variety of crops: apples, peaches, plums, cherries, strawberries, blueberries, and grapes. Some of them became prosperous, but others were forced to sell their farms because of economic losses. Some, not mentioned here, tried farming but gave up in a short time. They turned to business ventures instead, becoming merchants. Even among the successful farmers very few of the children showed a desire to go into farming, and the family farm was eventually sold. The nature of the work—the hardship and risks involved—was instrumental in turning the sons away from their fathers' farms. In some cases these young men had even gone to Michigan State University to study agriculture and had worked the family farm for a while before giving it up.

But there are some interesting stories to tell about those who did not succeed. Sam Braudo, born in Russia, immigrated to South Africa and afterwards came to the United States. He was sent by the Jewish Agricultural Society to their training farm in New Jersey, and was later assisted by them in establishing his own farm near Kansas City. From there he moved to the Benton Harbor area to become a fruit grower. Another farmer, Mendel Kirschenbaum, tried for years to sell his twenty acres of unproductive farmland for the sum of twenty thousand dollars. After a while, when he saw he had no buyers, he compromised at sixteen thousand. Still, he could find no one to buy the farm, and upon his death the land passed to his

children. Eventually they leveled it, subdivided part of it and built a shopping center across the road from the original farm at the intersection of M-139 and Napier Avenue. Needless to say, the selling price was considerably higher than Mendel Kirschenbaum's original asking price. A third man, William Pollyea, was married to a daughter of the Price family, also farmers. Mr. Pollyea quit farming but continued to live on his land. He kept up the farm through hired hands and became a tailor instead. And Ted Nimz, who died in December of 1982 at seventy-seven, had hired workers to raise grapes on his land on a part-time basis. His crop was sold each year directly to the Welch Company.

By far the most unusual story concerns a man named Martin Sorkin who came from Chicago with his wife and children in 1951 to take up farming. He had never planted an orchard nor worked in agriculture, but he was determined to learn how. With the help of the Jewish Agricultural Society and the Berrien County Extension Office (U.S. Department of Agriculture), Mr. Sorkin, a dedicated Zionist, succeeded in becoming one of the most successful farmers of the area. He raised apples, and his property, Tikvah Orchards, was famous in Berrien Springs for years. Recently he returned, sold the orchards, and moved to Valatie, New York, in the heart of New York State apple country to be close to his married children. Michigan's loss is New York's gain, for there are now over 2,000 Michigan apple trees blooming in upstate New York!

* * *

With every story heard about the Jewish farmer there was a reference to the Jewish Agricultural Society. This is not surprising, for behind the history of Jewish agriculture in most parts of the United States lies the JAS. Founded in New York state in 1900 through an agreement between the Jewish Colonization Association and the Baron de Hirsch Fund, its purpose was to promote agriculture as a livelihood and provide the means by which immigrant Jews could learn to farm profitably. Through its main office in New York, the JAS was able to train and place farmers in thirty-two states. Its major work included the Farm Loan Department's low-interest loans, a service offering free legal and business advice on farming, and the maintaining of an Extension Bureau which dispensed information either in person or via the mail on the latest agricultural techniques. The Bureau also sent out trained field personnel to advise individual farmers and to confer with small groups on common agricultural problems. They also operated a purchasing service through which farmers could buy certain materials at reduced cost. There were scholarships and loans offered in various colleges of agriculture, and a journal, *The Jewish Farmer*, published in both Yiddish and English. The Society supported the training farm in New Jersey where immigrants like Sam Braudo were prepared to become farmers. The JAS also helped to establish synagogues and community centers in rural areas where there was a sufficient number of Jewish farmers, in the belief that its role was also to enhance family life.² As far as is known, every Jewish farmer in Berrien County had been assisted by the JAS in some way. It even influenced the

² *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: 1940, 10 vols.), s.v., "The Jewish Agricultural Society, Inc."

development of a group the men had started on their own called the Jewish Farmers Association.

The JFA was a grassroots group that included all the Jewish farmers and their families in the county. It was like an extended family in which everyone participated in socials, such as Purim and Chanukah parties and model Passover seders. In addition, the JFA brought the Yiddish stage across the lake from Chicago to the small cities of Michigan, complete with singing, dancing, comedy, and melodrama. Events like these bound all the families together in an ongoing history, in a common memory. In the early days, in the '30s and '40s, these families numbered about twenty-four, but membership dropped to a low of ten in the mid 50s, reflecting the sharp drop in the number of Jews who continued to farm. Nevertheless, the few who remained held on to the JFA, continuing to operate it independently of the JAS. They even pooled their resources, buying certain items cooperatively, such as fertilizer and gasoline for their tractors.

* * *

Today the old way of life is gone and so is the Jewish Farmers Association, with its dual loyalty to Yiddishkeit and to the soil. In Sodus, in the Rosenberg orchards (the last enclave of the Jewish farmer), the new way of life goes on at a busy pace. From Ben's original purchase of 60 acres there are now 380 acres. In addition to the orchards, the land includes storage barns which house the heavy equipment used to plow, irrigate, mow, pick, sort and pack the fruit. Apples, cherries, grapes, pears, peaches, strawberries, and raspberries are handled by Ben's sons, Irving and Sheldon, their wives and approximately 12-15 workers in season. Both Irving and Sheldon are college trained. Sheldon was a medical student at the University of Michigan when he decided that he would rather be a farmer than a doctor. He left school to work alongside his father as he had been doing unofficially since boyhood, pitching in with his brothers to help both his parents run the farm. Although he and Irving married city girls from Chicago, their wives have learned to keep the books and pick, grade, pack, and bring the fruit to market, which can mean roadside stands supplied by the Rosenbergs during the summer or the Farmers Fruit Market on Territorial Road.

A third brother, Arnold, the youngest of the Rosenberg children, was also in the family business but had to leave farming because of a painful back injury incurred during the Korean War. For years he had a farm equipment business in Eau Claire, not far from the family's orchards, but today lives in retirement at his home in St. Joseph. Like Arnold Rosenberg, Max Lutz's two sons also maintain an attachment to their father's work. Both are with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, one in Washington, one in Georgia; neither of them farms.

The Rosenbergs represent a singular phenomenon, the only third generation of Jews in Berrien County to farm on a full-time basis. Indeed, Rabbi Schwarz cannot remember another family with a successful second generation. But what sort of future lies in store for the Rosenberg family? Of Ben's nine grandchildren, only one, Steven, a business major at Michigan State University, has shown any interest in farming. For the past few summers he has run his own roadside stand in Sodus but has approached it

strictly from a business aspect. Whether or not he will continue can only be conjecture.

From 1927 to 1979 Ben and his sons raised asparagus, the first farmers in Berrien County to do so. The canneries sent their own trucks directly onto the farm to haul away the crop. Today, however, the Rosenbergs no longer consider it profitable to grow asparagus. Modern techniques allow Sheldon and Irving to raise more fruit per acre than their father did, utilizing new methods of irrigation. (The sons use pipes, Ben dry-farmed.) They also employ more up-to-date systems of fertilizing and spraying and have at their disposal a greater variety of seeds than was available to Ben up to fifty years ago. Nevertheless, Ben, although retired, remains a valued technical advisor.

In earlier years, Ben, an avid Zionist, had exchanged advice on the latest agricultural techniques with Israeli farmers on his several visits to Israeli kibbutzim. He was indeed somewhat of an expert, for in Michigan he had served as chairman of the county's Agricultural Committee and had been an appraiser for the Federal Land Commission. He had also been active in politics. Selected as the first Jewish delegate to be sent to the Democratic National Convention from the state of Michigan (Philadelphia, July 12, 1948), he was a friend to both Harry Truman and John Kennedy.

* * *

In 1942, midway in Ben Rosenberg's career as a farmer, the population of Benton Harbor was less than 18,000,³ but there were three synagogues: the Orthodox Ahavas Shulem on Seeley Street; a Conservative synagogue, Congregation Children of Israel, on Lake Avenue; and Temple Beth-El, a Reform group that held services in a house on Fair Avenue, now destroyed.⁴ (In 1948 or '49 Beth-El erected a building on Britain Avenue.) In addition, there was a synagogue that belonged to the City of David, a Christian sect closely related to the neighboring House of David.⁵ On the grounds of its

³ The 1980 U.S. census gives Benton Harbor's population as 14,707.

⁴ Ahavas Shulem, at 117 Seeley Street, was later used as the Pentecostal Church of Everlasting Truth. On the cornerstone of the building, at the right front, are the names of Mr. and Mrs. Sam Schmolhausen; at the side of the cornerstone are Hebrew letters either eroded or chiseled away and too faint to be legible. The structure that housed Children of Israel, and later B'nai Shalom Synagogue, at 118 Lake Avenue, is now a Masonic Lodge (#298, F. and A.M.). This large brick building, incorporating a sizable addition (made at the time of the merger of the two congregations?), stands in an area now very dilapidated. Only two stained glass windows at the rear and four now bricked up at the side indicate that it was once a synagogue. The Orthodox B'nai Israel (later Children of Israel), on 8th Street, was the first synagogue in Benton Harbor, established in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (see *Michigan Jewish History* 22(1):11). Temple Beth-El, at 214 E. Britain Avenue, is now the Ebenezer Baptist Church (Walter L. Brown, pastor). On the facade, the inscription still reads "Temple Beth-El."

⁵ Officially known as the Israelite House of David, the group was established in 1903 by Benjamin ("King Benjamin") Purnell, who claimed to be the seventh messenger prophesied by the book of Revelation in Christian Scripture. He and his followers set up a communal settlement near Benton Harbor, believing that they were the direct descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel to be restored in the last days to their rightful places as judges and rulers in the kingdom of God. There are estimated to be one hundred fifty members in Benton Harbor. Strict vegetarians, they never shave their heads or faces.

well-known summer resort, the City of David had built a small Orthodox synagogue to accommodate Jewish vacationers from Chicago. Now the synagogue stands deserted.

There is now one synagogue in Benton Harbor: Temple B'nai Shalom. In the late 1950s Ahavas Shulem and Children of Israel merged, and the Ahavas Shulem building was sold. The new Conservative congregation was known as B'nai Shalom Synagogue. In the late 1960s the congregation moved from Lake Avenue to its present building at 2050 Broadway. A further consolidation of the Jewish religious community was effected in 1971, when B'nai Shalom merged with Temple Beth-El to form Temple B'nai Shalom.⁶

At B'nai Shalom, the memorial plaque displayed in the lobby contains many names that appeared on Ben Rosenberg and Rabbi Schwarz's list of local Jewish farmers. The names Pollyea, Shpok, Shapiro, Dunaetz, and others also appear on tombstones in the two Jewish cemeteries of Benton Harbor: B'nai Shalom, and Temple Beth-El Memorial Park. B'nai Shalom, on Crystal Avenue just outside Benton Harbor, is a merger of the cemeteries established by Ahavas Shulem and Children of Israel: the hedge was removed, and the two adjacent cemeteries became one.⁷ Temple Beth-El Memorial Park, nearby on Napier and Crystal, is much smaller and newer, dating from 1957-58.

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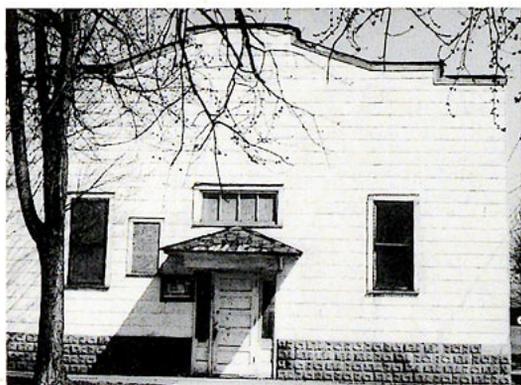
Jewish farming in southwestern Michigan is now threatened by the emigration of the younger generation and the economic and social problems that have hit Benton Harbor and Michigan especially hard. One might well compare current conditions to the times when Ben and the farmers of his generation flourished. How did they respond to the problems of a fickle climate and an unstable economy? Long before the motto "Say Yes to Michigan" was new or fashionable, Ben and the other Jewish farmers of Berrien County were saying yes to Michigan every day, every season, every harvest, good or bad. Theirs was a collective voice, an innovative, stubborn voice raised loud and strong.



Tombstone of Nathan Dunaetz (1854-1924), one of the original Benton Harbor Jewish farmers; B'nai Shalom Cemetery

⁶ Rabbi Joseph Schwarz retired as rabbi of Temple Beth-El in 1971. The present rabbi of Temple B'nai Shalom is Rabbi Moshe Sachs

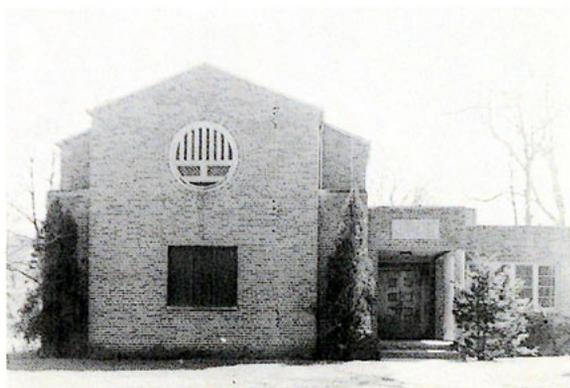
⁷ A plaque on the grounds reads "Congregation Children of Israel" and gives the date, 1932.



Ahavas Shulem



Congregation Children of Israel/B'nai Shalom



Temple Beth-El

JACK A. ROBINSON AND PERRY DRUG STORES, INC.

By Phillip Applebaum

Of the many drugstore chains in the United States today, one of the largest and most successful is Perry Drug Stores, Inc., with headquarters located in Waterford, Michigan, northwest of Detroit. With one hundred seventy-six stores, the Perry chain does business in six states: Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky. It holds the number-one position in chain-drugstore retail sales in its home state. Its shares are traded on the New York Stock Exchange. For the investor, the story of Perry Drug Stores tells of commercial success. To the Jewish historian, however, a look at the history of Perry Drug Stores and its founder exposes yet another layer of the American Jewish experience: how immigrants and the children of those immigrants combined talent, ambition, and the will to succeed to produce prosperity and repute felt far beyond the bounds of the quarters from which they emerged.



Jack A. Robinson

Perry Drug Stores was founded in 1957 by Jack A. Robinson, then a twenty-seven-year-old pharmacist. He was born on February 26, 1930 to

Information for this article was derived from "Jack A. Robinson and Perry Drug Stores, Inc." by Bernie F. Thomas (electrostatic typescript copy); "The Man Behind the Redcoats" by Maida Portnoy, *Oakland Sunday Magazine (Oakland Press)*, May 9, 1982; personal interview with Jack A. Robinson, Waterford, Michigan, March 10, 1983. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Berl Falbaum, director of Corporate Communications, Perry Drug Stores, and also of JHSM member Ann Abrams Feinstein.

PHILLIP APPLEBAUM was born in Detroit and earned a B.A. degree from Wayne State University. A past president of the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan, he is the editor of *Michigan Jewish History*.

Fannie and Julius Robinson, residents of Medbury Street near St. Antoine in Detroit's original Jewish settlement, the Hastings Street neighborhood. Julius began life as Yoel Vetcharabin in the town of Starabin, near Bobruisk, White Russia. He immigrated to the United States around 1911, leaving behind his father (a widower) and brothers and sisters, although two of the sisters settled in New York.

Jack's mother, Fannie, was the daughter of Velvil and Leah Aizkowitz, natives of Lekhovitch, White Russia. Velvil (later known as William) came to the United States around 1911 and worked as a junkman, collecting scrap in a pushcart. The business provided him with a steady livelihood, and he soon graduated to the use of a horse and wagon. He also saved enough money to pay for the passage of the rest of the family from Lekhovitch to Detroit. Arriving in 1919 were his wife, Leah (née Winikoff), and five children—Anna, Fannie, Louis, Minnie, and Sam.

Julius worked as a clothing salesman in a store on Milwaukee and Woodward. He died in 1932 at the height of the Great Depression, leaving Fannie, with her job in an apparel store, to support their three children: Erwin, Frances, and Jack. Without a father, Jack grew close to his grandfather (who died in 1941), and would often accompany him on his rounds.

With time, the Hastings Street area that Jack and his family lived in, changed. Known at the turn of the century as "Little Jerusalem," the Hastings neighborhood was the immigrant ghetto from which sprang many of Detroit's Jewish institutions and synagogues (indeed, just down the street from the Robinson house stood the synagogue of the Beth Hamedrish Hagodol Anshei Rovno). In the 1920s, however, black migrants from the southern states began displacing Jews in the Hastings area; twenty years later it was almost a completely black neighborhood.

The Robinsons moved to Detroit's west side, settling in the heavily Jewish Linwood neighborhood. They lived first on Tuxedo and Lasalle, and later moved to Sturtevant between Wildemere and Lawton. Jack attended the Farband Yiddish Folks Shule, then on Dexter and Cortland. At the age of twelve (a year before bar mitzva), he was sent to the Rose Sittig Cohen branch of the United Hebrew Schools on Tyler and Lawton. He celebrated his becoming bar mitzva at the synagogue of Congregation Bnai Israel on Linwood and Buena Vista.

As a teenager, Jack helped fill out the family's meager income by working as a photographer at bar mitzvas and weddings. And each day after classes at Central High, he worked as a soda fountain clerk and delivery boy at a pharmacy. Heeding his mother's advice to save money for college, he found another part-time job as a shoe salesman. He sold women's shoes, and looked forward to Saturdays, when he made as much as twenty dollars. But he needed an automobile to get to work, and regretfully sold his Speed Graphic camera to raise money to buy a black 1949 Ford. He was proud of the camera, for it was the type used by newspaper photographers.

Jack was rewarded for his hard work and frugal habits. In 1952 he earned a degree in pharmacy from the Detroit Institute of Technology (later incorporated into Wayne State University). He chose to attend DIT, known as a workingman's college, for its students were guaranteed to be out of school by 4 p.m.



Hanuka party, December 1940. Jack is seated third from the left. To his left is his mother, Fannie, and to her left is her father, Velvil Aizkowitz.

In that same year Jack found another cause for celebration—his marriage to Aviva Freedman, a girl he had met on a blind date. Aviva's parents were originally from Poland, but her mother Esther's family moved to Palestine and lived as pioneers in the frontier town of Petach Tikva. Fourteen years later, at the age of sixteen, Esther immigrated to the United States. She later married Abe Freedman, and insisted that their daughters be given modern Hebrew names, Geula and Aviva.

The beginning of Jack and Aviva's married life was interrupted by the call of the U.S. Selective Service. In 1953 Jack left for a tour of duty in the U.S. Army, but Aviva remained behind in Detroit to complete work for a degree in art education. Jack had promised her father that he would allow her to complete her studies, even if it meant that they had to spend some time apart. Given his science training, Jack was assigned various tasks in the army, such as laboratory technician, dental assistant, immunization officer, and even pharmacist.

Emerging as a corporal in 1955, Jack landed a job working for Samuel Pearlstein at the Merrill Pharmacy on Puritan in northwest Detroit. With a GI loan, Jack and Aviva bought a house in the newly developing suburb of Oak Park, a city popular with young Jewish couples because of its reasonably priced housing and its proximity to the Jewish neighborhoods of northwest Detroit.

Although the job at Merrill's provided him with a living wage, Jack was obsessed with the idea of owning his own drugstore and being his own boss. He spent two restless years behind the counter at Merrill, planning, dream-



The alumni association, Omicron Branch, of Alpha Zeta Omega, an all-Jewish pharmacy fraternity, 1955. Jack Robinson, president that year, is kneeling, front row center, with a pipe in hand.

ing of his own pharmacy. Each weekend he and Aviva took rides around the Detroit area looking for possible sites where the dream could be fulfilled. One day in 1955, while driving through the city of Pontiac (twenty-six miles northwest of Detroit), they chanced upon an empty storefront at Perry Street and East Boulevard. The storefront was unrented probably with good reason: it was located in an industrial area across the street from a cemetery. But to Jack, it seemed like an ideal location. He was ready to turn his dreams into reality. After he learned that a supermarket was slated to be built next to the site, he was certain that he could make a success of the place.

He approached the landlord, Harry Davidson, with a proposal to lease the store. Davidson thought Jack was a nice enough fellow, but he had no business experience, no credit rating and hardly any investment capital. Davidson decided he would wait for someone else to make him an offer. But Jack did not want to wait; he was ready to set up his own business and determined to do it with Davidson's store. He may have lacked money, but he possessed an abundance of persistence. He made a practice of telephoning Davidson on the first Monday of each month with the same request to rent the storefront. For two years Jack called and Davidson resisted. Finally, exasperated—and without any other offers—Davidson gave in and accepted Jack as his new tenant.

Armed with only two hundred dollars in savings, Jack innovated at every step to get his venture off to a successful start. Even the name of the

business was dictated by economics. Neon signage in 1957 cost seventy-five dollars per letter, and at eight letters a "Robinson" sign would have cost six hundred dollars. The street sign on the corner read "Perry," and at three fewer letters and two hundred twenty-five dollars less, the new business was named Perry Pharmacy. Jack used similar creativity with his suppliers. Using charm, enthusiasm, and shrewd salesmanship, he persuaded his suppliers to extend him credit—a privilege normally reserved only for longtime customers. One of the suppliers would later recall that Jack proved so persuasive that he almost felt he was being done a favor in allowing credit.

Jack was not the only one at work. Aviva's artistic abilities were put to use in decorating the store's interior. She chose the paint colors, wallpaper styles, fixtures, and made all of the interior signs. More prosaically, she also took on the task of bookkeeping.

The store opened on July 12, 1957. It carried prescription drugs, health and beauty aids, patent medicines and sundry items, and also featured a soda fountain.

Jack set out what he thought was a reasonable goal for himself: to fill seventy-five to eighty prescriptions a day and to get home at night with enough profit to continue being his own boss. Combining friendly, efficient service with what proved to be an ideal location, Jack's modest objective was more than fulfilled. Soon he was filling one hundred fifty prescriptions a day. But he could not afford to hire an additional pharmacist, and found himself working fourteen hours a day, including weekends, with little, if any, time to manage the other areas of the store. Business continued strong and steady and eventually he was able to hire part-time help. He took on a fellow veteran, Donald Fox, who had just gotten out of the U.S. Air Force.



The first Perry Pharmacy a few weeks before its opening in 1957. A sign in the window reads, "Be patient. We can't wait either. Perry Pharmacy."

Donald, it turned out, also had plans on being his own boss. Rather than lose a competent pharmacist, Jack proposed that Donald come into the business as a partner. Under the terms of their agreement, a second Perry Pharmacy was opened in Pontiac, with Donald as partner-manager. (He stayed with the firm, and today is the president and chief operating officer.)

In 1960 Jack was delivered a jolt that would change both the form and direction of his business. He learned that the S.S. Kresge Company was about to embark on a venture of large-scale discount retailing, what has since become the K Mart chain. To his despair, Jack discovered that a K Mart store was scheduled to open in Pontiac, in direct competition with the two Perry Pharmacies. Although he feared that his fledgling stores could not survive on a head-on confrontation with the retailing giant, he resolved to put up a good fight. He had six months to prepare.

First, he changed the name of the business to Perry Drug Stores, hoping the name change would get across the idea that he did more than fill prescriptions. He broadened the selection of health and beauty aids, added soft goods and home hardware products, and offered lower prices on such heavily traded items as cigarettes, milk, bread, ice cream, and money orders. He also mailed out his circular monthly rather than quarterly.

The plan worked, and Jack reported at the end of that year that business was better than ever; it had, in fact, quadrupled, K Mart notwithstanding. That one competitive jolt launched Jack from ordinary drugstore proprietor to a businessman with expertise in merchandising, displaying, pricing and advertising.

With his reinvigorated enterprise, Jack brought three more pharmacists into the business to operate drugstores under the original partnership formula. The new partner-managers were Allan Klein (today senior vice-president of merchandising), Mickey Kole (senior vice-president of store operations), and Robert A. Shapiro (vice-president of health-care services). Jack called his formula a "pyramid of partnerships." Under the scheme, Jack retained a fifty-one percent interest in each new store, his manager partners owned twenty-five percent, and the remaining twenty-four percent was shared by the manager-partners from the other stores. All of the partners were pharmacists, and all worked at the stores they owned.

With the opening of Perry Drug Number Four in Waterford, Michigan in 1965, the company officially constituted a drugstore chain with enough units to qualify for membership in the National Association of Chain Drug Stores. By 1973 the chain comprised eighteen stores, and in February of that year Perry Drug Stores became publicly owned, with shares traded on the over-the-counter market. The infusion of capital led to the opening of eighteen more stores in 1974. Trading in Perry shares was later conducted on the American Stock Exchange; in April 1983 Jack realized a long-held dream when Perry became a member of the New York Stock Exchange.

Still innovative, in 1976 Perry opened the nation's first combination drug and auto-home center store, putting automobile replacement parts, home

hardware items, and traditional drugstore merchandise together under one roof at discount prices. The idea worked, and today the chain operates sixty-eight such stores in three states. They have since added sporting goods, pets and pet-supply items, and even sailboats. Prescriptions in 1982 accounted for seventeen percent of total Perry sales. Beginning with the image of the Perry "redcoat" pharmacist to today's emphasis on the variety aspect, Perry Drug Stores has become a respected leader in the retail drugstore business. It is the largest drugstore chain in Michigan; nationally it ranks seventeenth in profitability, twentieth in the number of stores, and twenty-second in dollar volume.

Although his business acumen arose from his experience in the marketplace, Jack attributes his feelings of commitment to community involvement to his mother. "What a person gives," she told him, "God gives back." Jack has made Jewish causes a major part of his non-business activities. He and his family are members of Congregation Shaarey Zedek (Southfield). In 1978 he was the recipient of the Eleanor Roosevelt Humanities Award, presented by the state of Israel with the approval of the Roosevelt Foundation. In 1982 he was presented with the B'nai B'rith Youth Services American Traditions Award. He is the 1984 general chairman of the Allied Jewish Campaign sponsored by the Jewish Welfare Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, and serves as a member of the JWF Board of Governors. He has also been active in the Jewish Family Service, and has served as president of the Federation Apartments, a residential complex for the Jewish elderly.

His other charitable and community activities include the United Way of Pontiac, the United Foundation of Detroit, Boys Clubs of Pontiac, Save Orchestra Hall, the Pontiac Urban League, the Cranbrook Institute of Science, and the Pontiac Symphony Orchestra. In 1983 he was named Entrepreneur of the Year by the Harvard Business School Club of Detroit. He also serves as a member of the boards of directors of Winkelman Stores, Inc., the C.A. Muer Corporation, and the Bloomfield Savings & Loan Association. He is also a director of the National Association of Chain Drug Stores, the Michigan Merchants Council, and is a past director of the Affiliated Drug Stores Corporation.

Residents of Bloomfield Township, Jack and Aviva are the parents of three daughters, Shelby, Beth, and Abigail.

Aviva's jobs as bookkeeper and sign painter lasted only until the third Perry store. She did, however, decorate stores number four through ten. Today she is a widely known professional artist whose work is exhibited in major galleries.

Jack A. Robinson is one of many Jews who has traveled the road leading from humble immigrant ghetto streets to the portals of the executive suite, ever mindful of his Jewish heritage. American corporate history as well as American Jewish history are enriched by his achievements.

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REPORT ON THE TWENTY-FOURTH ANNUAL MEETING

The twenty-fourth annual meeting of the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan was held on Sunday, May 15, 1983 in Beth Shalom synagogue in Oak Park, Michigan.

Pursuant to our constitution, elections for the Officers and Board of Directors were held. Chairman of the Nominating Committee was Doris P. Easton, JHSM past president. The following were elected (all positions are one-year terms): Bette A. Roth, president; Lenore Miller, Stanley N. Meretsky, vice-presidents; Ida Levine, treasurer; Adele W. Staller, recording secretary; Lee Waldbott, corresponding secretary; Esther Klein, financial secretary. Elected to the Board of Directors (all one-year terms): Leonard Antel, Sarah Bell, Carol Altman Bromberg, Judy Cantor, Laurence B. Deitch, Walter L. Field, Carol Finerman, Leon Fram, Morris Friedman, George Goldstone, Philip Handleman, Laurence Imerman, Reuben Levine, Harold Norris, Evelyn Noveck, Patricia Pilling, Abraham Satovsky, Bette Schein, Oscar D. Schwarz, Irwin Shaw, Howard B. Sherizen, Betty Starkman, George M. Stutz, H. Saul Sugar, Janis Waxenberg. (All past presidents are automatic members of the Board.)

Guest speaker at the meeting was Dr. N. Paul Silverman, instructor in the Oak Park School System. His topic was entitled, "Look How Far We've Come, or Have We? A Portrait of the Jew in American Film."

In his annual report, outgoing JHSM President Phillip Applebaum reviewed the Society's various activities and projects: "Our major accomplishments over the past year involved the completion of two important commemorative projects.



Officers elected at the twenty-fourth annual meeting. *Left to right:* Adele W. Staller, recording secretary; Lenore Miller, vice president; Lee Waldbott, corresponding secretary; Bette A. Roth, president; Esther Klein, financial secretary; Stanley N. Meretsky, vice president; Ida Levine, treasurer.



Members of the Board of Directors elected at the twenty-fourth annual meeting. *Standing, left to right:* Phillip Applebaum, immediate past president; Abraham Satovsky, Sarah Bell, George Goldstone; Morris Friedman, Leonard Antel, Patricia Pilling, Irving I. Edgar, past president; Abraham Rogoff, past president. *Sitting, left to right:* Evelyn Noveck, Betty Starkman, Carol Altman Bromberg, Doris P. Easton, past president. *Not pictured:* Judy Cantor, Laurence B. Deitch, Walter L. Field, Carol Finerman, Leon Fram, Philip Handleman, Laurence Imerman, Reuben Levine, Harold Norris, Bete Schein, Oscar D. Schwarz, Irwin Shaw. Howard B. Sherizen, George M. Stutz, H. Saul Sugar, Janis Waxenberg.

"The first project is the commemoration of the site of the earliest Jewish cemetery in Michigan, today found on the grounds of the Rackham Building of Graduate Studies on the main campus of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Last year, we, along with Beth Israel Congregation of Ann Arbor, applied for a state historical marker for the site. Our application was approved, and I'm happy to inform you that the marker will be dedicated on Sunday, June 12, 1983 at the site . . . The marker dedication represents the culmination of a two-year project to locate and authenticate the cemetery site. We owe a debt of gratitude to the two persons who did most of the research: Helen Aminoff and Rabbi Allan Kensky of Beth Israel. As you know, the story of the cemetery, as well as the history of the early Jews of Ann Arbor, was published in the January 1983 issue of *Michigan Jewish History*. We also owe thanks to our Board member, Larry Deitch, for facilitating the marker application process.

"We are nearing the completion of our second commemorative project, a plaque in memory of David E. Heineman (1865-1935), to be placed in the Detroit Historical Museum. Heineman was the first historiographer of Michigan Jewry and wrote extensively on the subject. He was extremely active in civic affairs, having served in the Michigan State Legislature, was Chief Assistant City Attorney for Detroit, Assistant Corporation Counsel, and served as the first Jewish President of the Detroit Common Council. In 1907 he designed a flag for the city of Detroit which was officially adopted by the city in April 1948. A stained-glass window depicting the flag hung in the Council Chamber in the old Detroit City Hall. The City Hall was demolished in 1961, but at our behest, the window was rescued, and in 1972 was installed over the main entrance to the Detroit Historical Museum . . . This project came into being mainly through the efforts of our founder, Allen A. Warsen, to whom we owe our thanks.

"As you know, the execution of projects such as the two just mentioned costs a great deal of money. That, along with the increasing costs of publishing our journal, other printing, and postage led our Board of Directors this past year to adopt an increase in the dues schedule. As many of you are aware, until we increased the dues, we had been operating with the same dues structure since 1965. While the increase per individual member was modest, it has made a tremendous difference to the Society as a whole, giving us the freedom to pursue many additional projects.

"One of our important continuing projects is the Michigan Jewish Genealogical Index—a card file comprising birth and death records of Michigan Jewry, housed in the library of the Midrasha College of Jewish Studies in Southfield. A group of dedicated volunteers is keeping the project viable: Sarah Bell, who oversees the entire operation; Saul Sugar, who helps in securing newspaper records; Betty Starkman, who is helping obtain cemetery records; Ruth Podolsky, who spends hours transcribing birth and death records from issues of the old *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*; and Louise Lorber, who is doing the tremendously important task of typing the information onto file cards. To all of you, many thanks.

"In line with the Index project, our Board, at its last meeting, initiated a new project: a branch of the Historical Society devoted to the study of Jewish genealogy. Its activities will embrace not only the Jews of Michigan, but the tracing of Jewish roots in all lands and in all periods of history. Over the past five years there has been a tremendous upsurge in Jewish genealogical research, and there was talk of starting a Jewish genealogical organization here in Michigan. Inasmuch as the Jewish Historical Society has already laid the groundwork for this type of study, it was proposed that the JHSM itself establish a branch devoted to genealogical research. As mentioned, the idea was put before the Board, which gave its enthusiastic approval. Project coordinator will be Betty Starkman, with the assistance of Sarah Bell.

"Each year, we, along with the Jewish Parents Institute, sponsor a speaker at the Annual Jewish Book Fair. Last November our guest author was Aranka Siegel, who wrote the very successful book, *Upon the Head of the Goat*, an autobiographical novel recounting the days prior to the Holocaust as seen through the eyes of a little girl in Hungary.

"Also in November we held our semi-annual meeting at Beth Achim synagogue in Southfield. Our guest speaker was Dr. Gerald Teller, who gave us a cogent and thoughtful analysis of current trends in American Judaism.

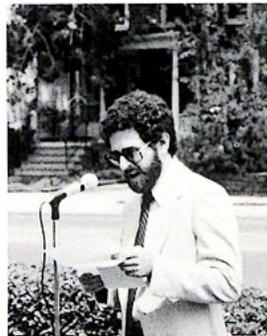
"We have had another successful year, of which we can all be proud."

ANN ARBOR MARKER DEDICATION

An official state historical marker, identifying Michigan's first Jewish cemetery site, was dedicated on a bright and sunny Sunday afternoon, June 12, 1983 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. About one hundred fifty residents of Ann Arbor and members of the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan gathered on the east lawn of the Horace W. Rackham Building of the University of Michigan for the dedication ceremony.

Rabbi Allan D. Kensky, spiritual leader of Beth Israel Congregation of Ann Arbor, extended greetings to the assemblage, and introduced each of the speakers. The Honorable Richard H. Austin, Michigan Secretary of State, spoke on behalf of the Michigan History Division, a branch of the Department of State, which authorized the marker. In the absence of Ann Arbor Mayor Louis Belcher, Mr. Wytan Stevens, former Ann Arbor City Historian, spoke on the marker's significance to the city. Dr. Harold T. Shapiro, president of the University of Michigan, also extended greetings. Bette A. Roth, president of the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan, addressed the gathering, expressing the Historical Society's pride in cosponsoring the marker, and briefly reviewed the other markers sponsored by the JHSM throughout the state. She also described the cooperative efforts of Beth Israel and the JHSM in getting the cemetery site recognized as an official historical site. Following her address, Phillip Applebaum, JHSM immediate past president, gave a reading of "the Jewish Cemetery of Newport," a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Helen Aminoff, author of a *MJH* article on early Ann Arbor Jewry, spoke on the history of the Ann Arbor Jewish community and those members of the Weil family who established the cemetery. The group was also addressed by Jane Berliss of Chicago, a University of Michigan student and a Weil family descendant.

Following the unveiling of the marker, the attendees proceeded to Forest Hill Cemetery to observe the newly restored Weil family plot.



The gathering at the dedication ceremony was addressed by Bette A. Roth, president of the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan; Richard H. Austin, Michigan Secretary of State; Phillip Applebaum, immediate past president, JHSM.

At a luncheon at Beth Israel Synagogue following the ceremonies, Dr. David E. Schteingart spoke on the contemporary Ann Arbor Jewish community.

Text of the Ann Arbor marker:

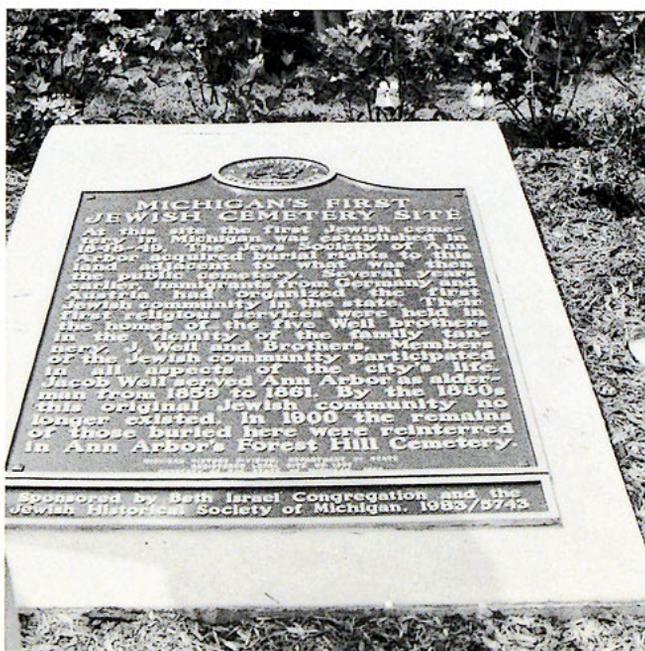
MICHIGAN'S FIRST JEWISH CEMETERY SITE

At this site the first Jewish cemetery in Michigan was established in 1848-49. The Jews Society of Ann Arbor acquired burial rights to this land adjacent to what was then the public cemetery. Several years earlier, immigrants from Germany and Austria had organized the first Jewish community in the state. Their first religious services were held in the homes of the five Weil brothers in the vicinity of the family tannery, J. Weil and Brothers. Members of the Jewish community participated in all aspects of the city's life. Jacob Weil served Ann Arbor as alderman from 1859 to 1861. By the 1880s this original Jewish community no longer existed. In 1900 the remains of those buried here were reinterred in Ann Arbor's Forest Hill Cemetery.

Michigan History Division, Department of State
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Sponsored by Beth Israel Congregation and the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan, 1983/5743.



NEW MEMBERS

We warmly welcome our new members with the hope that their association with us will be fruitful and rewarding.

Roberta Feldman

David L. Lewis

Dr. Joseph H. Lorber

Judy Nolish

Dr. Edward C. Pintzuk

Philip Slomovitz

We respectfully wish to inform our membership that they can benefit the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan by means of bequests from wills, trust funds, insurance policies, endowments, foundation donations, and outright gifts.

*For further information, please contact our president,
Bette A. Roth*

*1363 N. Woodward Ave., #203
Birmingham, Michigan 48009
(313) 644-4249*

All inquiries will be handled in strict confidence.

CORRECTIONS

Corrections to "The First Jews of Ann Arbor," *Michigan Jewish History* (January 1983):

Page 5: Charles Fantle's age should read 28, and not 18.

Page 5: The synagogue location should read 300 West Washington.

Page 11: Line four should read: As indicated by Jacob Weil, the description in the deeds of the cemetery location was indeed incorrect.

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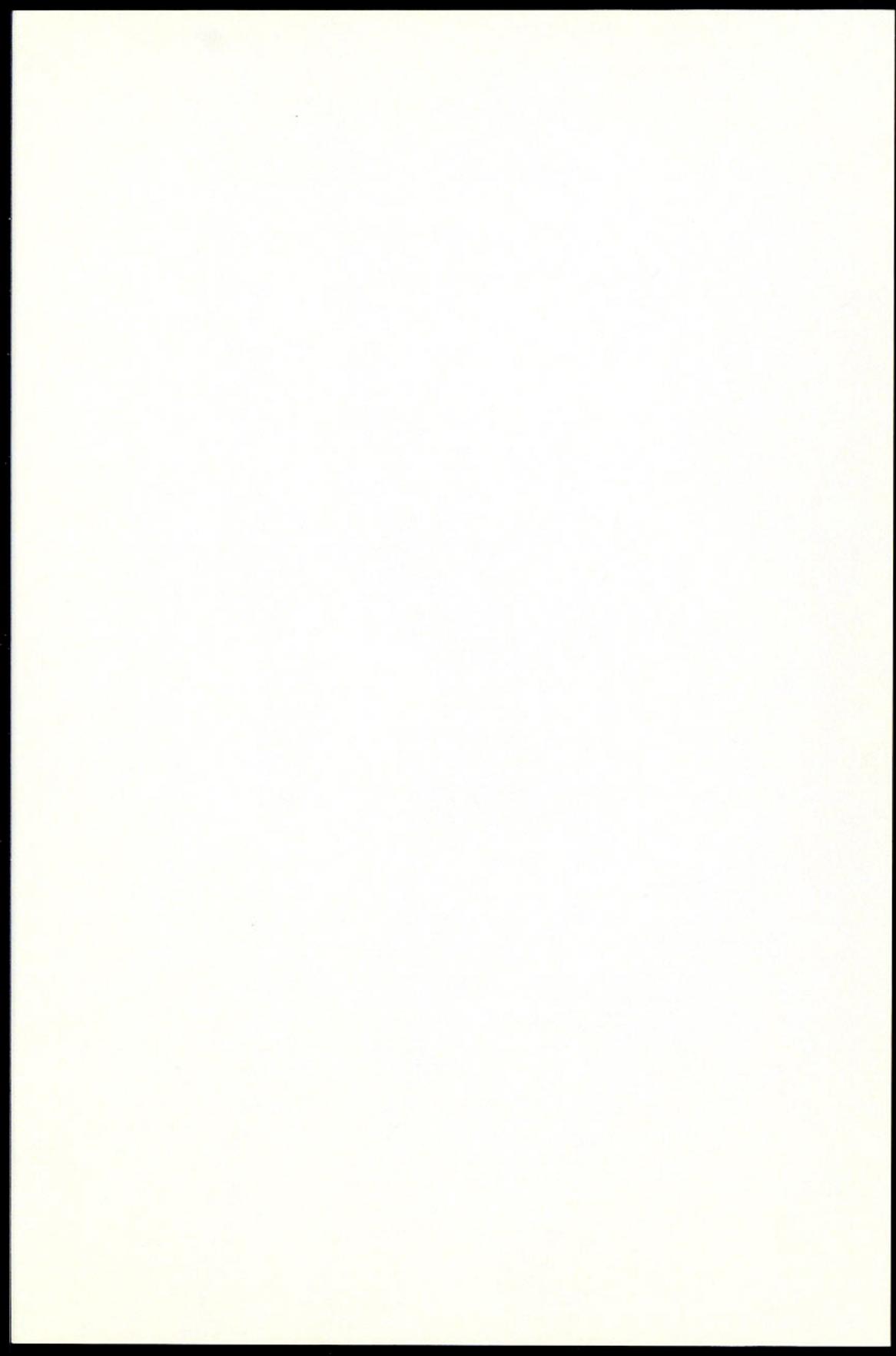
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