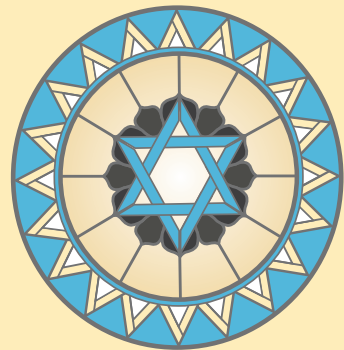


Michigan Jewish History



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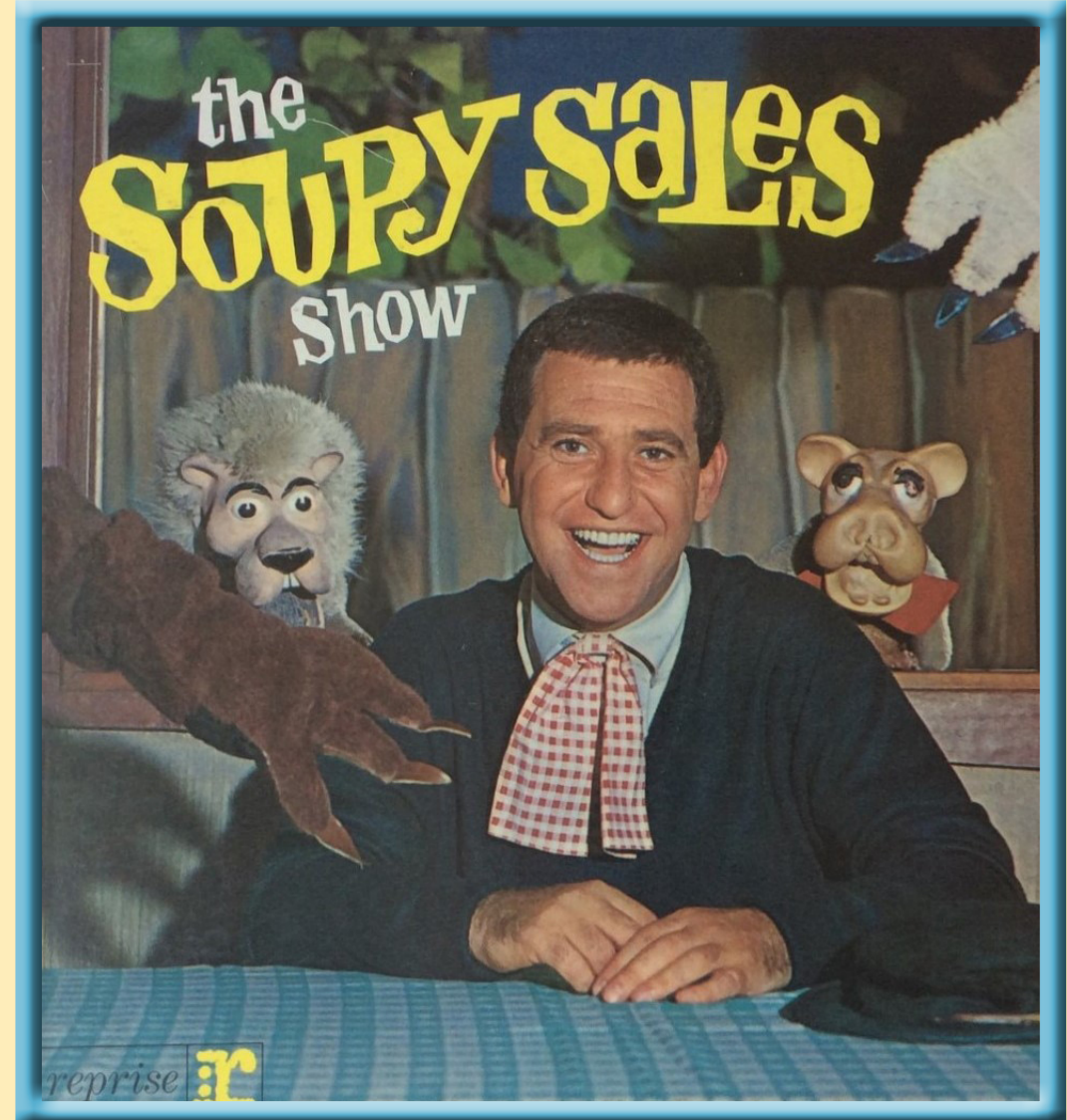
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Tammuz 5782



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Michigan Jewish History is dedicated to the memory of **Sarah and Ralph Davidson** and **Bessie and Joseph Wetsman**, the parents and grandparents of **William Davidson** and **Dorothy Davidson Gerson**, both of blessed memory.



Figures 1–4: (clockwise from top left) Sarah Wetsman Davidson, Ralph Davidson, Joseph Wetsman, and Bessie Handler Wetsman. (Courtesy of Gretchen and Ethan Davidson.)

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The Journal of Jewish Historical Society of Michigan

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Message from Our President

Risha B. Ring, PhD



(Courtesy of author.)

Our Star Continues to Rise. . . .

During my four years as president of JHSM, this journal, along with many other aspects of the organization, has changed because of our vision- and goal-driven growth. In partnership with our outstanding executive director, Catherine Cangany, PhD, officers, board, staff, and many valuable volunteers, we have accomplished a long list of points of pride.

In September 2019, the entire JHSM Board of Directors attended a retreat to develop our action plan for moving forward. Goals were developed in the areas of finance, collaboration, marketing, ambassador culture, knowledge production, and meaningful engagement (programming). Although we were forced to reinvent our operations in March 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to the dedication of many of our members, and with strong support from Catherine Cangany, we are proud to say that we have made significant gains in all of these areas. Our membership has grown, our programming has been plentiful, and our fundraising efforts have given us a head start on further growth for JHSM. I encourage all of you to look at the action plan and our progress in the upper-left corner of JHSM's homepage, www.jhsmichigan.org.

During the pandemic, we developed new ways to share Michigan Jewish history and used the available technology to provide educational opportunities to



participants from across the country and Canada and Israel, too! Through Zoom, we were able to “bring” scholars from Michigan and beyond into our members’ homes to share their knowledge, enthusiasm, and spirit.

As COVID-19 cases started to decline during summer 2021, we safely provided several private tours for families and groups, and we organized a successful and safe J-Cycle 10 bike tour on October 10, 2021. We held an in-person annual meeting on June 12, 2022, to honor our officers, board, and 2021 and 2022 Leonard N. Simons History-Maker Award recipients, Arthur M. Horwitz and Harriet B. Saperstein. We will continue to expand our in-person programming as conditions become increasingly safer.

Our CORE (Community Outreach, Relations, and Engagement) Committee also was established. During the last four years, JHSM has developed collaborations with new and established partner organizations in the community, including Bookstock, Center for Jewish Studies at EMU, the Coalition for Black and Jewish Unity, Detroit PAL, Detroit Urban League, Ford Piquette Avenue Plant, General Motors, the Greater Michigan Chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association, Hazon Detroit, The Henry Ford, Historic Boston Edison Association, Historical Society of Michigan, JCC Chicago, JCRC/AJC, Jewish Hospice and Chaplaincy Network, Jewish Senior Life, Liberty Temple Baptist Church, Livonia Historical Society, Mackinac State Historic Parks, Michigan ADL, Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs, Monroe County Community College, Novi Public Library, Nu?Detroit, The Well, the William L. Clements Library, and the Zekelman Holocaust Center.

Our most significant initiative and massive undertaking during the last four years has been the creation of a museum task force and the launch of a feasibility study to explore creating a museum of Jewish Michigan. As the next phase of determining feasibility, we will launch our first “pop up” exhibit at the Detroit Historical Museum in October 2023.

As I step away from the presidency, and take stock of our accomplishments, I am proud to see what lies ahead for JHSM. My wish is that we continue strengthening our role as keeper of Michigan’s Jewish history.

Our Star Continues to Rise. . . .



Introduction from the Managing Editor

Tracy Weissman, JD



(Courtesy of Paul Stoloff Photography.)

I am amazed at the issue of *Michigan Jewish History* you hold in your hands. Six weeks before writing this introduction, I was unable to sleep, worried whether there would be a 2022 issue. There was almost no content, and the few pieces we had received did not fit our mission. Then, outstanding scholars featured in our Zoom programs stepped up in a big way. And our incredible “Creative Expressions” editor, Joy Gaines-Friedler, worked her magic, pulling together a fantastic group of contributions. Although we did not originally plan for this issue to have a specific theme, the Jewish value of *Kehillah*—community—not only underlies the manner in which the 2022 journal came together, but also beautifully manifests itself in each piece. Throughout Michigan’s history, Jews, as a community, have established charitable organizations, formed partnerships, assisted individuals, and supported philanthropic causes. Each submission examines the impact of community in shaping the Jewish experience across Michigan and beyond.

In the first of the issue’s two feature articles, “Empathetic Citizenship: Jewish Immigrants and the Struggle for Black Civil Rights in the Midwest, 1927-1947,” Mary-Elizabeth B. Murphy (Eastern Michigan University) explores the impact of *Kehillah* through the risks Jewish Americans such as tailor Samuel S. Siegel, Judge Michael Feinberg, and community activist Isaac Franck took in publicly criticizing racism in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. These and other Jewish immigrants’ performance of empathetic citizenship—denouncing racial segregation, particularly



on interstate buses—formed an important part of the Americanization process. The solidarity between Jewish immigrants and African Americans also led to the formation of a successful Black-Jewish community alliance in Detroit in the 1930s and 1940s, which helped shape civil rights strategies in the decades that followed.

The related educator materials in the “Youth History Education” section offer a specific example of Kehillah in their closer look at Jewish tailor Samuel S. Siegel’s response to a racially motivated incident in South Haven in 1927. Siegel’s October 15, 1927 letter to the editor of the *Chicago Defender* newspaper three months after he interceded on behalf of a Black bus rider facing threats of physical violence forms the basis for discussion questions and lesson plans.

In this issue’s second feature article, “Soupy Sales’ Jewish and Motor City Connections,” Francis Shor (Wayne State University) recognizes the influence of Kehillah on television icon Soupy Sales’ career and legacy. Shor demonstrates how Sales’ childhood and Jewish roots shaped his public persona, which emerged during his years in Detroit from 1953 through 1960. Although many marginalized groups experienced discrimination in the Motor City during this period, Sales did not. In fact, the Jewish humor of early television comedians Milton Berle and Sid Caesar influenced Sales’ comedy sketches and contributed to his enduring celebrity status.

MJH’s “Interviews, Essays, and Personal Reflections” section features two trailblazers in their respective professions who have made lasting contributions to the Jewish community. In the essay “Hank Greenberg’s Iconic Status Remains 75 Years after His Retirement from Major League Baseball,” Irwin Cohen revisits the legendary player’s time with the Detroit Tigers. Greenberg’s iconic career during the 1930s and 1940s places him among the best ever. His decision not to play on Yom Kippur in 1934 and his military service during World War II only added to his heroic stature that continues today.

In the section’s second piece, “Eli Brown, MD: A Successful Physician and Leader at Detroit’s Sinai Hospital,” Levi Smith interviews Dr. Brown about his experiences as a Jew attending medical school in the 1940s when there were admissions quotas, his service in the army at the start of the Korean War, and his nearly 40-year career as chairperson of the department of anesthesiology (1954-1992) at Detroit’s Sinai Hospital. Brown provides a firsthand account of the importance in the 1950s of Kehillah in establishing Jewish hospitals like Sinai. Such facilities provided Jewish doctors, who had been denied medical staff privileges elsewhere, a place to treat their patients and offered Kosher kitchens to accommodate observant Jews receiving medical care. Brown also reflects on the consequences of Sinai’s decision not to relocate with its patients to the suburbs, ultimately leading to the hospital’s closure.



MJH's "Notable Jewish Michiganders in History" section features one of the remarkable individuals from our Michigan Women Who Made a Difference online archive. In "MWWMD Biography—Lillian Keidan Levin: Braille Transcriber and Volunteer Educator," Judith Levin Cantor (z"l) remembers her mother, an improbable cancer survivor who devoted her life to Kehillah—assisting her community. As a volunteer braille transcriber and English teacher to Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, Lillian Keidan Levin helped individuals lead fulfilling lives who otherwise might not have had the opportunity to do so.

The thought-provoking essays, memoirs, and poems in the "Creative Expressions" section offer spiritual explorations of human connection and empathy. In doing so, these contributions also recognize the importance of Kehillah in the Jewish experience.

This issue's pieces provide just a few examples of the enduring impact of Kehillah. I invite you to visit JHSM's online gallery (www.jhsmichigan.org/gallery) to learn more about the history of Jewish Michigan and the extraordinary individuals in our communities who have shaped it.



FEATURE ARTICLE

Empathetic Citizenship: Jewish Immigrants and the Struggle for Black Civil Rights in the Midwest, 1927-1947

Mary-Elizabeth B. Murphy
Eastern Michigan University

On January 5, 2021, the twin victories of Georgia candidates Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock to the US Senate sparked many conversations about the historic alliance between Jewish Americans and African Americans. At a joint campaign rally, Warnock had urged voters to “send a young Jewish man—the son of immigrants who sat at the feet of Congressman John Lewis and a kid who grew up in the public housing projects” to the Senate, arguing that these campaigns embodied “what America is about.”¹ This partnership had a history. In the postwar Black freedom struggle in the United States, Jewish Americans were some of the most visible white allies, whether it was the brutal murders of Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner in Mississippi during Freedom Summer, the iconic image of Martin Luther King, Jr., with his hands clasped next to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel at the Selma March, or the formidable legal team of Jack Greenberg, Thurgood Marshall, and Constance Baker Motley, who argued the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* before the Supreme Court. Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, Jewish Americans had been outspoken about a range of Black civil rights matters, including economic inequality, racial segregation, and violence. In particular, Jewish Americans served as outspoken allies in the campaign to integrate buses in the United States.

While all forms of racial segregation were humiliating for African Americans, conflicts over bus segregation were often violent. The image of a Southern bus or waiting room was a potent symbol of Jim Crow. Even though the US Supreme Court handed down decisions that integrated interstate buses (1946) and waiting rooms (1960), bus companies and southern states rarely enforced these laws.² In

Mary-Elizabeth B. Murphy, PhD, is an associate professor and chair of History at Eastern Michigan University. She is the author of *Jim Crow Capital: Women and Black Freedom Struggles in Washington, D.C., 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018). She is writing a book about African American women, bus segregation, and racial violence during the Great Migration.

¹ See, for example, Samuel Freedman, “A Historic Alliance Rekindled by Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 18, 2021; Terence L. Johnson and Jacques Berlinerblau, “Can Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff Reinvigorate the Black-Jewish Alliance?,” *Salon*, January 18, 2021; Jeff Melnick, “Georgia’s New Senators Will Write the Next Chapter in Black-Jewish Relations,” *Washington Post*, January 21, 2021.

² These two court cases were: *Morgan v. Virginia*, 328 U.S. 373 (1946) and *Boynton v. Virginia*, 364 U.S. 454 (1960).



1961 a group of 436 Black and white Freedom Riders boarded buses that began in Washington, DC, and snaked into the Deep South, testing the enforcement of these decisions. The journey in the Upper South was rather uneventful, but when buses wheeled into Deep South states like Louisiana, South Carolina, and Mississippi, riders confronted violent opposition, stretching from brutal beatings to bombs. Jewish Americans composed two-thirds of the white riders, including Israel Dresner, who earned the worthy title of the “most arrested Rabbi in America.”³ Members of the American Jewish Congress (AJC) wired telegrams to Attorney General Robert Kennedy protesting this racial violence and pressing for the federal government to intervene.⁴

The roots of this Black-Jewish alliance can be traced to the early twentieth century. Waves of anti-Semitism in Europe prompted two million Jewish citizens to immigrate from Eastern Europe to the United States, settling in large cities in the North and Midwest, including Chicago and Detroit. These cities were also home to thousands of recently migrated Black southerners, who fled the trauma of the Jim Crow South. Even though Jewish immigrants and Black migrants did not often live or labor together, the density of urban spaces, the day-to-day relationship between the two communities, and shared experiences of discrimination were all factors that helped nurture a Black-Jewish alliance.

As Jewish immigrants were grappling with their identity and becoming Americans, many wove Black solidarity into their articulation of rights in the United States, performing what I term “empathetic citizenship.” Many Jewish Americans pledged allegiance to their new homeland by offering mournful solidarity in the struggle for Black equality in the United States, marking an important part of their citizenship process. Through their words and their actions, Jewish Americans highlighted the fragility of American democracy that was predicated on a racial hierarchy. First-generation Jewish Americans were sensitive to racial intolerance precisely because it evoked the anti-Semitism they had experienced in many European countries, resulting in a two-tiered labor system, exclusion from some institutions of higher learning, overt discrimination, and violence.⁵

In the decades before the Freedom Riders, African Americans and Jewish Americans forged a critical alliance in cities such as Chicago and Detroit. As bus

³ Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 173.

⁴ “Believes Bus Attack Violates U.S. Law,” *Chicago Defender*, May 22, 1961, 19; “Mixed Group of Ministers File Protest Against Jailing Colleagues,” *Chicago Defender*, July 24, 1961, 4.

⁵ Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 18-22.



passengers, Jewish Americans were more likely to denounce racial segregation and side with Black riders. And as lawyers and judges, Jewish immigrant men sided with African Americans over white bus companies. From speaking out in the local press to celebrating the artistic talents of African American musician and civil rights activist Gloster B. Current, Jewish immigrants articulated a discourse of empathetic citizenship in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, critiquing racism at a time when most white Americans were silent. The solidarity of Jewish immigrants registered a large impact on both ordinary African Americans and the broader Black civil rights community.

Importantly, it was in Detroit where Jewish Americans formed important community partnerships with African Americans. This article demonstrates how the success of Detroit's Black-Jewish alliance in the 1930s and 1940s inspired the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to partner with Jewish Americans in seeking justice for Isaac Woodard, a Black soldier who was brutally beaten on a bus in 1946.⁶ Historian Lila Corwin Berman argues that Jewish citizens from Detroit "played outsized roles on the national Jewish stage," whether it was through their leadership of national organizations or fundraising and philanthropy.⁷ Indeed, the Black-Jewish partnership in Detroit would ultimately shape the NAACP's strategy in the fight against bus segregation and might have inspired so many Jewish Americans to participate in the Freedom Rides.

Bearing Witness and Speaking Out

By the mid-1920s some Americans began to ride a brand-new form of transportation: interstate buses. These vehicles were less expensive than trains, could transport passengers to more destinations, and were new and modern. In this period, Jewish Americans boarded buses for vacations. In the North, they rode buses to visit Atlantic City and the Catskills, while in the Midwest, Jewish families flocked to South Haven, Michigan, a town on the shores of Lake Michigan. South Haven was home to many resorts and became the premier vacation spot for Jewish citizens from Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City in the summer months.⁸ Since South Haven was fairly remote, its resorts relied on the fledgling bus industry to transport passengers to and from the area. For example, Zlatkin's Resort in South Haven directed prospective tourists to

⁶ Richard Gergel, *Unexampled Courage: The Blinding of Sgt. Isaac Woodard and the Awakening of President Harry S. Truman and Judge J. Waties Waring* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019).

⁷ Lila Corwin Berman, *Metropolitan Jews: Politics, Race, and Religion in Postwar Detroit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 15.

⁸ Bea Kraus, *A Time to Remember: A History of the Jewish Community in South Haven* (Allegan Forest, MI: Priscilla Press, 1999), 17.



specific Greyhound routes.⁹ And the Greyhound Bus company advertised in the *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, which indicates the popularity of bus travel within the Jewish community to South Haven.

While Jewish Americans primarily rode buses for vacations, Black migrants traveled by bus to sustain familial connections through visits to the South, often in the summer months. In addition to these visits to extended family members, African Americans rode buses to attend conferences and take vacations.¹⁰ Even though they were coded as white, Jewish passengers often crossed racial boundaries to side with Black riders during disputes over bus seats. Through their allyship, Jewish riders helped to ease the anxiety of bus trips for Black passengers when most other white Americans ignored the racist practices of bus drivers and bus companies.

For years, historians have documented the Black-Jewish alliance around civil rights, but they have largely focused on the postwar Black freedom struggle, sometimes terming it the “golden age” of the Black-Jewish alliance. Pressing back to the inter-war era, one sees how the divergent paths of Jewish immigrants and Black southern migrants in the Midwest converged on the racially tense bus. Some scholars have argued that Northern Jewish citizens did not confront the system of Jim Crow in the same way as their Southern counterparts, which made it easier to champion Black civil rights.¹¹ On the contrary, the system of Jim Crow segregation thrived in the Midwest, manifest in unequal treatment, racial violence, and inferior accommodations. Jewish Americans in Chicago and Detroit publicly denounced America’s color line before nearly every other community of white Americans would embrace civil rights.¹² And this movement began on the bus.

⁹ “Keep Fit for Victory Is Zlatkin’s Slogan at South Haven Spot,” *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), June 26, 1942, 14.

¹⁰ Maria O’Donovan, “A Trip to the Mountains: Travel and Social Relations in the Catskill Mountains of New York,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15, no. 2 (June 2011): 267-78.

¹¹ See, for example, Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Jeffrey Melnick, *Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2020); Maurianne Adams and John Brace, eds., *Strangers & Neighbors: Relations Between Blacks & Jews in the United States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); V.P. Franklin et al., eds., *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century: Studies in Convergence and Conflict* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998); Hasia R. Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion*, 175.

¹² Brian Purnell and Jeanne Theoharis, eds., *The Strange Careers of the Jim Crow North: Segregation and Struggle Outside the South* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).



In July 1927, Samuel S. Siegel, a Jewish immigrant from Romania, was enjoying a relaxing vacation in South Haven. While waiting at a Greyhound Bus terminal to take him home to Chicago, Siegel, a tailor in a fur shop, witnessed a well-dressed Black man clutching a ticket for his destination of Benton Harbor, Michigan, a city near Chicago with a large Black population. When this man showed his ticket to the white driver, the driver shoved him aside and allowed two white passengers to board the bus. Horrified, Siegel approached the man and expressed his disgust at the behavior he had just witnessed. Siegel assured the man that he would stay with him so that he could board the next bus. When a second bus wheeled into the station, they climbed aboard together. The Black man sat in the rear. A few minutes into the trip, the driver noticed the man. He swiftly marched to him, called the man a “dirty drunkard,” and demanded he exit immediately. The driver also threatened to use physical violence. Siegel intervened, questioning why the driver was engaging in such behavior. It was Siegel’s actions that caused the driver to change course and defuse the situation.¹³

After Siegel returned to his home in Chicago, he penned a letter to the city’s Black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, which had a national readership (see related youth history education materials on page 61). Since the Black community in Michigan did not have a similarly prominent newspaper at that time, many residents of Detroit, and indeed, throughout the state, subscribed to the *Chicago Defender*. It is even possible that the Black man Siegel assisted read the letter. Narrating the incident in vivid detail, Siegel described the violent behavior of the bus driver. Rather than connecting this discrimination to the wanton behaviors of a single person, Siegel argued that the bus driver’s behavior was sanctioned by the Greyhound Bus Corporation. In offering this assessment, Siegel correctly diagnosed racism in the United States as both interpersonal and systemic. Siegel then inserted himself in this narrative, noting, “As a member of the Jewish race, which has also and still is subjected to uncivilized persecution, I deeply and sincerely resent such incidents. . . .” By connecting past and present patterns of discrimination and stressing a shared “otherness,” Siegel rhetorically linked the fate of Jewish Americans and African Americans.¹⁴ And he articulated this discourse of empathetic citizenship, publicly letting Black subscribers of the *Chicago Defender* know that he and other Jewish immigrants were their allies on the bus.

Not only did Jewish passengers speak out against segregation on the Greyhound bus, but Jewish lawyers and judges also denounced segregation. In 1940 the NAACP established the Legal Defense Fund as a separate office to coordinate

¹³ “Bus Line Outrages,” *Chicago Defender*, October 15, 1927, A2. For Siegel in the census, see *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, Illinois, Cook County, Enumeration District 16-2191, Sheet 2B.

¹⁴ “Bus Line Outrages,” *Chicago Defender*.



its mounting civil rights cases. Thurgood Marshall chaired the office, assisted by Black lawyer William R. Dudley and Jewish attorney Milton Konvitz.¹⁵ A native of Safed, in what was then Palestine and now Israel, Konvitz and his family moved to New York City in the early twentieth century. In 1942 he joined the Legal Defense Fund and spent two years assisting numerous Black civilians and soldiers battling racism on buses. In the 1940s the legal team of Marshall, Dudley, and Konvitz tackled some of the most challenging cases of bus discrimination in the history of the NAACP.

Not only did Jewish Americans work as lawyers to dismantle bus segregation, but they also presided over these cases. In 1939 Judge Michael Feinberg of Chicago ruled on an important case of bus segregation. A native of Minsk, he immigrated to the United States when he was only three years old. By the 1920s he had been elected to the bench in Chicago, an incredible achievement for an immigrant.¹⁶ In 1939 a case appeared on Feinberg's docket between Claude Johnson, a Black porter in Chicago, and the Greyhound Bus Corporation. Johnson, a native of Tennessee, had been traveling on a Greyhound Bus for a visit to the South. At a rest stop in Arkansas, Johnson was late getting back to the bus and got into an altercation with the white bus driver. The driver tried to attack him with a lug wrench, but the other passengers held the driver back. When the bus wheeled into Blytheville, Arkansas, the driver called the police and had Johnson arrested. He was held in jail for six hours and officers robbed him.

When Claude Johnson returned to Chicago, he hired two lawyers and sued Greyhound for \$25,000 in damages. In the trial, Johnson's lawyers defended him against the testimony of the white bus driver and the white police officers. Judge Michael Feinberg ruled in favor of Claude Johnson and awarded him \$3,500—a fraction of the suit, but still a considerable sum of money. In his ruling, Feinberg noted that Greyhound “should be careful to employ servants who can be educated to know that colored people are human beings and that they are entitled, under our system of government, to the same treatment as any other human being.”¹⁷ While Feinberg did not evoke either his Judaism or his immigrant status in his decision, his empathy and tolerance toward Claude Johnson match the reaction and reasoning of Samuel S. Siegel.

¹⁵ David J. Danelski, *Rights, Liberties, and Ideals: The Contributions of Milton R. Konvitz* (Littleton, CO: Fred B. Rothman, 1983), 15.

¹⁶ Irving Cutler, *The Jews of Chicago: From Shtetl to Suburb* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 127. For Feinberg's family history, see *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940*, Chicago, Illinois, Enumeration District 9, Sheet 2A.

¹⁷ “Wins \$3,500 Judgment from Greyhound Bus Company,” *Chicago Defender*, February 4, 1939, 10.



Judge Michael Feinberg and Samuel S. Siegel shared a few traits. First, they were both immigrants to the United States. In an era of nativism and hostility toward immigrants, especially from Eastern Europe, Feinberg and Siegel dared to stand up for African Americans. Their experiences of anti-Semitism in Europe likely shaped their visceral reactions to injustice in the United States, especially around cases of bus segregation. Next, these men both seemed to have a particular hostility toward the Greyhound Bus Corporation. In this era, the Greyhound management company was based in Cleveland, but the board of directors was housed in Chicago. Feinberg and Siegel represent Jewish immigrants who performed empathetic citizenship toward African Americans in this period. As many white Americans looked the other way in the face of injustice, Feinberg and Siegel spoke out. The words and actions of these two men against bus segregation represented the broader patterns of racial tolerance in Jewish Detroit.

Mapping Black-Jewish Detroit Relations

In Detroit Jewish Americans and African Americans also developed an important Black-Jewish alliance. This partnership was nurtured by residential patterns, business connections, and a mutual desire on the part of Black and Jewish Detroiters to better understand one another. Beginning in the 1880s and 1890s, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe began to settle in Detroit. Many moved into a neighborhood near Hastings Street, where they established a thriving Jewish community. When Black migrants began to stream into the city in the late 1910s and 1920s, they moved to Black Bottom, a neighborhood overlapping Hastings Street. These residential patterns put Black migrants and Jewish immigrants in closer proximity with one another than other immigrant communities.¹⁸ In Detroit close to one-third of the city's Jewish residents opened small businesses.¹⁹ Some Jewish immigrants established their stores in Black neighborhoods, selling groceries, furniture, and clothing. Some hired Black employees. These business relationships knit even tighter bonds of familiarity between Black and Jewish Detroiters.²⁰ Finally, both communities were under attack in the inter-war era. During the 1920s Michigan had the largest number of KKK supporters outside of the South, and members of this organization targeted local Black and Jewish residents. Furthermore, Henry Ford frequently published anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in the pages of his publication, the *Dearborn Independent*, deterring many Jewish immigrants from laboring in Ford enterprises.

¹⁸ Corwin Berman, *Metropolitan Jews*, 27.

¹⁹ Corwin Berman, *Metropolitan Jews*, 25.

²⁰ Traci Parker, *Department Stores and the Black Freedom Movement: Workers, Consumers, and the Civil Rights Movement from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 21-22.



It would have been logical for the Jewish community in Michigan to turn inward to focus on combating anti-Semitism and discrimination. However, some Jewish Detroiters expressed empathetic citizenship by articulating a commitment to Black equality in the 1920s and 1930s. This sentiment can be discerned in the local Jewish newspaper. In 1924—the same year Congress passed restrictive legislation that cut off most Jewish immigration to the United States—the *Detroit Jewish Chronicle* published an editorial celebrating a decline in the number of reported lynching episodes in the South and discussing the promise of Black migration to the North. The editorial concluded with the hope that “a finer spirit of equality and humanity will dominate all the people of the world.”²¹ The *Detroit Jewish Chronicle* also published an article highlighting a talk by Black civil rights activist and educator W. E. B. DuBois, which suggests the Jewish community in Michigan was eager to hear about the struggles of African Americans in these decades.²² Finally a small blurb in the *Detroit Jewish Chronicle* celebrated lawyer Samuel Leibowitz’s work defending the Scottsboro boys.²³ These examples demonstrate the Detroit Jewish community’s performance of empathetic citizenship toward African Americans, both in the local community and across the country. Through the pages of its newspaper, the Jewish community in Detroit offered much more tolerance and empathy for African Americans than the city’s white newspaper, the *Detroit Free Press*.

Detroit’s African American community took note and offered similar expressions of solidarity. For example, in 1936 the city’s Black newspaper, the *Detroit Tribune*, featured a Black-penned editorial on the Allied Jewish Campaign, a fundraiser for local, national, and international Jewish charities. The editorial noted that in Detroit, some Jewish citizens suffered from financial hardship. Attempting to build bonds of support, the editorial remarked that Jewish citizens were “human, even as we are.” It urged Black Detroiters to contribute to the fund if they were able, calling the campaign a “worthy, humanitarian endeavor.”²⁴ This editorial demonstrated that the Black community was aware of the efforts Jewish Detroiters made toward improved race relations and worked to return the favor.

In addition to using their respective local newspapers to promote allyship and empathy, Jewish Americans and African Americans came together through the artistic talents of Black musician Gloster B. Current. A native of Indiana, Current,

²¹ “A Favorable Sign,” *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, August 22, 1924, 6.

²² “Will Talk on Negroes,” *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, February 5, 1926, 3.

²³ See, for example, “Un-Americanism in America,” *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, January 2, 1925, 4; “Will Talk on Negroes,” *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*; “Bay City Notes,” *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, September 3, 1927, 21.

²⁴ “Allied Jewish Drive,” *Detroit Tribune*, May 16, 1936, 4.



along with his family, settled in Detroit, where he attended high school. After continued studies in West Virginia, he returned to Detroit. In the 1930s he became active in the youth chapter of the Detroit branch of the NAACP and performed with his bands in the city. Throughout the 1930s Jewish organizations hired him to play at their events. For example, in December 1933, the Live Wires, a social organization, tapped Current and his band, the “Nightingales,” to perform at its sixth-annual dance.²⁵ Another group, the Satellites, recruited Current’s band to play at its event at the Union Guardian Building, calling his band “radio’s newest sensation.”²⁶ Both organizations advertised Current’s music in their event descriptions, perhaps as a way to entice people to come. This was a *very* important relationship. By hiring Current to perform and featuring his band in event advertisements, the Jewish community not only celebrated Current’s musical talents, but also treated him as a person welcome in Jewish spaces. This openness on the part of Detroit’s Jewish community likely introduced Current to some of the mores of Jewish life. It also showed him the strength of Jewish organizations and might have put him in close contact with prominent members of the community.

As the United States entered World War II, Current assumed an even more important role in Detroit when he was elected president of the local NAACP chapter. He was not only a talented musician, but also a savvy organizer. Under his leadership, Detroit developed the largest NAACP chapter in the country, with a total of 24,500 members by 1945.²⁷

The same year that Current became president of the Detroit Branch Chapter of the NAACP, Isaac Franck, a Jewish immigrant, became executive director of the Jewish Community Council in Detroit. Franck had been born in Zozov in what is now Ukraine. When the pogroms swept through his village, he and his family escaped, paddling across a frozen river in a canoe. Franck settled in New York City. After attending many universities, he came to the Midwest to pursue graduate work at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.²⁸ It was in Detroit where Isaac Franck deliberately reached out to the African American community. As an immigrant who bore the scars of anti-Semitism, Franck was sensitive to discrimination and embodied empathetic citizenship in his interactions with Detroit’s African American community.

²⁵ “Live Wires’ Sixth Dance on December 25,” *Detroit Jewish Chronicle and Legal Chronicle*, December 15, 1933, 6A.

²⁶ “Plan Floor Show at Satellite Dance, January 19,” *Detroit Jewish Chronicle and Legal Chronicle*, January 10, 1936, 2.

²⁷ Lawrence Van Gelder, “Gloster B. Current, 84, Leader Who Helped Steer N.A.A.C.P.,” *New York Times*, July 9, 1997, B-11.

²⁸ “Man of the Week,” *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, December 7, 1945.



Together, during this tumultuous time—rocked by the devastation of the Holocaust and fighting in Europe and racial violence in the United States—Franck and Current forged a pioneering interracial partnership in Detroit, determined to foster tolerance and empathy between the Black and Jewish communities. For example, in October 1942 the Detroit branch of the NAACP and the Jewish Community Council joined forces to finance two graduate fellowships at Wayne University (now known as Wayne State University), based around “relations between Jewish and negro groups.”²⁹

Even as the NAACP and Jewish Community Council came together to discuss advocacy and empathy, race relations in Detroit worsened, especially around employment and housing. For the first time, Black Detroiters, men and women, were able to find jobs in the city’s automobile plants. But they labored in close proximity to the thousands of white Southern migrants who streamed into the city and protested working with African Americans. These labor tensions were compounded by an issue of space, as Black and white Detroiters clamored for housing in the city’s tight landscape of racial segregation.³⁰

In June 1943 tensions exploded in a devastating race riot on Belle Isle, where as many as one hundred thousand people gathered on the false rumor that a Black man had raped a white woman. Nine white people died, but 25 African Americans also perished, some at the hands of white police officers. In the aftermath of the race riot, the Detroit mayor appointed an interracial committee to examine race relations in the city. The Jewish community leapt to speak out. In July 1943 Claude A. Benjamin, Chairman of the Coordinating Committee of Jewish Organizations, issued a statement that the Jewish community was “gravely concerned over the violent disturbance in race relationships, which have recently occurred in Detroit and elsewhere. These outbreaks violate the democratic way of life and hamper the successful prosecution of the war effort. . . .”³¹

Within days of the devastating race riot, the Jewish community in Detroit also held a summit featuring Isaac Franck as speaker.³² Here, the Jewish community balanced an important discussion of property damage sustained by Jewish businesses with a desire to understand the root causes of the riot. For example, Aaron Rosenberg and Samuel Liberman, representatives from the East Side Merchants’ Association, discussed the fact that their stores, located in Black

²⁹ “Inter-Group Relations Fellowships Established at Wayne University,” *Detroit Jewish Chronicle and Legal Chronicle*, October 23, 1942, 3.

³⁰ Thomas J. Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 25-26.

³¹ “Jews Express Grave Concern over Detroit Racial Strife,” *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), July 2, 1943.

³² “Will Discuss Race Relations,” *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), July 9, 1943, 11.



neighborhoods, were damaged by the riots. But then, Franck addressed the riots in a comprehensive way, explaining how structural patterns of discrimination against African Americans contributed to racial inequality.³³ Franck's ability to offer empathy and support for Black Detroiters in this charged moment mirrored the reactions of Jewish immigrants who sided with Black riders on buses. This meeting demonstrated the complexities of the Black-Jewish alliance in Detroit: Jewish merchants operating businesses in Black neighborhoods were vulnerable, especially in moments of tension. Yet, the Jewish community's efforts to understand the causes of the riot indicate that many Jews wanted to improve race relations in the city, even at a personal cost for those who sustained damages.

In the aftermath of the race riot, Franck and Current worked to maintain their interracial relationship. The findings produced by recipients of the Black-Jewish graduate fellowships at Wayne University poured in and helped to dispel many falsehoods the groups held about each other.³⁴ Additionally, Franck organized a book club at the Jewish Community Council. On two occasions, he invited Current to lead the discussion on books related to the Black experience. In 1944 the club read Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*, a book on lynching.³⁵ And one year later members read Richard Wright's *Black Boy*.³⁶ The Jewish Community Council's invitation to Current to come into its space and recognition of his authority as an expert speak volumes about Jewish tolerance and empathy for the cause of Black civil rights.

Jewish Americans and African Americans also joined other faith groups to participate in interracial activities in the city. For example, in February 1945 the Jewish Community Council held an event at Central Methodist Church, where Current presented a talk entitled, "Crucial Concerns of the Negro." Both a Christian soloist and a Jewish cantor sang.³⁷

When World War II ended, Franck and Current continued to work on strengthening the Black-Jewish alliance. In 1946 the Jewish Community Council convened a conference at the famous Book Cadillac Hotel to consider whether Jewish and African American groups should press for a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) ordinance for Detroit. Both Franck and Current spoke

³³ "William Hordes Reports," *Detroit Jewish Chronicle and Legal Chronicle*, July 9, 1943, 12.

³⁴ "Permanent FEPC Asked by Jewish Community Council," *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), November 3, 1944, 21.

³⁵ "Center Activities," *Detroit Jewish Chronicle and Legal Chronicle*, October 20, 1944, 3.

³⁶ "Gloster Current to Review 'Black Boy' Next Thursday," *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), October 26, 1945.

³⁷ "Shaarey Zedek Joins Program at Central Methodist," *Detroit Jewish Chronicle and Legal Chronicle*, February 16, 1945, 5.



in favor of the resolution. Even though Jewish Americans and African Americans did not face the same economic circumstances or dimensions of prejudice and intolerance, they both identified the FEPC as a crucial instrument in preventing employment discrimination.

And in 1947 Jewish Americans and African Americans united to form the Midtown Neighborhood Council (MNC) in Detroit. A few months earlier, the Jewish Community Council had convened a meeting at the Hutchinson School, stressing the importance of “good neighborliness” and “cooperation.” The MNC was touted as a coalition between African Americans and Jewish Americans “working for the good of the neighborhood that they share.”³⁸

The alliance that Current and Franck forged was deeply important, not only for Black-Jewish relations in Detroit, but also for the Jewish connections to the postwar Black freedom struggle. Gloster B. Current first met Jewish citizens in Detroit as a musician. Performing at their fundraisers, Current appears to have been treated as a talented musician and an exciting performer. This musical relationship formed the basis for a political connection. When Franck became head of the Community Council, he crafted an important alliance with Current. It was the empathy in Detroit’s Jewish community—whether in reporting on Black matters in its local paper, inviting Current to perform at fundraisers, or banding together with Current to study Black-Jewish relations—that created a unique kind of interracial and inter-faith community in Detroit.

In the aftermath of World War II, civil rights organizations recruited both Franck and Current to leave Detroit and serve in more prominent positions in Washington, DC, and New York. Franck became executive vice president of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington. When the city of Washington was set ablaze in the aftermath of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination in 1968, Franck drew on his expertise from the 1943 Detroit race riot to assist the community and promote tolerance.³⁹ And in 1946 the national office of the NAACP tapped Gloster B. Current to become the director of branches in New York City. In this capacity, Current would connect his time with the Detroit Jewish community to the pressing civil rights matters that reached his desk.

Justice for Isaac Woodard: The Detroit Jewish Connection

During World War II, Black soldiers suffered all types of discrimination, especially in the training camps that were disproportionately located in the South. White bus drivers shot and killed at least three Black soldiers over bus conflicts:

³⁸ “Varied Groups Join to Tackle Problems,” *Detroit Tribune*, November 22, 1947, 1.

³⁹ Joseph D. Whitaker, “Former Jewish Council Official Isaac Franck,” *Washington Post*, May 15, 1985.



Henry Williams (1942), Edward Green (1944), and Booker T. Spicely (1944). In case after case, it was clear that states would decline to punish white police officers and bus drivers for their racial violence.

Even though the war ended, the violence persisted. In June 1946 Isaac Woodard, a 26-year-old soldier from New York, was discharged from Camp Gordon in Georgia and boarded a Greyhound bus headed for South Carolina to see his wife. On the bus, Woodard protested the segregated seating arrangement to the white bus driver, who evicted him from the vehicle. The driver immediately handed Woodard over to a white police officer, Lynwood Shull, who beat him mercilessly and gouged out both of his eyeballs. Woodard survived the attack, but his vision loss became a compelling symbol of the brutality of white bus drivers and officers who policed soldiers in the Jim Crow South.⁴⁰

Once newspapers began to report the assault, leaders at the NAACP made Woodard the public face of Jim Crow violence. Only a few months into his new position in New York, Gloster Current faced a major challenge: how to galvanize public attention toward the brutality of the Woodard case. In a revealing memo, Current outlined the organization's public relations strategy. Current recommended that the NAACP mobilize veterans, labor unions, civic groups, and social organizations. Tellingly, he listed only one religious community to contact: Jews. At this moment, Jewish Americans composed 3.7 percent of the US population, one of the country's smallest religious communities. Yet they were the key ally Current identified in the fight to secure justice for Woodard.⁴¹ And it was precisely Current's work with Jewish activists in Detroit that prompted his choice.

As a community, Jews were reeling from the Holocaust, where six million people were murdered at the hands of the totalitarian Nazi regime. Jewish Americans in the United States lost family members, former neighbors, and entire ancestral communities. This devastation unequivocally demonstrated the dangerous consequences of anti-Semitism and led to a transformation in Jewish-American politics in several ways. First, Jewish organizations expanded. The financial coffers and membership rosters of Jewish civil rights groups, including the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Congress, grew as Jewish Americans looked to these organizations to protect their civil rights in the United States. In particular, Jewish organizations recognized the fragility of anti-discrimination laws in the United States and lent their voices in support of a permanent FEPC. The disturbing presence of anti-Semitism in fueling the

⁴⁰ Gergel, *Unexamined Courage: The Blinding of Sgt. Isaac Woodard*.

⁴¹ Memo to Mrs. Waring from Mr. Current, October 17, 1946, NAACP Papers, Part II, Series B, Box 219, Folder 3, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as NAACP-LC).



Holocaust imbued Jewish Americans with authority to speak out about intolerance and injustice at home.⁴² Scholars have argued that the Holocaust only strengthened the Black-Jewish alliance in the United States. This connection is discernable in the ways newly energized Jewish organizations and citizens responded with alacrity and empathy to the assault of Isaac Woodard.⁴³

Following Current's call for Jewish solidarity, letters of support poured into the NAACP offices. Dozens of individuals and organizations publicly mourned this American tragedy, including the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, which was largely composed of Jewish women.⁴⁴ Mr. B. Harper, a representative of the American Jewish Council of New York, wrote that his organization was dedicated to working with the NAACP and would alert "all members and friends."⁴⁵ Even though some scholars argue that Northern Jewish citizens championed causes in the postwar period that were only tangentially beneficial to African Americans, the record of indignation for Woodard's case—Southern, Northern, and overall, American—disputes this claim.⁴⁶

Not only did Jewish Americans denounce the brutality through their organizations, but individual citizens also offered personal lamentations. In particular, leftist Jewish women spoke out about the Woodard case and sent messages to the NAACP and the federal government tinged with implicit and explicit references to the Holocaust and the dangers of white supremacy in the United States. In June 1946 Eva Robin, a Russian Jewish immigrant and prominent member of leftist organizations, wrote a scathing letter to the Department of Justice. Robin told the Attorney General that she "burned with indignation" about Woodard's assault. She remarked that "Hitler is dead," but his "spirit" carried on with Southern white supremacy, which she labeled an act of terrorism. She ended the letter by noting that she was a "loyal citizen" of the United States and that two of her children had personally served as medics in the war.⁴⁷ Robin might have lost relatives in the

⁴² Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 74-75; Corwin Berman, *Metropolitan Jews*, 5-6.

⁴³ Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters*, 116.

⁴⁴ "National Organizations to Plan Joint Action against Wave of Terror in South," August 8, 1946, NAACP Papers, Part II, Series B, Box 219, Folder 10, NAACP-LC.

⁴⁵ "The Case of Isaac Woodard," July 24, 1946, in NAACP Papers, Part II, Series B, Box 219, Folder 2, NAACP-LC.

⁴⁶ Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion*, 175.

⁴⁷ Letter from Eva Robin, New York City, to Department of Justice, Washington, DC, July 10, 1946, NAACP Papers, Part II, Series B, Box 219, Folder 2, NAACP-LC. For evidence of Robin's activism, see "Labor Can Expect No New Laws Now, Arnold Says Here," *New York Times*, January 28, 1940, 1; for information on Robin and her family, see *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, Wilmington City, Delaware, Enumeration District 79, Sheet 4B.



Holocaust. By bravely naming Hitler and connecting his atrocities with Southern white supremacy, Robin articulated this discourse of empathetic citizenship.

Two months later, Ethel S. Epstein, an attorney who worked as the labor secretary for New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, donated \$250 for Woodard's legal defense, a significant contribution. Epstein asserted that the "blame" for Woodard's brutality must be "shared by the whole nation."⁴⁸ Racism and prejudice were not simply isolated acts, but rather a burden the entire country needed to overcome.

At a rally of 31,000 for Woodard's defense at New York's Lewisohn Stadium, Jewish actress Hilda Strouse Vaughn stated that the crowd size was a reflection of the tragedy: "We hope that Isaac Woodard's loss of vision may give us a little extra vision."⁴⁹ Indeed, it was the Black-Jewish alliance in Detroit that inspired Gloster B. Current and NAACP leaders to seek Jewish support for Woodard. This Detroit connection reveals how the chance encounters between Current and Jewish communities in the 1930s ultimately led to the Jewish outpouring of support for Woodard in the wake of the Holocaust.

Woodard toured the country, speaking about his experiences with racial violence. In November 1946 he spoke before a packed audience of two thousand people at the Bethel A.M.E. Church in Detroit. Newspaper articles noted that it was a "mixed" audience, and surely composed of many Jewish people, including prominent local civil rights leaders. In his speech, Woodard warned that his assault "could happen here too." For African Americans and Jewish Americans shaken by the racial violence and trauma of World War II, those words were prophetic.⁵⁰ For Current, bringing the story of Woodard home to Detroit showed the devastating effects of racial violence to the NAACP chapter he had helped to build.

Despite so many pleas for justice, Woodard never received any. An all-white jury in South Carolina deliberated for a mere 30 minutes before acquitting Officer Lynwood Shull of all charges, except his admission that he had attacked Woodard. The acquittal led Harry Truman to establish the President's Committee on Civil Rights and appoint an interracial group of fifteen people to serve on it, including Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn. In the 1960s when Jewish Freedom Riders were jailed for their protests, Gittelsohn implored his fellow Southern rabbis to visit with the activists. As someone familiar with the Woodard case, Gittelsohn

⁴⁸ "Nation Aroused Over Blinding of Negro Vet," *Chicago Defender*, July 27, 1946, 1.

⁴⁹ "31,000 at Woodard Rally, Mayor Attacks Brutality," undated and unknown clipping, in NAACP Papers, Part II, Series B, Box 219, Folder 1, NAACP-LC.

⁵⁰ "Woodard and Marshall Move Large Audience in Bethel Mass Meeting," *Detroit Tribune*, December 7, 1946, 1.



was aware of two important facts. First, it was nearly impossible for African Americans, and sometimes, their white allies, to receive justice in the Jim Crow South. And second, protests over bus segregation could be incredibly violent. As a Jewish American, Gittelsohn's actions for bus integration, stretching from the Isaac Woodard assault to the Freedom Rides in the 1960s, reveals the long history of Jewish support on this issue.⁵¹

Conclusion

From 1927 to 1947, Jewish immigrants in Chicago, Detroit, and other cities expressed empathetic citizenship toward African Americans. Risking their lives and, potentially, their livelihoods, Jewish immigrants, such as tailor Samuel S. Siegel, Judge Michael Feinberg, and community activist Isaac Franck, bore witness to discrimination and critiqued racial segregation and racism at a time when there was not a nationally coordinated Black freedom struggle. Jewish men and women wove solidarity with the Black freedom movement into their Americanization process.

The Jewish community in Detroit embodied this spirit of empathetic citizenship, especially in its treatment of civil rights activist Gloster B. Current. At a time when white Detroiters refused to allow African Americans to move into their neighborhoods, the Jewish community brought Current into its dances, its synagogues, and the reading room of its Community Council. As a Black man, Current bore witness to Jewish Detroiters who denounced lynching, worked to understand the underlying causes of the 1943 race riot, pressed for a permanent FEPC, and promoted mutual tolerance between Black and Jewish communities. When he left Detroit for New York in 1946, Current was profoundly shaped by this Black-Jewish alliance. He drew inspiration from this partnership to seek justice for Isaac Woodard, but ultimately, it likely shaped much of the work he did for civil rights for the next three decades. The example of Black-Jewish cooperation forged in Detroit—especially in the partnership between Current and Franck—laid an important foundation for this iconic alliance in the postwar era. As the United States enters a new phase of social justice in the era of Black Lives Matter, pressing back to these moments of tolerance in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s is not only illuminating, but also inspiring for this next chapter of Black-Jewish solidarity.

⁵¹ Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion*, 177.



FEATURE ARTICLE

Soupy Sales' Jewish and Motor City Connections¹

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When Soupy Sales left Detroit in 1961 after seven years on WXYZ-TV Channel 7, he was the highest paid local television personality and one of the most well-known and beloved celebrities in town. His daytime television programs in the early morning and at noon had an enormous and devoted following. The latter, *Lunch with Soupy Sales*, was nationally syndicated on ABC on Saturdays, starting in the fall of 1959. His late evening program, *Soupy's On*, featured everything from renowned jazz artists to pop singers to satirical skits. During his time in Detroit, from 1953 through 1960, Sales built on his Jewish social and cultural connections and integrated into his on-air personality the *shticks* of early television's influential Jewish comedians, becoming one of the most legendary entertainers in Detroit history.

This article explores how Sales drew upon his family background and Jewish roots to develop his public persona that took hold during his seven years in Detroit. The article contrasts Sales' financial success in the Motor City in the 1950s with the difficulties many African American residents encountered as a result of racial discrimination. It also considers how the influence of early Jewish television comedians, specifically Milton Berle and Sid Caesar, provided a cultural context for Sales' brand of humor and contributed to his success and celebrity status, which resonated in Detroit long after he left in 1961.

Childhood Memories and Comedic Confabulations

Born on January 8, 1926, in Franklinton, North Carolina, to Irving and Sadie (Berman) Supman, Milton Supman would begin his 27-year journey to becoming the television and public persona known as "Soupy Sales." In 1953, shortly after his arrival in Detroit, Supman first appeared as Sales. The name stuck, remaining with

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¹ This article is based on my book, *Soupy Sales and the Detroit Experience: Manufacturing a Television Personality* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021).





Figure 1: During his time in Detroit from 1953 through 1960, comedian Soupy Sales, born Milton Supman, achieved celebrity status performing in popular television shows, including Lunch with Soupy Sales. (The Soupy Sales Show, Phillip March Studios, 1961, record album back cover. JHSM collections.)

him until his death in New York City on October 22, 2009. Indeed, Soupy Sales was, in certain respects, as much a manufactured product as any other that rolled off the assembly lines in the Motor City, albeit less mechanical and standardized and more organic and idiosyncratic. Tracing the physical and psychological paths Milton Supman traversed in becoming Soupy Sales reveals the biographical, historical, and social contexts for his Detroit debut.

The physical path is, perhaps, easier to demarcate than the psychological one. Leaving his birthplace in North Carolina after the death of his father in 1931



and remarriage of his mother in 1934, Supman accompanied his mother and new stepfather, Felix Goldstein, to Huntington, West Virginia. Following his graduation from high school in Huntington, he enlisted in the navy in 1943 at age seventeen. Like millions of other young men during World War II, he was uprooted from his small-town upbringing and exposed to a wider world, punctuated by the terrors of the war in the Pacific. Returning to Huntington after the war, he took advantage of the GI Bill to continue his education at Marshall College (now Marshall University) in Huntington. From there, he pursued a career in radio and television that took him first to Cincinnati from 1950 to 1951, and then to Cleveland from 1951 to 1953, before landing in Detroit in 1953 to emerge as the television personality known as “Soupy Sales.”

However, it is the psychological passages he navigated in becoming his public persona that provide intriguing insights into the first 27 years of Sales' life. As noted by psychologist Dan McAdams, life stories “are based on biographical facts, but they go considerably beyond the facts as people selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both the past and future to construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences.”² For Sales, in particular, the retelling of his life story was more than an effort to “interpret certain memories as self-defining.”³ He deployed some of those recollections, including manufactured ones, specifically to entertain and impress his audience.

Memories, as innumerable social psychologists and cognitive scientists have confirmed, are fallible. Indeed, the well-known neurologist and author, Oliver Sacks, contends that our “earliest memories, in particular, are susceptible to ‘transference’ from what one actually experienced to something profoundly significant but without any experiential foundation.”⁴ This is especially relevant in tracking the earliest recollections of the young Milton Supman in North Carolina and discerning the difference between what Sacks terms “narrative truth” as opposed to “historical truth.”⁵

In trying to decipher the distinctions between the narrative and historical truths of Sales' earliest memories, I rely on his memoir, *Soupy Sez!: My Zany Life and Times*, co-authored by Charles Salzberg.⁶ Many of these stories are replicated, like rehearsed scripts, in other published and taped interviews with Sales. As Salzberg told me in an email exchange on January 26, 2020, Sales'

² Dan McAdams, “The Psychology of Life Stories,” *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2001): 101, <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100>.

³ McAdams, “The Psychology of Life Stories,” 110.

⁴ Oliver Sacks, *The River of Consciousness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 105.

⁵ Sacks, *River of Consciousness*, 119.

⁶ Soupy Sales and Charles Salzberg, *Soupy Sez!: My Zany Life and Times* (New York: M. Evans and Co., 2001).



debilitated condition and evident physical impairments at the age of 74 required Salzberg to prompt Sales during the writing of the memoir and to interview friends and family to fill in the gaps. Given that Sales was not diagnosed with a cognitive impairment at the time, it is likely the normal functioning of his memory produced distortions, pseudo-reminiscences, and confabulations.⁷ My intention in attempting to establish the historical truth underlying the distortions and confabulations in Sales' memoir is not to challenge the authenticity of his narrative truth; rather, it is to provide a more complete historical, social, and cultural context within which his life stories resonate, especially concerning his Jewish connections.

When looking back at his early years, Sales laced his recollections with jokes and what I would call comedic confabulations: deliberate efforts to translate mundane or traumatic biographical moments into amusing vignettes to get a laugh from an audience. In effect, Sales' comedic confabulations became a self-manufacturing process for humorous purposes. For example, he jokingly recounted that his birth in Franklinton, North Carolina, was "primarily because I wanted to be near my mother."⁸ This was also probably true for his older brothers, Leonard, born in 1918, and Jack, born in 1920. (Another brother, born in 1916, died the same year Jack was born.) The brothers were given nicknames: for Leonard it was "Hambone" (oy, hardly Kosher!), for Jack it was "Chickenbone," and for Sales, the leftover seemed to be "Soupman," later to become "Suppy Supman," and finally, "Soupy."⁹

While Sales kidded about wanting "to be near his mother" for his birth, he divulged nothing about either parent's background in his memoir. A limited online search of genealogy sites revealed the bare outlines of Sales' family history. His father, Irving Supman, was born in Hungary in 1890 and immigrated to the United States with his family. His mother, Sadie Berman, was born in Baltimore in 1897 to Etta and Max Berman, both from Russia and part of the massive wave of Jewish immigrants arriving in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sales' mother and father met and married in Baltimore, but moved to North Carolina after World War I, following Irving Supman's brother for better economic opportunities. When Irving Supman died on September 23, 1931, at the age of 41, his body was returned to Baltimore and buried in the B'nai Israel Congregation Cemetery.

⁷ Daniel L. Schacter et al., "Memory Distortion: An Adaptive Strategy," *Trends in Cognitive Science* 15, no. 10 (2011): 467-74, <https://www-clinicalkey-com.proxy.lib.wayne.edu/#!/content/journal/1-s2.0-S1364661311001744>; Armin Schneider, *The Confabulating Mind: How the Brain Creates Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁸ Sales, *Soupy Sez!*, 13.

⁹ Sales, *Soupy Sez!*, 14.





Figure 2: Sadie (Berman) Supman and her sons: (left to right) Jack, Milton (later known as Soupy Sales), and Leonard, circa 1926. (Courtesy of Kathy O'Connell.)

Irving and Sadie Supman settled in the small town of Franklinton, with a population somewhere between 1,200 and 1,500 and nary another Jewish person in sight. They established a dry goods store called the “Wonder Department Store.” If you are wondering why this Jewish couple would move to a remote part of North Carolina to begin a dry goods business, Sales did not supply an answer. He did, however, offer some jocular cultural commentary from his retrospective comedic lens, noting “if it weren’t for bowling, Franklinton wouldn’t have any culture at all,” and “the main street ran through a car wash.”¹⁰

But it was the pervasive prejudice that animated Sales’ recollections in his memoir of his time in North Carolina, linking the discrimination to his later reading of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and his identification with the kids in that novel. Although recounting the grim racist environment of this period, Sales, nonetheless, constructed a comedic confabulation to mitigate the prejudice he and his family may have encountered. Joking that

¹⁰ Sales, *Soupy Sez!*, 14, 19.



his parents sold the Ku Klux Klan its sheets,¹¹ Sales returned again and again throughout his life to this comedic confabulation, including in his 1986 television interview with fellow comedian, Robert Klein.¹² Stretching even the meaning of narrative truth, Sales' references to the KKK contradict many of the historical truths about its resurgence after World War I and through the early to mid-1920s.¹³

The so-called second coming of the KKK in the early 1920s was not limited to the South. The KKK exerted tremendous political and cultural influence in midwestern states, like Indiana; western states, like Colorado and Oregon; and cities throughout those regions. In Detroit there were massive rallies of tens of thousands of KKK members whose 1924 contender for mayor initially won the election as a write-in candidate before losing in a recount. Amid renewed white supremacy, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism—the latter particularly pernicious in creating the social-psychological conditions experienced by the young Sales—the KKK actually exhausted its dominant influence outside the South by the time Milton Supman was born in 1926. Even in Franklinton, North Carolina, there were no evident chapters of the KKK. This did not, however, diminish the racist and anti-Semitic atmosphere surrounding Sales and his family.

At variance with Sales' comedic confabulation about his family selling the KKK its sheets, Klansmen and other anti-Semites like Henry Ford—and his notorious Michigan-based newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*—targeted Jews. According to historian Linda Gordon, “Jews functioned in Klan discourse to resolve contradictory attitudes towards capitalism and commercialism—by projecting lust for money onto ‘the Jew,’ Klansmen could adjudge their own profit-seeking as honorable.”¹⁴ The Klan's monetary endeavors included the manufacturing of costumes: KKK members were required to purchase their outfits through the organization.¹⁵ So, Sales' obvious attempt at comedy when it came to the KKK and his family was one of those manufactured confabulations that relied upon the incongruity factor (a significant feature of any comedian's humor) while relieving, perhaps, some painful memories from his childhood.

¹¹ Sales, *Soupy Sez!*, 15.

¹² “Robert Klein Time with Soupy Sales,” 1986, YouTube Video, Posted November 14, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-y80vH8Tmk>.

¹³ Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright, 2017); Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Gordon, *Second Coming of the KKK*, 49-54, 61.

¹⁵ Gordon, *Second Coming of the KKK*, 66.



Arrival in Detroit

When the 27-year-old Soupy Supman arrived in Detroit in the spring of 1953, his prior experiences in commercial television in Cincinnati and Cleveland only partially prepared him for his multiple programming roles at WXYZ-TV, the local ABC affiliate. The station's general manager, John Pival, recalled seeing Sales perform stand-up comedy in Cincinnati and invited him to audition. The audition

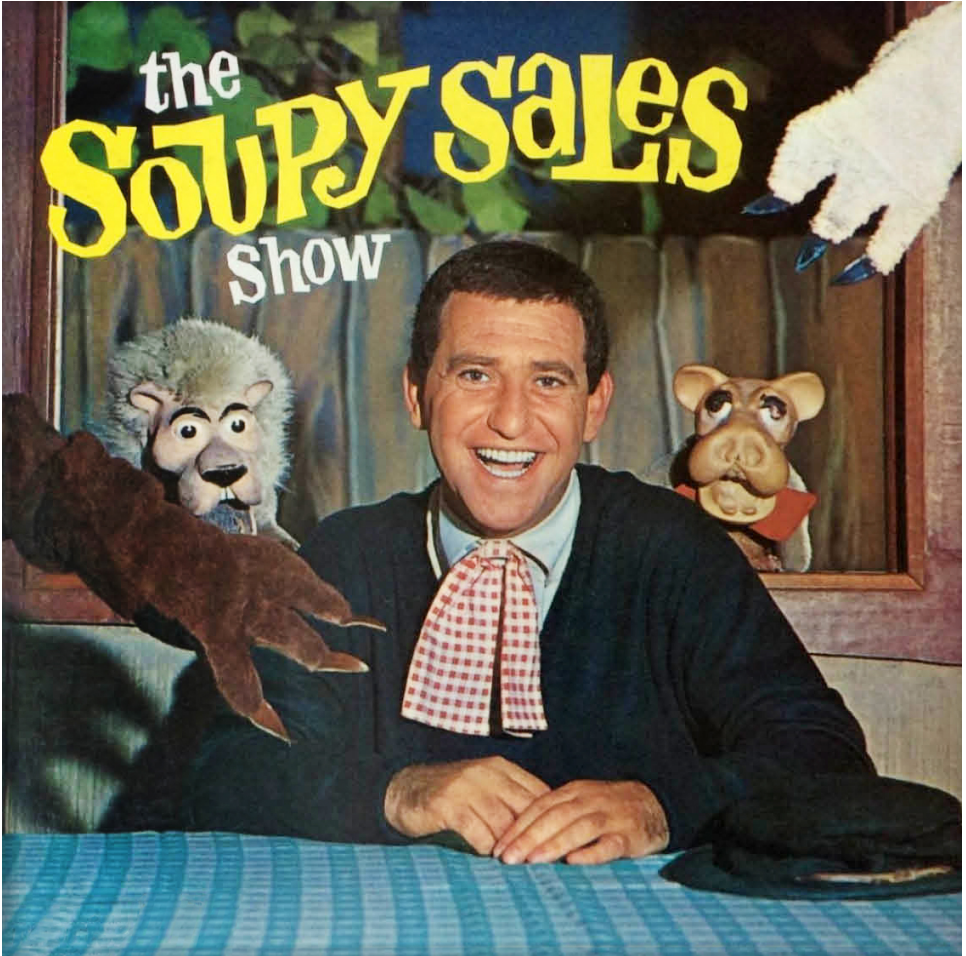


Figure 3: Sales' lunchtime show, 12 O'Clock Comics, later renamed Lunch with Soupy Sales and then The Soup Sales Show, was filmed in Detroit from 1953 through 1960, before moving to Los Angeles, and finally, New York, where it ended its run in 1966. The immensely popular children's comedy-sketch show included live performers as well as the puppets pictured here with Sales: (left to right) Black Tooth (represented by a dark paw with white claws), Pookie the Lion, Hippy the Hippo, and White Fang (represented by a white paw with black claws). (The Soupy Sales Show, Phillip March Studios, 1961, record album front cover. JHSM collections.)



became, in effect, a rehearsal for a kids' show that would air at noon five days a week.¹⁶ According to Sales, "John Pival wanted a show where I'd have lunch with the kids every day. I didn't have any experience working with kids . . . but then again, there weren't actually going to be any kids on the show, just watching it."¹⁷ And watch it they did! In the process, Sales and his *Lunch with Soupy Sales* (known during the first few years as *12 O'Clock Comics*) would become immensely popular with youngsters in the Motor City, and eventually, around the country after gaining national syndication in 1959.

Following his arrival in Detroit, Sales temporarily settled in 1953 in a duplex on Schaefer Road on the city's west side.¹⁸ When his wife and young son joined him, they resided until 1958 in Jewish neighborhoods in West and Northwest Detroit.

The African American Experience in 1950s Detroit

In 1953, the same year Sales took up residence in Detroit, the Woodsons, an African American family, moved to an all-white neighborhood in the city. They faced a hostile and uninviting reception in the form of a letter telling them to "get off this street or we will blow you off." A few days later, someone shot at the front door of their new home. In the aftermath of such threats and actual violence, a spokesman for the local neighborhood association made them an offer they could not refuse: accepting \$1,000 more than they had paid for their house, the Woodsons fled the inhospitable and potentially deadly environment.¹⁹ What they experienced in their attempt to become the lone Black family in an all-white neighborhood was replicated throughout Detroit in the 1950s.²⁰

The starkly contrasting experiences of the Sales and Woodson families are part of the story of the Motor City in the 1950s. For Sales, Detroit did, indeed, represent a "Mecca," the place where he attained fame and success.²¹ From the WXYZ-TV studios atop the stately Maccabees Building in Midtown Detroit, Sales could look out at a bustling metropolis. With its peak population in 1950 of over 1.8 million, Detroit laid claim to being the fourth largest city in the United States. Along the central spine of Woodward Avenue were magnificent movie

¹⁶ Gordon Castelnero, *TV Land Detroit* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 12-13.

¹⁷ Sales, *Soupy Sez!*, 53.

¹⁸ Castelnero, *TV Land Detroit*, 14.

¹⁹ Nicola Pizzolato, *Challenging Global Capitalism: Labor, Migration, Radical Struggle, and Urban Change in Detroit and Turin* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²⁰ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 209-58.

²¹ Sales, *Soupy Sez!*, 53.



palaces like the Palms and the Michigan Theatre where Sales would eventually entertain his youthful fans on Saturday mornings. Thousands and thousands of single-family bungalows radiated out on the west and east sides of the city, inhabited by blue-collar workers and a growing middle class whose kids would become the inveterate viewers of Sales' noon program.

But for countless others, especially African Americans, the Motor City was a "mirage," an illusory refuge from discrimination.²² African Americans were excluded from owning many single-family homes not only because of discriminatory real estate practices and the prejudices of white neighborhood associations, but also because of local and national governmental policies. Even with the Supreme Court's 1948 ruling in *Shelley v. Kramer* declaring racial covenants unconstitutional,²³ deed restrictions often remained in place, enforced by realtors, bankers, and white homeowners. As civil rights and community leader Arthur Johnson recalls in his memoir:

[The *Shelley* decision was] on paper . . . a victory against housing segregation; in practice, however, things were different. Authorities in Detroit (meaning those headed by racist Mayor Albert Cobo, a conservative Republican who ruled the city from 1950-1957) refused to enforce the Supreme Court decision. Detroit newspapers wrote detailed articles instructing and encouraging white homeowners to circumvent the law and keep blacks out.²⁴

As a consequence, while the number of private housing units in Detroit expanded during the late '40s and early '50s, African Americans, who by the mid-'50s constituted almost a quarter of the city's population, were limited to little more than one to two percent of them.²⁵

Connecting with Detroit's Jewish Community

Although close to 80 percent of Jewish families still lived within Detroit's city limits in the late 1950s, many others had moved to nearby suburbs.²⁶ By 1958, with a contract topping \$100,000 (at least twenty times the annual amount the average Detroiter then earned), Sales and his family moved to the affluent

²² For an overview of the long struggle of African Americans to find refuge and build viable and valuable lives in the city, see Herb Boyd, *Black Detroit: A People's History of Self-Determination* (New York: Amistad, 2017).

²³ *Shelley v. Kramer*, 334 US 1 (1948).

²⁴ Arthur L. Johnson, *Race and Remembrance* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 43.

²⁵ Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 43.

²⁶ Lila Corwin Berman, *Metropolitan Jews: Politics, Race, and Religion in Postwar Detroit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 39; Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 26.



suburb of Grosse Pointe, which was known for its discriminatory housing practices against not only people of color but also Jews. However, regardless of where he lived, Sales remained engaged with the Jewish community. From the fall of 1953 through the fall of 1959, he served as master of ceremonies or special guest at a number of events sponsored by the Jewish community. These included providing the entertainment for a Hanukkah party in 1953 sponsored by several local Jewish War Veterans posts, appearing at a fundraiser supported by Jewish War Veterans for Children's Hospital of Michigan in the summer of 1954, appearing at a children's party sponsored by Temple Israel's Men's Club in the fall of 1954, working with PTAs at schools with large Jewish-student populations, and serving alongside Rube Weiss from the *Soupy's On* show on a panel titled "What Makes it Funny" at the Jewish Community Center in Northwest Detroit in October 1959.²⁷

Another fascinating aspect of Sales' connections to the Jewish community was the number of "sightings" of Sales in Northwest Detroit neighborhoods during the mid-1950s. Among my Jewish interviewees, stories of sightings abounded. For example, Barry Hoffman maintained that when he and his family would eat dinner at Darby's, an upscale Jewish deli on 7 Mile near Wyoming in Northwest Detroit, he would see Sales greeting people as they came through the door. Any number of other interviewees claimed that Sales lived just a few blocks away from their homes in the Jewish neighborhoods. One person insisted he saw Sales drive by in a limousine. "Soupy sightings" attained apocryphal status, almost equaling those of Elvis Presley. The difference, of course, was that Elvis sightings occurred after he passed away while Sales was sighted during his heyday in the Motor City.

The Impact of Early Television's Jewish Comedians

The influence of early television's preeminent Jewish comics on Sales' humor strengthened the connections Sales formed with Detroit's Jewish community during his time on WXYZ-TV. In particular, Milton Berle's and Sid Caesar's reinterpretation of stand-up comedy routines and vaudeville *shticks* in their television shows impacted Sales' own brand of comedy.

Milton Berle

Milton Berle, born Mendel Berlinger in 1908, was part of a large cohort of comedians born and raised in New York City. Those performers, including George Burns, Sid Caesar, and Phil Silvers, would have a major effect on television

²⁷ "Chaplin's Comedies on Center Film Program," *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), October 16, 1959, 17.



comedy shows during the 1950s. Berle, like the others, sharpened his comedic skills in burlesque, acting in variety shows in theaters and radio during the 1930s and 1940s. He incorporated this experience into his hit NBC television comedy-variety show, *Texaco Star Theater*, beginning in 1948. The Tuesday-night show was the most watched program on television but was the subject of numerous criticisms of “vulgarity.”²⁸ According to a study of the impact of Berle’s TV show in Detroit, “water levels dropped in the city’s reservoir immediately after the show when the viewers rushed to their bathrooms.”²⁹ As one columnist noted, “Berle’s rapid gags, broad clowning, versatility, and hard work added up to video’s first smash hit.”³⁰

Acting as master of ceremonies and comedic prankster throughout the show, Berle was not unlike the Jewish jesters, known in Yiddish as *tumblers*, who oversaw entertainment at the Borscht Belt resorts in the Catskills frequented by New York City Jews.³¹ In her incisive study of Jewish humor throughout the ages and in different cultures, Ruth Wisse identified the Borscht Belt as “an incubator of a new form of entertainment that gradually emerged from its formative center into the US mainstream and beyond.”³² While Sales did not perform at Borscht Belt resorts, he, like other Jewish comics, was influenced by it.

Berle reveled in Yiddish and Jewish humor, using them throughout his early shows on *Texaco Star Theater*. For example, in one bit he exclaimed, “I’m *shvitzing* in here,” referring to himself sweating in his outfit. Although Sales avoided Yiddish, perhaps as a consequence of his lack of exposure to it during childhood and his particular audiences, he drew from Berle’s vaudeville routines, including slapstick pranks, in creating his television persona. Particularly influential was “[Berle’s] awkward physicality and psychological vulnerability expressed through his self-deprecating humor.”³³ In addition, there were links between the gags performed on Berle’s and Sales’ shows. For example, Berle would be

²⁸ Susan Murray, *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars: Early Television and Broadcast Stardom* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 55-58; Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 145-50.

²⁹ Lawrence Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 130.

³⁰ Quoted in Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 131.

³¹ Arthur Asa Berger, *Jewish jesters: A Study in American Popular Comedy* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2001), 58; Rick DesRochers, *The Comic Offense from Vaudeville to Contemporary Comedy* (New York: Bloomsbury Academy, 2013), 22-23; Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), 23-29.

³² Ruth R. Wisse, *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 126.

³³ Murray, *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars*, 68.



pummeled with a giant powder puff whenever anyone called out “makeup,”³⁴ while Sales often took a pie in the face. Similarly, Berle’s mugging through being drenched with seltzer may have provided the inspiration for Sales’ bit where he was doused with a stream of water whenever he pulled a plug from a wall with the sign, “Do Not Touch.”

There were other common threads. At times both played directly to the camera, although Berle typically was in costume for his mugging close-ups. Both performed live, although Berle appeared in front of a large audience while Sales’ audience consisted of the stagehands on the WXYZ-TV set. Both also dispensed advice on their shows. Berle’s “Uncle Miltie” administered advice to kids, urging them to be “good little boys and girls.”³⁵ Sales, who seemed less like a crazy uncle than a silly older brother, gave advice in the form of “Soupy’s Words of Wisdom.”

Viewers in urban areas made up a sizable segment of Berle’s audience from 1949 to 1952. Some estimates suggest that as much as 35 percent resided in New York City.³⁶ According to conservative critics, “vaudeville humor did not appeal to Midwestern audiences.” By 1953 Texaco withdrew its sponsorship of Berle’s show, ultimately resulting in its cancellation in 1955.³⁷ Even more malicious, with perhaps a tinge of anti-Semitism, radio commentator Paul Harvey criticized television broadcasts that emanated from New York City for “contaminating an awful lot of fresh air.” For Harvey, the culprits were “New York comedians” who spread a “virus” that had to be expunged.³⁸

Sid Caesar

One of those other viral New York comedians who “infected” the television airwaves and popular culture around the country was Sid Caesar. Born in 1922 in Yonkers, New York, to Max and Ida Ziser, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, Caesar marched through the Catskills, like his namesake crossing the Rubicon, to become, in effect, an emperor of television. Using his Borscht Belt training, Caesar attracted a dedicated audience to the award-winning *Your Show of Shows*, which ran from 1950 to 1954 on NBC. It relied on sketch comedy that showcased Caesar, his supporting cast of Carl Reiner, Imogene Coca, and Howie Morris, and what would become an amazing stable of comedy writers that

³⁴ Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 132.

³⁵ Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 133.

³⁶ Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 134.

³⁷ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 147-50.

³⁸ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 114.



included Mel Brooks, Larry Gelbart, Lucille Kallen, and Neil Simon.³⁹ As one critic noted, “he was wholly dependent on writers who, in turn, took inspiration from him.”⁴⁰

Caesar’s sketch comedy drew on both the anxieties of the present and the angst of the past, producing what co-star Nanette Fabray identified as “the first original TV comedy creation.”⁴¹ From author Lawrence Epstein’s perspective, “Caesar was a symbol of his time. . . . Caesar’s characters located the dark undersides of the vibrant, new America. Presented through humor, they were acceptable to audiences who were themselves grappling to control those undersides and build a postwar society.”⁴² Yet Caesar’s comedy and characters retained a residual Jewish humor, expressed especially by the goofy-looking professor in a disheveled frock coat and battered top hat giving the appearance of a displaced hobo, or, more in keeping with Jewish sensibility, a *luftmensch*. (If you do not have a clue what this term means, check out the floating male figures in Russian Jewish artist Marc Chagall’s paintings.)

Among Caesar’s professors was Ludwig von Sedative, a German-sounding “expert” whose Yiddish inflections and inane counsel recalled the *rebbe*s in the *Wise Men of Chelm*, the Jewish folk tales of *shtetl* simpletons. In an interview, Caesar, as von Sedative, described his view of sleep: “Schleep is vunderbar. Schleep is beautiful. But schleep is no good to you if you is vide awake.” The professor then hailed his friend who “could schleep anyveres. . . . He could go on a train and right away he fall aschleep.” When the interviewer remarked how “wonderful that is,” von Sedative’s comedic comeback was that it “was lousy. He was the engineer. He wrecked more trains, dot friend of mine.”⁴³

Caesar’s Professor Ludwig von Fossil, a so-called expert in archaeology, seemed to come closest to the spirit of foolish Chelm *rebbe*s when he explained the results of his attempt to straighten out the Leaning Tower of Pisa: assembling a large caravan of camels and tying a rope to their humps, they pulled and pulled for days. When queried about the outcome, von Fossil blithely responded that there was no change in the Leaning Tower of Pisa, but all the humps in the camels had been flattened.⁴⁴

Characters like Caesar’s professors would inspire Soupy Sales to try out his own similarly silly-named creations on his evening show, *Soupy’s On*. Among

³⁹ Berger, *Jewish Jesters*, 73-77; Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 138-44; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 100-122.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 100.

⁴¹ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 101.

⁴² Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 141-42.

⁴³ Berger, *Jewish Jesters*, 80-81.

⁴⁴ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 104-5.



those characters was “Charles Vichysoise—a kind of composite of Charles Boyer, Maurice Chevalier, and Charles Aznavour—a leering ‘continental crooner’ who was constantly arguing with the pianist and trading insults with surly patrons at the Club ChiChi.”⁴⁵ (Later, in his New York television show in the mid-1960s, Sales would create a character that owed more to Jewish humor with Yiddish inflections—private detective Philo Kvetch.) Combining the comedic craziness of Caesar and Berle, and stealing bits from others, Sales developed a specific style of humor that veered between what comedian Richard Lewis referred to as Berle’s “wacky funny” and Caesar’s “torturously funny.”⁴⁶

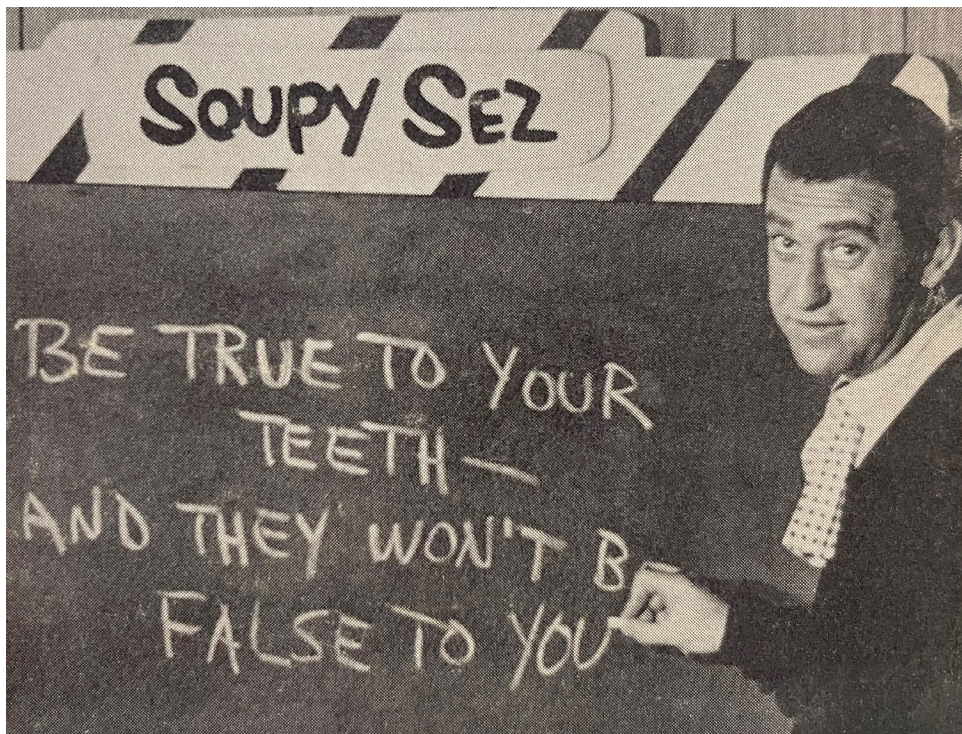


Figure 4: Sales, circa 1960–61, drew upon the Jewish comedy of Milton Berle and Sid Caesar in developing his style of humor on his television programs. (The Soupy Sales Show, Phillip March Studios, 1961, record album back cover. JHSM collections.)

While Sales’ performances on WXYZ-TV lacked Berle’s and Caesar’s overt references to Jewish comedy, his routines did contain covert expressions of Jewish

⁴⁵ Sales, *Soupy Sez!*, 74.

⁴⁶ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 101.



humor. Among the most loved figures on *Lunch with Soupy Sales* was White Fang (see Figure 3, page 30), represented by a large white paw usually manipulated by puppeteer, Clyde Adler. Although Sales referred to White Fang as “the meanest dog in Dee-troit,” the rapport between the two, often requiring Sales to interpret White Fang’s strange non-dog guttural sounds, became a common feature on the program and one that resonated with Jewish viewers.

From the perspective of Jewish humor, White Fang was the *schlemiel* to Sales’ *schlimazel*. (In Yiddish the *schlemiel* is the one who spills the soup, and the *schlimazel* is the one upon whom the soup is spilled.) For example, in one of the few remaining excerpts of the WXYZ-TV production of *Lunch with Soupy Sales* (most of the old 1950s kinescopes were destroyed), Sales scolds White Fang for trying to read in the dark.⁴⁷ So, White Fang takes out a light bulb and proceeds to hook it up to Sales’ head. When White Fang pulls the chord, the blinding light (exaggerated by a close-up camera shot) is too much for Sales who turns it off. Immediately, the big paw shoots out, pulls the chord, and grabs a newspaper to shove in front of Sales and the light bulb. While White Fang reads aloud with his unintelligible, but humorous, “Reh-Oh-Reh-Oh,” Sales stands there like a *schlimazel*, someone on whom a joke has been played.

Becoming a Celebrity in the Motor City

Whether being the brunt of a visual joke or getting hit in the face with a pie, Sales became a major personality in Detroit television during the 1950s. Crafting a public persona that generated a large and loyal following, Soupy Sales sought to complement the audience that watched his Motor City television programs. His life outside the WXYZ-TV studios included engaging and entertaining thousands of local fans. Peter Strand, a producer and co-writer on Sales’ shows, remembers what often transpired when Sales would show up for a last-minute appearance: “Soupy did a lot of guest appearances and I would go with him. We would go to a Big Boy restaurant, one of our sponsors, and the crowd would be enormous.”⁴⁸

Sales’ desire to be out in public derived from both his personal inclinations and the economic imperatives of television stations and sponsors. According to Dave Usher, Sales’ personal manager during a portion of his time in Detroit, “[Soupy] would average about five or six calls a day from viewers asking, mainly because of his kids show, if he’d make appearances at various locations. So, we’d show up wherever and Soupy would dress up in the garb he wore on the show, the

⁴⁷ See “An Interview with Clyde Adler on Soupy and White Fang,” by Jerry Stanecki, n.d., *Channel 7 Action News*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_0jKZUkWrA.

⁴⁸ Sales, *Soupy Sez!*, 79.



high hat and his oversized polka-dot-red-and-white bow tie and in a sweater and a shirt—that was his costume.”⁴⁹

Sales referred to his young fans as “birdbaths,” eventually leading to the formation of the Birdbath Club. Kids could “send a dime or something” to United Dairies, a sponsor of *Lunch with Soupy Sales*, and receive “a membership card . . . and a little button.”⁵⁰ Birdbath events drew thousands of fans. Sales recalled, “[I was] really appreciative of the fans because I had never done a show like that before . . . and doing the show I could tell it was catching on, and I never forgot that with the people.”⁵¹

Young fans’ encounters with Sales cemented their bond with him: Peggy Tibbits, whose father played Detroit television legend “Milky the Clown,” met Sales when he and her father appeared together on another show. Sitting next to Sales, Tibbits recalled, “I just remember being thrilled.”⁵² Accompanying his grandmother to her doctor’s appointment in the Maccabees Building, where the WXYZ-TV studio was located, Larry Dlusky ran into Sales while waiting for the elevator. “He walked over to talk to me. . . . I think I probably did all the talking. I told Soupy I was a member of the Birdbath Club and I had the magic slate that wrote in three colors . . . he seemed genuinely interested in what I was saying and was talking to me like an equal. That stayed with me the rest of my life – that he took the time to do that.”⁵³

Sales’ fans in the Motor City, however, were not limited to children. According to manager Dave Usher, “Many times when we’d go for personal appearances, we’d really need a police escort. It’s hard to believe, but Soupy was more recognizable than President Eisenhower. He . . . had this kind of recognition with adults, because of his evening show at eleven o’clock which would usually beat out his competition.” Usher recollected another time when Sales accompanied him to the county courthouse: “[W]e heard a roar. We looked around and saw that it was coming from a crowd of people. They were chanting, ‘Soupy, Soupy, Soupy.’ Evidently, word had gotten out that he was going to be at the courthouse. I remember we walked around toward the parking lot, and looking up at the buildings around us, we could see people standing in the windows . . . yelling ‘Hi, Soupy.’ That’s how popular he was.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Sales, *Soupy Sez!*, 70-71.

⁵⁰ Castelnero, *TV Land Detroit*, 27.

⁵¹ Castelnero, *TV Land Detroit*, 29.

⁵² Castelnero, *TV Land Detroit*, 28.

⁵³ Castelnero, *TV Land Detroit*, 28-29.

⁵⁴ Sales, *Soupy Sez!*, 70, 72.





Figure 5: After leaving Detroit, Sales filmed Lunch with Soupy Sales at KABC-TV Channel 7 in Los Angeles from 1961 to 1962. (The Soupy Sales Show, Phillip March Studios, 1961, record album back cover. JHSM collections.)

Beyond the slapstick routines, the funny gags, and the pies in the face, the atmosphere of casualness and silliness on the lunchtime program created an authentic rapport among Sales, his crew, and the viewing audience. The relaxed environment also reinforced the sense that Soupy Sales was an intimate member of the family who brought relief to kids and adults in fraught times. The pressures to conform either on the job or in school, along with economic uncertainties and social and political injustices during the 1950s in the Motor City and beyond



(from Cold War repression to racial discrimination), could be cast aside during a brief half hour of ridiculous hilarity with Sales. As Bob Talbert, a *Detroit Free Press* entertainment columnist, noted: “People thought of [Sales] as one of themselves. He was a star, yes, but he was an approachable star. He had that homey quality that people identified with.”⁵⁵ Indeed, it was that televisual connection of approachability and familiarity that boosted Sales’ star and gave him tremendous celebrity status in the Motor City, a status that would remain with him even after he departed Detroit in 1961 for Los Angeles and then New York.

Returning periodically over the many decades after his time on WXYZ-TV, Sales would be met by tremendous affection: “even today more than forty years later, there still exists a great love between me and the Motor City. I go back there at least a couple of times a year, and I’m still amazed at the wonderful reaction I get.”⁵⁶ On one of Sales’ final trips to Detroit, to promote A&E’s telecast of his biography, *Detroit Free Press* television columnist, Mike Duffy, declared: “Soupy was—and remains . . . a downright illustrious hall-of-fame television institution.”⁵⁷

Conclusion

Although Soupy Sales spent most of the last five decades of his life away from Detroit, passing away on October 22, 2009, in the Bronx, he is remembered fondly by those Motor City baby boomers who religiously watched his shows.⁵⁸ Sales’ childhood and Jewish roots, transformed by comedic confabulations, shaped his public persona that emerged during his years in Detroit from 1953 through 1960. Although many African Americans experienced discrimination in the Motor City during this period, Sales did not encounter a similar situation. In fact, Sales drew upon the Jewish humor of early television comedians Milton Berle and Sid Caesar in creating comedy sketches for his television shows, and in the process, became a beloved celebrity. Through his television persona, Sales made his mark on the cultural life of Detroit during the 1950s and beyond.

⁵⁵ Sales, *Soupy Sez!*, 130.

⁵⁶ Sales, *Soupy Sez!*, 84.

⁵⁷ Mike Duffy, “A&E Bio Shows Why Soupy Sells,” *Detroit Free Press*, December 21, 1994, 7D.

⁵⁸ Very few of Sales’ television moments on WXYZ-TV remain as a consequence of the fragility of the original kinescopes. Those that are available, for example on Jewish Life Television, come from Sales’ shows on WNEW-TV in New York during the mid-1960s.



INTERVIEWS, ESSAYS, AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Hank Greenberg's Iconic Status Remains 75 Years after His Retirement from Major League Baseball

Irwin Cohen

The Detroit Jewish community has had great philanthropists and popular figures over the last several generations, but none, in my opinion, has reached the level of popularity of Hank Greenberg. Even after his retirement as a major league player 75 years ago, following the 1947 baseball season, Greenberg remains on a high pedestal unreached by anyone on a local or national level.

Greenberg joined the major leagues with the Detroit Tigers in 1933, the same year Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany. With the rise of Nazism, Jews yearned for something to feel good about, and Greenberg was it. He was Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Gregory Peck, and Jimmy Stewart rolled into one. Tall and handsome, the charismatic Greenberg was one of the best baseball players of his era. His decision not to play on Yom Kippur in 1934 when the Tigers were battling for the American League pennant further endeared him to Jews everywhere.

Greenberg's years of military service from May 1941 until his return to the major league playing field in July 1945 only added to his heroic stature. Before leaving for the army, Greenberg reached amazing baseball numbers in several seasons. In 1937 he drove in 183 runs during the 154-game season, averaging more than one run batted in per game. The following year Greenberg hit 58 home runs, only two short of Babe Ruth's single-season record of 60 set in 1927. As Greenberg received more adulation, Jews in Germany were hunted and beaten. Only six weeks after his great 1938 season, the fires and violence of Kristallnacht ("Night of Broken Glass") raged through Jewish areas of Germany and Vienna, and many Jews were dragged away, never to be seen again.

After serving as a gunner in Burma and other roles in uniform during World War II, Greenberg returned to the Tigers in late June 1945, but needed to work to get back into playing shape. When the team went on the road, Greenberg stayed behind to practice his batting skills and timing. It was only fitting that the clubhouse radio was playing one of the top hits of the time, "June Is Bustin' Out All Over," as Greenberg was ready to bust out, too.

The Tigers announced that Greenberg would be ready for big league play on Sunday, July 1, in a scheduled doubleheader against the Philadelphia Athletics, managed by the legendary Connie Mack. A crowd of more than 49,000 turned out to welcome back Hank Greenberg. Greenberg wanted to hit a home run more





Hank Greenberg hitting a home run in Chicago's Comiskey Park, circa 1938. (JHSM collections.)

than anything that day, as he had hit his 249th career home run in his previous game—four years and two months earlier.

After flying out twice to right field, popping out to the catcher, and walking on four pitches, Greenberg connected in the bottom of the eighth inning. As the ball flew into the crowd in lower left field near the 370-foot mark, Greenberg could only think of the number 250—his 250th career home run.

Greenberg's heroics continued. He batted .311 and hit 13 home runs in 1945 after his July return. His grand-slam home run in St. Louis on the last day of the season won the American League pennant for the Tigers. He went on to star in the World Series: Greenberg's two home runs were the only ones hit by a Detroit player, leading to the Series win over the Chicago Cubs. Horns blew throughout the city and confetti floated from downtown buildings as Detroit celebrated.

One of the nation's most eligible Jewish bachelors, Greenberg turned 35 on January 1, 1946. On February 18, 1946, he married Caral Gimbel, one of the nation's richest Jewish women: she was the daughter of Bernard Gimbel, president and co-owner of the Manhattan mega department store that bore his last name. With his new wife wearing a mink coat at opening day of the 1946 season in



Detroit, Greenberg thrilled the capacity crowd of more than 52,000 by hitting a home run to win the game. Each of Detroit's three daily newspapers, the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Detroit News*, and the *Detroit Evening Times*, devoted the front page and several other pages of coverage to Hank Greenberg in his bright white uniform and Caral Greenberg in her dark mink coat.

Greenberg hit his 300th career home run on September 17, 1946, and when the '46 season ended, his 44 homers were tops in the major leagues. While Greenberg batted a respectable .277, it was the first time in his career that his average was under .300 for a full season.

On January 18, 1947, the Detroit Tigers sold Greenberg's contract to the lowly National League Pittsburgh Pirates. Greenberg was stunned. Jewish Detroiters were shocked and outraged: their "Hank" had been part of the community since 1933. Tigers owner Walter O. Briggs thought the 36-year-old Greenberg's skills were fading and wanted to deal him while he could still bring some value. Briggs did not want Greenberg to remain in the American League, where he would play against the Tigers. (At that time teams played solely within their own league in the regular season). Briggs also reasoned that Pittsburgh was a weak team and would not represent the National League in the World Series for years.

Marvin Schlossberg, who would become famous forecaster Sonny Eliot, could not believe the news. Like most young Jewish Detroiters, he grew up following the Tigers' slugger. Eliot even got to watch the games for free: he accepted a non-paying job leading fans to their seats and wiping them off with his *shmattah* rag for tips. Greenberg also asked Eliot to come before regular batting practice to run around the outfield retrieving balls Greenberg hit. Eliot jumped at the chance, getting plenty of exercise and earning extra money.

Greenberg threatened to retire rather than play for Pittsburgh. But the Pirates' new owners, including entertainer Bing Crosby, lured Greenberg away from his \$75,000 salary on the Tigers with a six-figure contract.

Although the '47 season would be Greenberg's last, it was Jackie Robinson's first. On May 16, 1947, Robinson's Brooklyn Dodgers faced the Pirates. While Greenberg was playing first base, he and Robinson collided. As the first African American player in major league baseball, Robinson expected to hear racial insults or even receive a punch, but Greenberg politely asked if he was okay and welcomed him to the big leagues. It marked the beginning of a long friendship.

Bothered by sore legs, Greenberg closed out his one season in Pittsburgh, hitting .249 with 25 home runs. He retired with a .313 career batting average and 331 home runs. In seven of his seasons with the Tigers, Greenberg hit 33 or more home runs. No Tigers player has matched Greenberg's single-season record of 58



home runs. He also hit five home runs in the World Series, the most recorded by a Tigers player.

It has been 75 years since Hank Greenberg retired as a major league player. His good looks, charismatic personality, and baseball and military heroics make him arguably the most popular figure in the Jewish history of Detroit.

Irwin Cohen is a noted author, columnist, and public speaker. He headed a national baseball publication for five years and interviewed many legends of the game before accepting a front office position with the Detroit Tigers and earning a World Series ring. He went on to write several history books of interest to Detroiters and the Jewish community. He may be reached in his dugout at irdav@sbcglobal.net.



INTERVIEWS, ESSAYS, AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Eli Brown, MD: A Successful Physician and Leader at Detroit's Sinai Hospital

Interview by Levi Smith

March 10, 2021



(Courtesy of Eli Brown, MD.)

LEVI SMITH:

Thank you, Dr. Brown, for meeting with me to talk about your life and medical career at Sinai Hospital of Detroit. Let's start with your early life. Where were you born? Where were your parents from?

ELI BROWN:

I was born in Baltimore, Maryland, April 25, 1923, at Mercy Hospital. My parents were immigrants from Russia. My father was from a small town called Uman, outside of Kiev, in what became Ukraine. My mother was from a small town called Amischi, near Minsk, in what became Belarus. They came to the US in the early 1900s.



LEVI SMITH:

With the COVID-19 pandemic still on everyone's mind, it is interesting that your birth year fell shortly after the flu pandemic of 1918. Do you remember discussions about people in your family who died from the flu during the 1918 pandemic?

ELI BROWN:

Actually, I remember very well the discussions of that epidemic, which lasted until 1920 or '21. It was a terrible epidemic, and I remember as a child hearing my parents talk about it. One of my uncles, Matthew Poliakoff, died from the 1918 flu at about 45 years of age. Being born so soon afterwards, I was actually named for him.

LEVI SMITH:

I understand you grew up in Baltimore. Tell me about your education there.

ELI BROWN:

I went to what is now the Talmudic Academy. It used to be the Hebrew Parochial School. I started there in first grade and attended through seventh grade. I skipped eighth grade and went to high school at Baltimore City College. Following my graduation from high school in 1940, I attended the University of Maryland, earning a bachelor of science degree after three years. I was then accepted to the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

LEVI SMITH:

When you applied to medical school, were there quotas for Jews at that public university?

ELI BROWN:

There were no quotas in the undergraduate school, but the medical school had a strict quota: 10 percent Jews.

LEVI SMITH:

Did you indicate you were Jewish on your application?

ELI BROWN:

You had to indicate your religion.

LEVI SMITH:

Were Jews required to have higher grade point averages to get into medical school than gentiles?



ELI BROWN:

Yes, much higher. In fact, many of my fellow undergraduate students had a four-point average, which is excellent. Yet, they couldn't get into medical school while Christian kids with C averages got in very easily. It was exceedingly difficult for a Jewish person to get into medical school. It was also difficult for females to get into medical school. There were only three females in our class of one hundred, and only ten Jewish students.

LEVI SMITH:

When did quotas limiting the number of Jewish students end in medical school?

ELI BROWN:

I'm not sure exactly. I would guess not until after World War II.

LEVI SMITH:

Why did you want to become a doctor?

ELI BROWN:

Medicine was a major interest in my family. My brother was a physician. My two brothers-in-law were physicians. One of my sisters earned her PhD in bacteriology and another was a registered nurse. That environment encouraged my interest in medicine.

LEVI SMITH:

Did your parents steer you toward becoming a doctor?

ELI BROWN:

Not my parents, but my older sister, Rebecca, did.

LEVI SMITH:

When did you graduate from medical school?

ELI BROWN:

I graduated medical school in 1946. I joined the army while in medical school as part of the ASTP, the army specialized training program. So I was obligated to serve in the army for two years after my internship.

LEVI SMITH:

Before you joined the army, how did you pay for college and medical school? Were there loan programs or scholarships?

ELI BROWN:

For the first year of medical school, my sister, Rebecca, paid for me. It was I think somewhere in the vicinity of \$145. After the first year, the army paid my tuition.



LEVI SMITH:

Where did you do your internship following graduation? What was your specialty?

ELI BROWN:

I did my internship at the Jewish Hospital of Brooklyn, New York. There was a rotating internship in those days in which you obtained exposure to various programs: pediatrics, obstetrics, medicine, surgery, and so forth.

LEVI SMITH:

And then you picked your specialty for residency?

ELI BROWN:

Yes, for my residency, I picked anesthesiology. I did my first year at the Jewish Hospital of Brooklyn. After my first year of residency, I was called into the army. My initial post was at Valley Forge General Hospital in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, where I served for approximately a year. During this time I received credit from the University of Pennsylvania for my second year of residency. My supervisors at the hospital were on the staff of the University of Pennsylvania, and I attended their programs in Philadelphia to earn residency credit. Later, I was sent overseas to Japan where I served in Osaka, Japan.

LEVI SMITH:

Was it in connection with the US occupation of Japan after World War II?

ELI BROWN:

Yes, General MacArthur was in charge. I was stationed at a hospital in Osaka from 1949 to 1950. In 1950 the Korean War broke out. Prior to the Korean War we had a census of about one hundred patients at Osaka General Hospital. Within two weeks after the war broke out, we had one thousand casualties. I was the only anesthesiologist in southern Japan, and we had only one trained surgeon. So, we worked extremely hard for the next three or four weeks until replacements came over. I remained in Japan until 1951 when I was rotated back to the United States and assigned to Camp Pickett, Virginia, for another year. Then I was honorably discharged.

LEVI SMITH:

Did you ever think when you started college that you would be in the army for a good part of your early career?

ELI BROWN:

No. I certainly didn't expect that.

LEVI SMITH:

When did you get married?



ELI BROWN:

I was married in 1948 before I went into the army. After I was sent to Japan, my wife, Estelle, and our son, Billy, came over and joined me. They stayed until the Korean War broke out.

LEVI SMITH:

Talk a bit about your wife, who was famous in her own right.

ELI BROWN:

Estelle was trained in ballet, and she worked as a ballerina in the Corps de Ballet at Radio City Music Hall. She was in Broadway plays, and she also danced with the Metropolitan Opera. When she joined me in Japan, there was a ballet school near where we lived. She served as a teacher to local children learning ballet. She choreographed an entire ballet that was presented at the theater in Osaka. That was quite a feat. Her work was publicized in many Japanese newspapers. Estelle received a master of arts in English literature and had a number of papers on dance published in academic journals.

LEVI SMITH:

I understand you had the opportunity to meet President Truman after you returned from Japan.

ELI BROWN:

Yes, we were driving from Detroit to Tulsa, Oklahoma, for my nephew's bar mitzvah. We happened to be driving through Independence, Missouri, and we passed the Truman Museum. My mother was with us, and she said, "I would like to see President Truman." I said, "I think you have to have an appointment." My wife said, "No, wait a minute. I'm going to check if we can see President Truman." She made a phone call to the museum. She said, "My mother-in-law had three sons in the army. And she wants to see President Truman." Well, strangely enough, they said, "Yes, come on over. We'll have you meet President Truman." So, we went to the Truman Museum, and we met with President Truman! We sat around a table, and I sat right next to the President. The Korean War had ended, and I remember asking him, "Why was it necessary for us to fight in Korea?" And I remember his answer: "It was necessary to stop communism because if we didn't stop communism in Korea, it would spread all over Southeast Asia."

LEVI SMITH:

How did you end up coming to Detroit?



ELI BROWN:

When I was in medical school, there was one Jewish fraternity at the University of Maryland, Phi Delta Epsilon. Practically all of the Jewish boys, including me, joined. The fraternity had a meeting each year for doctors from all over the United States. In 1954 the annual meeting was held in Baltimore, and my wife and I attended. My friend, who was an anesthesiologist in Baltimore, said, "There's a doctor here, Dr. Emil Rothman, who is an obstetrician at Sinai Hospital, a new Jewish hospital in Detroit. They are looking for an anesthesiologist. Why don't you and I go out there and take over?" I said, "Sure." Well, my friend's wife didn't want to leave Baltimore, so he backed out. I had never been to Detroit. All I knew about the city was Father Coughlin and Ford Motor Company. But I said, "They're paying our expenses. Let's go out and take a look." I really didn't intend to take the job, but when I arrived in Detroit in 1954, everyone was so hospitable, especially people like the Davidsons who owned Federal's Department Stores, Dr. Milt Sorock, Dr. Jerry Hauser, and many others. And I was very impressed with the hospital and with the people at the hospital. So I decided to take the job as chairman of the department of anesthesiology.

LEVI SMITH:

Why was it important to establish Jewish hospitals like Sinai?

ELI BROWN:

Jewish hospitals were established to provide service to the community; to provide Kosher meals to those patients who required them; and to provide internships, residencies, and practice opportunities for Jewish doctors. Jewish doctors had little or no opportunity to practice at non-Jewish hospitals.

LEVI SMITH:

Was there any problem with Jewish patients being admitted to non-Jewish hospitals?

ELI BROWN:

No, I think patients could be admitted to the hospitals, but their doctors couldn't take care of them.

LEVI SMITH:

At Sinai, were Jewish holidays observed?

ELI BROWN:

Only in the Reform sense. The first day of Rosh Hashanah and the holy day of Yom Kippur were observed. And, of course, there was a Kosher kitchen, so if you were Orthodox or Conservative, you could get Kosher food.



LEVI SMITH:

Were there discussions about having two days off for Rosh Hashanah or possibly observing some of the other Jewish holidays?

ELI BROWN:

No, there may have been discussions, but it never came to pass. Sinai did close the operating rooms on Christmas and New Year's because a lot of the staff—the nurses and other workers—were not Jewish. So, it was understandable.

LEVI SMITH:

Were there issues when Sinai wanted to hire an African American intern?

ELI BROWN:

It came up during my second year at Sinai. In 1955 there was an African American applicant. I remember a discussion about it by the executive committee. There was, surprisingly, a great deal of opposition to hiring an African American intern, mainly from the people in obstetrics who thought their white patients would object to having an African American physician perform pelvic exams. Dr. Julian Priver, the executive chairman of the hospital, and I fought very hard against that kind of bias. Ultimately, we were able to win over the majority of the people, and Sinai hired its first African American intern in 1956. After that, there was no problem hiring African American physicians.

LEVI SMITH:

What were some of your other early accomplishments as chairman of the department of anesthesiology?

ELI BROWN:

I started a residency program in anesthesiology at Sinai in 1955. I later became chief of staff of the hospital.

LEVI SMITH:

When did you become chief of the medical staff, and what were your responsibilities?

ELI BROWN:

I became chief of staff for three years sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s. It was very unusual for an anesthesiologist to be chief of staff. The chief of staff serves as the doctors' representative to the board of trustees of the hospital. It was very important to all of the doctors that Sinai develop an academic program. We had residencies in all the major specialties. The residency program was highly regarded and eventually became the only training program associated with Wayne



State University. Many of the members of Sinai's medical staff were also on the staff of WSU. I started out as an assistant professor in anesthesiology at WSU and eventually rose to the position of full professor. I was asked to become chairman of WSU's department of anesthesiology in 1975, even though I was still chairman of anesthesiology at Sinai. I served as chairman at WSU until 1992, when I retired.

LEVI SMITH:

Shifting topics, were you working at Sinai during the Detroit uprising in July 1967?

ELI BROWN:

Yes, it was very difficult during that time. There was a lot of fear, but our hospital was located on Outer Drive, which was sort of toward the suburban area. Still, many of our employees were African American, and a lot of them couldn't get to work. It was a very scary time, but we managed to get through it.

LEVI SMITH:

How did Sinai's board of trustees respond following the uprising?

ELI BROWN:

The question arose whether the hospital should move to the suburbs. There was land available adjacent to the Jewish Community Center at Maple and Drake in West Bloomfield. I vehemently supported moving to the suburbs. I remember there were other supporters of that idea on the board of trustees. But, unfortunately, Dr. Julian Priver, who was the chief administrator at Sinai, felt very strongly that we had an obligation to remain in Detroit. And he convinced the majority of the board of trustees that we should remain in the city. I think it would have been smarter to move out to the suburbs where the patients lived.

LEVI SMITH:

From an economic standpoint, did the hospital start to lose money in the late sixties and the seventies?

ELI BROWN:

In the seventies, many of the Jewish doctors started to get privileges at Beaumont Hospital, which was out in the suburbs, and at Henry Ford Hospital, West Bloomfield. Many Jewish patients then started to go to those hospitals. So, things started, economically, to go badly for Sinai. About that time, I recall that Michael Duggan [currently, mayor of Detroit], who was CEO of the Detroit Medical Center, spoke to me about having Sinai become part of the DMC. I thought it was



a good idea because Sinai could have replaced the DMC's Harper Hospital as the major teaching hospital for WSU. The merger did not occur because some of Sinai's department chairpersons and administrative staff would have been replaced. For the same reason, a proposed merger with Henry Ford Hospital was rejected. Eventually Sinai did merge with the DMC, but it was too late, and Sinai was closed. Sinai was a great hospital; I think it would have existed to this day if we moved to the suburbs.

LEVI SMITH:

You mentioned that Jewish doctors were leaving Sinai to join Beaumont and Henry Ford, West Bloomfield. So, I assume at some point Jewish doctors were accepted at non-Jewish hospitals.

ELI BROWN:

Yes, that happened in the sixties and seventies. It was not really a problem anymore.

LEVI SMITH:

Did you serve in professional organizations?

ELI BROWN:

Yes, I was president of the American Society of Anesthesiologists, the ASA, starting in the fall of 1980 and for the year, 1981. I developed a public education program so patients would understand the importance of anesthesia during surgery. I also developed a quality assessment program to enhance the safety of anesthesia.

LEVI SMITH:

Were you the first Jewish president of that group?

ELI BROWN:

No, but I was the first president of ASA from the state of Michigan.

LEVI SMITH:

Was it unique that you were from a community hospital?

ELI BROWN:

There had been other doctors from community hospitals who were president of ASA, but I held many academic positions, which was unusual for a physician from a community hospital. These included chairman of the ASA residency review committee and member of the professional technical committee of the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals. I was also an examiner for the American Board of Anesthesiology.



LEVI SMITH:

Were you a victim of antisemitism while serving as an examiner?

ELI BROWN:

No, I wasn't. But Jewish doctors prior to my time were victims when the board examinations were held in Scottsdale, Arizona, at the Camelback Inn. While they allowed Jewish applicants to sit for the exam and Jewish examiners to administer the exam, they would not allow them to stay at the Camelback Inn. They had to stay down the hill at another hotel.

LEVI SMITH:

Did you experience antisemitism during your involvement in other professional organizations?

ELI BROWN:

I wouldn't call it antisemitism, but there was no concern for Jewish holidays when scheduling meetings of the ASA. In the late 1970s the annual meeting was to be held in Las Vegas on Yom Kippur. I had some influence because I was a delegate to the board of directors of the ASA. I called the president and told him it was unacceptable to have an annual meeting on Yom Kippur. And they changed it. That was nice. From then on, they made sure that there was no annual meeting on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur.

LEVI SMITH:

Shifting topics again, were you involved in the Israeli Yom Kippur War in 1973?

ELI BROWN:

In 1973 I had planned to go to Israel as a visiting professor. The Yom Kippur War broke out, and they called me and said, "Would you like to cancel because of the war?" I said, "No, I will come over, but not as a visiting professor. I will come over as a volunteer." I went to Jerusalem and volunteered at Hadassah Hospital. I took care of wounded soldiers who required anesthesia for surgical procedures.

LEVI SMITH:

Was it a situation similar to your service in Japan during the Korean War?

ELI BROWN:

Yes, there were not as many casualties as we had in the Korean War, but there were still casualties that we had to take care of. I served as a volunteer in Jerusalem for six weeks.



LEVI SMITH:

How did the practice of anesthesia in Israel compare with the practice in the US in 1973?

ELI BROWN:

The practice of anesthesiology there was excellent. They had excellent doctors and hospitals, outstanding.

LEVI SMITH:

Was your family with you?

ELI BROWN:

I took my wife and my two daughters with me, and we lived in Jerusalem for the six weeks in 1973 when I served as a volunteer. My sons came over and joined us. Of course, I went back to Israel many times after that.

LEVI SMITH:

How have you spent your time since you retired from Sinai Hospital?

ELI BROWN:

In 1992, when I retired from Sinai Hospital, I served as a visiting chief at the University of Miami. They asked me if I would like to come down to work at the university and help in their anesthesiology residency teaching program. I said, I'd be happy to work there six months a year when it was cold in Detroit. I had family in Detroit, so I didn't want to be there the entire year; amazingly, they accepted. In 1998 I retired as chair at WSU Medical School and became the first professor emeritus in anesthesiology.

LEVI SMITH:

Next month, G-d-willing, you are going to be 98. What do you attribute your longevity to?

ELI BROWN:

Baruch HaShem, yom yom. Thank G-d. Every day, every day.

Levi Smith, JD, is an attorney, commercial real estate broker, and developer. He is vice president of the Albert Kahn Legacy Foundation.



 NOTABLE JEWISH MICHIGANDERS IN HISTORY

MWWMD Biography—Lillian Keidan Levin: Braille Transcriber and Volunteer Educator

Judith Levin Cantor (z"l)



Lillian Keidan Levin, circa 1914, volunteered in the community throughout her life, including as a braille transcriber, English teacher, and Hadassah study group leader. (Courtesy of author.)

With a stylus, she made a raised dot or impression: the size of the head of a pin. Six dots in different, precise arrangements made a letter of the alphabet. Dot after dot, she patiently filled the page with the words of a book. At the end of the page, if there were two errors, a mere two dots out of place, she discarded the page for her grandchildren's art projects. Lillian Keidan Levin repeated the challenge of transcribing braille until it was perfect, knowing it would bring the pleasure of reading to one who was blind, through the Shaarey Zedek braille group.

My mother, Lillian Keidan Levin (1891-1971), was born in Detroit. The sixth of eight children of Abba and Hannah Fredl Keidan, she was the first of the family born



in the United States. The family had emigrated from Lithuania/Poland after an attack on their town by the Cossacks, a wild onslaught that destroyed their small business and caused them to look for a better, more secure future in America. In her later years, Keidan Levin handwrote a 65-page manuscript describing her family's happy history in Europe, the Cossack attack, and the decision to immigrate and resettle in Detroit—gleaned from the stories told by her mother, Hannah Fredl Keidan.

According to the manuscript, Abba Keidan came to America first, put a pack on his back, and joined his brother, Wolf Keidan, in rural Petoskey, Michigan: lumber country. Successful as a peddler, Abba Keidan eventually accumulated the \$36.40 needed for ocean passage for his wife and (at that time) their five children. As they were an observant Jewish family, Hannah Keidan recommended settling in Detroit, where there already was a practicing Jewish community. Since they spoke Polish, they opened the Keidan Store in the city's Polish neighborhood at 600 Gratiot at Dequindre—within walking distance of the early Congregation Shaarey Zedek at Congress and St. Antoine. Their high-quality dry goods store, which was closed weekly for the family's observance of the Sabbath, was popular: non-Jewish customers would gather for the reopening on Saturday night, watching together for the first star, which ended the Sabbath. Hannah Keidan, herself, was often sought out by friendly customers and neighbors to write letters for them to their families in Poland—a veritable ambassador.

As a young girl, Lillian Keidan Levin attended public school in Detroit. She was a diligent student. Her older brothers, highly educated in Jewish studies in Europe, continued with private Jewish education in Detroit. The young Keidan Levin was dissatisfied. An early feminist, she insisted that if the boys could have a Hebrew education, so could she! And so young Samuel Levin, the son of the esteemed local rabbi, Judah Levin, was hired as the private Hebrew teacher for Keidan Levin and her older sister, Ida Keidan. Ida Keidan did not like being “roped into” these extra studies. Soon after, Samuel Levin became a student at the University of Michigan and was initiated as president of the charter chapter of the U-M Menorah Society. He invited Keidan Levin to be his guest at the dance in Ann Arbor and filled her dance card. They were married in August 1914.

Keidan Levin's husband, now a college graduate, taught English to foreign-born students at Central High School on Woodward Avenue (now part of Wayne State University). In 1917 Principal David Mackenzie established the Junior College of the City of Detroit. He hired Samuel Levin as one of the school's seventeen faculty members. Through the years, the college morphed into Wayne State University. Samuel Levin, the first Jewish professor in Detroit, eventually chaired the Department of Economics and spent more than 40 distinguished years with the university.



Married to a distinguished professor, without a formal college education of her own, Lillian Keidan Levin made significant contributions in rewarding volunteer activities. She was active in the Wayne University Faculty Wives' Club—in the days before women were faculty themselves. I can remember frequently meeting in our home Mrs. Hilberry, wife of the president of the university. Keidan Levin helped establish the first Jewish sorority at Wayne, serving as founder, sponsor, and advisor, and welcoming the young women into our home. During the 1930s and 1940s, Keidan Levin was a dedicated volunteer English teacher to Detroit's Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. In the city's Russell Woods neighborhood, she also served for several decades as a Hadassah study group leader, which attracted a large circle of interested, educated women.

While Lillian Keidan Levin revered education and Jewish studies, and was an avid reader, our garden and home were “the work of her hands.” My mother's garden included 40 rose bushes, all chosen, planted, and cared for by her. Our home was clearly a Jewish home, but my mother made sure it was always a place of hospitality to all: friends, family, community leaders, and my father's fellow faculty and their wives. She spent many hours preparing the cakes, puddings, and desserts that graced the table when she entertained so beautifully.

A traditionally observant Conservative Jewish woman, she made Friday night Sabbath dinners special occasions. The feast of Kosher home cooking ended with her own special apple pie. As long as she was able, my mother walked several miles to Sabbath morning services at Congregation Shaarey Zedek on Detroit's Chicago Boulevard, our family's spiritual home. And her home-cooked Seders included extended family, friends, and community leaders—with long discussions led by my father (and robust off-tune singing). I remember Fred Butzel, the “Dean of Detroit Jewry,” bringing a hostess gift of a small bronze sculpture, which he presented to me. It seems he knew my mother would fuss and object, so I was the beneficiary. I still have it and love it.

After a day's work volunteering, gardening, cooking, sewing, entertaining, and raising an active family of four children, Lillian Keidan Levin would take a book in hand and read into the night. As I look back, I realize that much of what she read (the complete lives of Beethoven, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Franklin Roosevelt) featured men and women of accomplishment who had to overcome difficulties, challenges, and obstacles. This was indeed Lillian Keidan Levin's own story.

When I was nine years old, and the only child still at home, my father was called to the telephone. His face went white. A few days later, he and my mother drove to Ann Arbor. My wonderful older sister, Miriam Keidan, was in tears. No one explained to me what was going on, but this is what I remember. In Ann Arbor, my mother had urgent, pioneering colostomy surgery that changed her



life. She had intermittent colostomy surgery at the University of Michigan hospital for the next three decades with no explanations. I never heard the word “cancer” or a discussion of the “Big C.” It is different today.

With the gift of her life, my mother was determined to use it to make a difference: to raise her younger daughter and make a significant volunteer contribution. Advanced braille-writing to help the blind motivated her. As the technology advanced, she was given a sophisticated, typewriter-like braille machine. Now she could learn and produce the even more challenging Hebrew braille and mathematics braille. She was hard at work transcribing in her home until her death at age 80 in 1971. She “beat the odds” and lived to see fifteen grandchildren born. At the time, this was considered a medical miracle. After her passing, she was honored by the International Jewish Braille Institute in New York City for her accurate and demanding transcriptions. Her talent and dedication to the task brought her satisfaction and a will to live. And it made a difference to those whose lives she enriched, opening doors for them that otherwise might have remained closed.

Lillian Keidan Levin is just one of Michigan’s remarkable Jewish women who have helped build and shape the state’s communities. Since 2013 JHSM has sought to collect, preserve, and share the stories and achievements of such women through its Michigan Women Who Made a Difference Project. To explore and support this undertaking, please visit JHSM’s MWWMD online gallery at www.jhsmichigan.org/mwwmd.

Editor’s note: We are deeply saddened to learn of the July 26, 2022 passing of our dear friend, Judith Levin Cantor (ז”ל). Judy was the bedrock of JHSM—a past president, a constant cheerleader and supporter, the person behind the historic markers across the state of Michigan, and the power behind our endowment. She was the author of Jews in Michigan (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2001), our organization’s much-used reference book. JHSM and countless others will miss this extraordinary woman. May her memory be for a blessing.



YOUTH HISTORY EDUCATION

Educator Materials: Samuel S. Siegel Primary Source, Discussion Questions, and Lesson Plans

Primary Source

Read Mary-Elizabeth B. Murphy's article, "Empathetic Citizenship: Jewish Immigrants and the Struggle for Black Civil Rights in the Midwest, 1927-1947" (page 8), about how Jews were early advocates for Black civil rights. Then, examine Samuel S. Siegel's October 15, 1927 letter to the editor of the *Chicago Defender* newspaper at the end of these Educator Materials.¹ Siegel was a 37-year-old Romanian Jew working as a tailor in Chicago. That summer, he witnessed and interceded in a racially motivated incident in the Michigan resort community of South Haven. Racial segregation and violence against Black bus riders were commonplace in the 1920s, and would remain so for the next 40 years.

Vocabulary

brazen: bold and without shame

covenant: binding agreement

intercede: try to help people work out their differences

persecution: hostility and mistreatment, especially because of race or political or religious beliefs

primary source: an original document, recording, artwork, artifact, or other material created at the time in question. Historians use primary sources as evidence for understanding the past

unsuppressable (today, usually rendered insuppressible): impossible to control

Discussion Questions

Identification Questions

1. What kind of primary source is this?
2. When was it produced?
3. What topic does it concern?
4. Who wrote it? What can you determine about its author?

Comprehension Questions

1. What did Siegel witness?
2. How did he attempt to intercede? To what effect?
3. What reasons does Siegel give or imply for why he interceded?

¹ Samuel S. Siegel, "Bus Line Outrages," *Chicago Defender*, October 15, 1927, A2.



Analysis and Evaluation Questions

1. Why did Siegel write about the incident three months after the fact?
2. Why did Siegel write to the *Chicago Defender* and not another newspaper? What can you infer from Siegel's letter about the newspaper's audience?
3. What nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs does Siegel use to recount and describe the incident and its participants? To what purpose and effect?
4. What conclusions does Siegel draw about what he witnessed?

Lesson Plan Ideas

1. Imagine you are the Black bus rider in Siegel's tale. Write a letter to the editor about your side of the experience. How will you present your story? What language will you use? What outcomes will you advocate for and how? Repeat for the white passengers on the bus: What varied reasons might they have had for choosing not to intercede?
2. Research antisemitism in the United States between World War I and World War II. How might this climate have shaped Siegel's intervention?
3. Research South Haven in the 1920s. (Begin by reading the 2017 *Michigan Jewish History* cover story, https://www.jhsmichigan.org/assets/docs/Journals/Michigan_Jewish_History_2017.pdf.) During a peak period of discrimination in the United States, why was South Haven particularly welcoming to Jewish and Black vacationers?
4. The US Supreme Court handed down decisions that integrated interstate buses (*Morgan v. Virginia*, 328 US 373 [1946]) and bus terminal waiting rooms (*Boynton v. Virginia*, 364 US 454 [1960]), ahead of the Civil Rights Act (1964). Research these cases and their enforceability. How did bus companies get around them?
5. Brainstorm a list of modern-day equivalents to the incident Siegel recounts. How are acts of public discrimination today both the same as and different from 100 years ago?
6. Visit Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History or another similar museum to learn about other incidents of discrimination in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. Consider whether Siegel's decision to intercede was unique during that time or whether others also chose to intervene.



BUS LINE OUTRAGES

Editor Chicago Defender: In reading about the un-American and uncivilized display on the part of the high school children in Gary, Ind., which display is undoubtedly fostered by an organized body of grown-ups who are using the school children as their tools, I could not help recalling an incident to which I chanced to be a witness. As one of the outstanding defenders of the rights of the Negro race in the United States, you will probably be interested in the following:

On the morning of July 25, 1927, while waiting for one of the Greyhound line busses at South Haven, Mich., I observed a young Negro of respectable appearance and dress being denied admittance in one of the busses. The driver roughly pushed him aside, addressed him vulgarly, and despite the protests of the young man, who showed the driver his ticket to Benton Harbor, Mich., threatened him with physical violence unless he step aside and permit two white people to enter the bus.

After the incident, and when the bus had left, I spoke to the young man, ascertained that he had in his possession a lawfully purchased ticket, that he was respectable and sober, and assured him that I would see to it that he was admitted passage in the next bus. He entered the next bus apparently unnoticed by the driver, who was occupied with the baggage of the passengers, taken a seat in the rear of the coach. I entered the same bus.

When we had proceeded for a few minutes, the bus stopped in a side street. The driver went to the rear entrance of the bus and none too gently, even at first, demanded that the young Negro leave the coach. When the latter protested in the weak

manner of his, the driver became extremely rough and threatened to use force. Now that the passengers were all attracted by the commotion, the driver called the young fellow a "dirty drunkard" and insulted and humiliated him in a most outrageous manner.

My sympathy upon witnessing this gross and brazen injustice reached the point of unexpressable anger. I interceded in behalf of the young Negro, who was too nervous and humiliated to take his own part. I told the passengers what I had previously witnessed, directed their attention to the sobriety of the young Negro and warned the driver to quit molesting one who was entitled to the same degree of courtesy and the same accommodations as any other lawful passenger, regardless of race or color. After a heated argument, the driver showed his guilt by resuming his position at the wheel and drove on without again bothering my fellow passenger. However, he did not attempt to conceal with looks the resentment that he felt toward me for spoiling his plans.

The drivers of these busses were, it is reasonable to assume, following the instructions of others higher up in the service of the Greyhound bus line. If this is true, then that particular bus line is violating the most important covenant in its contract with the public from whence it gets its right to operate, that is, the covenant to accept passengers without discriminating between race and color.

As a member of the Jewish race, which has also and still is subjected to uncivilized persecution, I deeply and sincerely resent such incidents as those described above. What's the good of churches, schools and the teachings of parents, if these outrages are to continue?

SAMUEL S. SIEGEL
1633 Burnham Bldg., Chicago, Ill.



 2023 APPLEBAUM AWARD

Call for Submissions



Rabbi Emanuel Applebaum, circa 1948. (JHSM collections.)

JHSM invites article submissions to *Michigan Jewish History* for consideration for the 2023 **Rabbi Emanuel Applebaum Award**. The award honors outstanding original scholarship in the field of Michigan's Jewish history, broadly defined.

Purpose and Process: This award is named for Rabbi Emanuel Applebaum (1922-2001), a JHSM founding member and *Michigan Jewish History's* first editor, serving from 1960 to 1963. All entries are reviewed and judged by *MJH* editors, the *MJH* advisory committee, and external referees. The winner receives publication in *MJH*, a cash prize of \$2,000, \$150 worth of JHSM books, special recognition at JHSM's awards ceremony, and a complimentary JHSM annual membership. Finalists also may be invited to publish in *MJH*.

Eligibility: Graduate and advanced undergraduate students, faculty members, public historians, and independent scholars are encouraged to submit manuscripts for the Applebaum Award on any topic appropriate to the aims of *MJH*. Double-spaced manuscripts should not exceed 10,000 words, excluding notes, tables, and figures. Chicago-style notes should not exceed 5,000 words.

Submission: Please email a Word version of the complete manuscript to Tracy Weissman, *MJH* managing editor: tweissman@jhsmichigan.org. **Please write "Applebaum Award" in your email's subject line.** Submissions received by close of business on **November 1, 2022**, will be considered for the 2023 award cycle.

About: *Michigan Jewish History*, a peer-reviewed academic journal, is published annually by JHSM. The most successful submissions will be accessible to JHSM's entire readership, including scholars and the interested general public.



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Editor's Message

Joy Gaines-Friedler, MFA

The richness of writing flash (brief) memoir is in the pleasure of discovering history's meaning for oneself, meaning that goes beyond the telling of the story. In other words, memoir is both the story, and what you make of the story. These little bits of personal history, and what they mean to the writer, create a bridge to empathy and connection to history.

So too, a poem—a linguistic bridge to some essence of emotion—allows the reader a kind of shared “knowing,” a deeply human connection, a concentrated extract of experience and empathy. This issue's flash memoirs and poems do exactly that: they help us on this quest for meaning, and offer a deeper, spiritual exploration, which correlates beautifully with the Jewish concept of *Kehillah*—community.

This year we reached further for contributions from around the state of Michigan that embody Jewish experience. From the wonderful submissions published here, we learn in Natalie Ruth Joynton's essay, “Lech L'cha,” and David Holden's memoir, “Troll's Aliyah,” about the struggles and pleasures of living a rural Jewish life in western and northern Michigan, respectively. We also include a stunning poem, “Shalom Rav—An Evening Blessing,” in which Grand Rapids poet t.r.h. blue reminds us that “[w]e are each putting roots in the dirt, / sprouting from the ground that's borne us, / growing together.”

In her memoir, “David Horodok Memorial,” Marla Rowe Gorosh takes us through a moving experience at the sight of unimaginable horrors in Belarus. In “Hanukkah, Pandemic 2020,” poet Ellen Stone recalls how “[t]he doleful world goes on another night,” yet “candles in the window flare with grace” during the lockdown year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alinda Dickinson Wasner's poem, “Neighbor Boy,” reminds us that as children we hear stories that we only fully comprehend later as adults. The poem's speaker

Joy Gaines-Friedler, MFA, is the award-winning author of four collections of poetry. Her work also has been widely published in anthologies, including *The Bloomsbury Anthology of Contemporary Jewish American Poetry*, ed. Deborah Ager and M.E. Silverman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), and *101 Jewish Poems for the Third Millennium*, ed. M.E. Silverman and Nancy Naomi Carlson (Ashland, OH: Ashland Poetry Press, 2021). Gaines-Friedler teaches private workshops in memoir and advanced poetry; as a visiting writer; and for nonprofit organizations in the Detroit area and throughout Michigan.



came to understand why, as an infant, her best friend had been smuggled out of Prague. And, finally, in “Words of Childhood: Growing Up in 1940s Detroit,” Dan I. Slobin recounts learning to love language in a household surrounded by Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian that got “mixed and mixed up beautifully.”

As always, we invite readers to submit personal essays, short stories, memoirs, or poems for our Creative Expressions section. If interested, please email us at tweissman@jhsmichigan.org or call us at (248) 915-1844.



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Lech L'cha

Natalie Ruth Joynton

Yesterday I pulled up behind a car with the “coexist” bumper sticker. You’ve probably seen it before: the one where each letter represents a different faith. In place of the “X” there is a Star of David, and as I sat there, staring at it, waiting for the light to change in the small Michigan town I call home, I was struck with the same grief I can’t fully investigate when I’m late to pick up my kids from gymnastics.

That grief is a question: *When do we get to leave this place?*

This question is new. Or at least it has recently reemerged with such resonance that it’s hard for me to accept. Hard because of everything we have in Mason County, a cornucopia that begins with its abundance of natural resources: endless miles of Lake Michigan coastline, orchard hills, wind-swept dunes. For a family that enjoys the outdoors as much as ours, with its richly articulated seasons, Mason County is hard to beat.

When we first moved here in 2010, that question was omnipresent. Like it was then, and is now, it is centered on the absence of a Jewish community here. Bit by bit, however, as my husband and I built a life in Mason County, that question began to recede: We bought a house, married on a neighbor’s property, and now we’re raising our young children deep in its countryside where they can run free (something I only dreamed about as a kid growing up in Houston). In the winter they drive sticks through the ice on the pond behind our barn. In summer they pick black raspberries in the woods.

Still those natural resources represent only the beginning of what I love about Mason County. We’ve cultivated a robust network of friends, colleagues, and professional support here, the likes of which I had never experienced before moving to rural Michigan. That network includes the best friend I’ve ever made, the children’s librarian who is like a second mother to my son, a doctor who actually listens, and a host of other friends and colleagues who in the last twelve years have come to feel like family. That’s the hardest part of all: thinking of leaving them.

But in 2019, something odd happened. We had lived in Mason County for almost a decade, and I was starting to wonder if we’d stay for good. Even if there wasn’t much in the way of a Jewish community, the area’s benefits were numerous



enough, I kept telling myself. I had even started believing it. I could always just continue my Jewish rituals at home, I told myself, the lighting of the candles on Shabbat eve, the *Sh'ma* at bedtime with the kids.

That year I drove down to Muskegon for Passover services. I can't remember why the kids weren't with me, perhaps because I worried they'd make too much noise during the adult service. I arrived early to Temple B'nai Israel and sat alone in the sanctuary. Then I watched others arrive and greet one another, then greet me. When it was time to daven, I was surrounded by Jewish families, singing together in Hebrew, the white light of spring pouring through the windows. At that moment, it took everything in me not to weep.

A few months later the question returned.

My daughter Rivka turned eight this past April. She knows how to boil maple sap into syrup and how to crank apples into cider. She's the fastest kid in her class, a voracious reader, an animal lover who operates with a stunning amount of agency for an eight-year-old. One time I watched Rivka stand up to a kid who was blocking the slide so others couldn't go down. She was not unkind but direct. The boy moved, then joined in the sliding himself. Sometimes she leaves me notes with rainbows on them: *Be brave. Be bold. Be you!*

Rivka was six when she came through the door one afternoon, threw her backpack into the corner of the mudroom, took off her mask, and said: "Mom, I am tired of being the only Jewish kid in my class."

It was December. The staff and teachers had just decorated for Christmas.

"I know," I said.

I hadn't spoken a word of my own longing for a Jewish community, or the fierce return of that question, around either of my kids. In fact, I had made a conscious effort *not* to speak of what was missing, maybe because I hoped they would always associate Judaism, first and foremost, with joy.

"Would you like me to call the school and see if they'll put up a *hanukkiyah*?"

Rivka stared out the window. Outside on the fields and hardwoods it had started snowing.

She shook her head. "No. I don't think that's going to fix it."

Perhaps part of what's so hard about knowing it's time to leave—whether it's someone or something—is that it doesn't fit neatly within the gratitude



narrative we're all supposed to cling to right now. That narrative is certainly one I've subscribed to in recent years, homing in on small pleasures as so much else goes awry. It's a fearful time to be a human in the world, let alone raise humans. Practicing gratitude does the powerful work of placing me back in the present. Naturally the persistent return of that question—*when do we get to leave this place?*—feels frighteningly off-script.

But these days, I've been trying to reimagine it. I reimagine that question not as a failure in my own practice of gratitude, but as a friend who tells me the truth, even when it's hard. As the good kind of grief, if there is such a thing. *Lech l'cha. Go forth.*

This is my reimagining of that question, that famous line from G-d to Abram, before he becomes Abraham. I don't know where we are going, and I don't know when we will leave, yet it seems more real now than ever before. I am not Abram, and G-d has made me no grand promise, still the call is clear enough.

I'm also trying to understand that just because it is time to go doesn't mean I am ungrateful for everything Mason County has given us. Wherever we end up we will take the miles of Lake Michigan coastline, the orchards, and the dunes with us, within us, but most of all the people we've come to love in this rural inch of earth. *Lech l'cha. Go forth.*

Rephrased in this way, interestingly, the gratitude remains.

Natalie Ruth Joynton's writing has recently appeared in the *Washington Post* and the *LA Times*. Her first book, *Welcome to Replica Dodge* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019), was a finalist in the 2020 Next Generation Indie Book Awards (memoir category). She is currently at work on a second book.



 CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Shalom Rav

An Evening Blessing

t.r.h. blue

Give us peace.

Not an ignorant peace,
 nor a winner's one.
 I do not want a bliss
 built on the back of another,
 no matter what they think of me.
 I don't believe we will ever all agree.
 Yes, if there was an easy peace,
 I imagine we'd have found it by now.

Whatever you call the lifeforce,
 be it G-d, spirit, holiness, humanity,
 do you remember it connects us all?
 We are each putting roots in the dirt,
 sprouting from the ground that's borne us,
 growing together, green
 and grateful for the lengthening days,
 sticking our noses straight into sunlight,
 sharing space, sharing air,
 sharing earth.

Give us peace.

Nothing alike are the trees and
 the sparrows, the moss and the badger,
 the snake and the bluebell.
 What do they have in common aside from
 the woodlands they call home?
 And, oh, then just alike are they—
 lives that, in this beautiful world,
 only wish to keep on living.

t.r.h. blue is a neurodivergent Jewish writer, artist, photographer, advocate, and Michigander. In 2015 she started a company called *notesontheway*, through which she writes custom poems and sells prints of her poetry in a handwritten font. She works from her home in Grand Rapids, where she lives with her wife, Alex, and their son, Auden.



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

David Horodok Memorial

Marla Rowe Gorosh

I stepped through the small newly planted cedars, then carefully between the deliberately placed boulders that reached my hips. My eyes took in the shocking expanse of pure green, outlined by red brick. Here, in what was a massive pit, this mass grave, lay the remains of seven thousand men, women, and children forced to lie naked, then shot by drunken Nazi beasts.

Now so silent, so flattened where the surrounding pines do not grow, lay only stones of remembrance. And the sobering appearance of a giant cemetery plot.

Somber, heavy, tired from the four-mile walk through the town of David Horodok in what is now Belarus, past the wooden homes with their vegetable and flower beds, we traced The March forced upon them only a generation ago.

Today we wore Israeli flags and banners. We carried water and a pink parasol for the hot sun. My feet hurt, my back dripped, but I pressed on because *they* had had no choice.

We marched past faces with questioning, curious eyes, past the blond straight hair, the faces of children, the same faces seen in the stout older women with thick ankles and in the hardened, leather-skinned men. Eyes rarely meeting, we were offered only a few nods, no waves, no smiles.

I imagined their questions: Who are you? What are you planning? Why come to David Horodok, with your Western clothes, sparkling jewelry, and Jewish stars?

Did they fear that we might intend to take back what was stolen? Our families' homes? Furniture, clothing, books, pictures? Silverware, table linen?

Do you understand? I wanted to ask. Don't fear for your things. We walk for the lives of our mothers, our fathers, sisters, brothers and cousins. We walk for the children who were never conceived, for our history, today made so close as we walk on what were "our" streets, touch what were their houses, and now, face their bones.

We don't know how to feel about you. What do you know of this history? Probably nothing. The genocide is not taught in your lessons in school. Your grandparents are gone, or don't mention it. Your parents never learned of their parents' observations or participation in the routing out, rounding up, the forced movement into the ghetto, or The Marches at gunpoint accompanied by terrifying dogs at their heels. They were forced across the bridge, out of town along the road through the cornfields, then along the birches and into the clearing in the pines where the pit, this pit, was dug by neighboring Horochukers, Tatars, and



Mongols; clans who volunteered for the jobs of digging the pit, sorting the clothes, and checking the homes for an additional two weeks in order to find those who had tried to hide.

Which ones along our march today knew any of these details? I asked myself, how could they ever know?

And then I saw! The far side of the memorial was thick with townspeople dressed as if going to church. Silent, standing by, some holding small children in expectant attention. They stood reverent, watching us enter the gravesite of the seven thousand, watching us enter the memorial to our lost loved ones, our murdered families, victims of heinous crimes. I felt my throat tighten. I cried.

It moved me deeply to stand at this sacred sight, but also to see that all was not lost. They, the townspeople, were there to learn; to hold open the possibility for understanding. Perhaps even to express their own sorrow.

Marla Rowe Gorosh, MD, a graduate of the University of Michigan Medical School, practiced family medicine as a member of the Henry Ford Medical Group and served on the Board of Governors. She is active in the Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice at Henry Ford Health in Detroit. Currently, Dr. Rowe advises clinicians on professionalism and interpersonal communication skills and is a clinical assistant professor at Wayne State University School of Medicine.



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Hanukkah, Pandemic 2020

Ellen Stone

Tonight, the mixing bowl slipped from my hands
And landed in sharp pieces on the ground.
The carpet daisies all are black-eyed blue.
You sounded small and lonely on the phone.

I worry slick potatoes in the sink.
Set candles in the menorah on the sill.
The doleful world goes on another night.
You sounded small and lonely on the phone.

The tapers reach for the ceiling like a spire
Wax as round and golden as the bees.
Flames are tips of fingers in the dark.
You sounded small and lonely on the phone.

Candles in the window flare with grace.
They barely flicker in the moonless glass.
I want my faith to burn a steady light.
You sounded small and lonely on the phone.

Ellen Stone advises a poetry club at Community High School and co-hosts a monthly poetry series, both located in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where she raised three daughters with her husband while teaching in the public schools. Her poetry collections are *What Is in the Blood* (Woodstock, NY: Mayapple Press, 2020) and *The Solid Living World* (Traverse City: Michigan Writers' Cooperative Press, 2013.) Stone's poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart prize and "Best of the Net." For more information about her work, visit Stone's website at www.ellenstone.org.



 CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Troll's Aliyah

David Holden

“Yah, it’s a good roof,” the big Finn nodded. It was the most words he had strung together in the past twenty minutes. We had spent the last few of them in silence, standing on my prospective driveway and staring at the white split-level.

He was the home inspector recommended by Cindy, my real estate agent. I felt fortunate to have found a house that, with a little imagination, the six of us might be able to squeeze into on short notice. Cindy had shared that there were a lot of homes on the market for November in the Upper Peninsula’s Copper Country, but nothing with five bedrooms. A far cry from the big-house sales scene we were leaving in suburban Saint Louis that had gobbled up our current home with little effort. I looked up at the burly man and shivered a bit. I held my kippah in place, the wind whipping up puffs of snow around us. “How do you mean, *good*?”

“Not too steep. Shouldn’t have trouble shoveling it.”

Blankly, I looked at him for a moment. “Shovel? The roof?” I grew up in suburban Detroit and thought I had a handle on what a Michigan winter looked like. The slow shake of his head as he turned back to staring down the house intimidated otherwise.

My wife, Beth, and I were making the move to Houghton for a number of reasons: slow down, put ourselves on a better financial footing, give our kids more of the kind of upbringing we ourselves enjoyed rather than the frenetic and somewhat crime-prone suburbs of River City. But we also knew we would be leaving the closeness and warmth of the Conserva-dox Jewish community in St. Louis that had become such a part of our family’s identity. The lot of us had vacationed for years in Michigan’s UP: Seven Mile Point Beach, Presque Isle, Five Mile Point, Lake Fanny Hooe. We were those weird Jews at the campsite singing in Hebrew around the Saturday evening campfire on the shores of Gitche-Gumee. And Beth had been tromping around her father’s secret central-UP fly-fishing spots since her youngest memories had formed. The solitude, beauty, and live-and-let-live ethos would remain appealing.



That first winter introduced some new terms into our lexicon:

Troll: Michiganders from south of the Mighty Mac (Mackinac Bridge) seeking out fudge and pasties. That one hurt a little at first.

Yooper Scooper: 30 to 48”-wide metal sledge with a big loop handle you push through snow drifts to clear your driveway. Snow shovels are for porches. Maybe roofs. Or *Trolls*.

Keweenaw Cake: the layered frozen treat along the sides of the roadway after the big diesel-electric scrapers go by exposing the numerous strata of packed snow and road grit.

We had heard there was a synagogue in the community, but in all our trips to the Keweenaw Peninsula, we had never been able to find it. Truth is, we never really looked all that hard. We could not imagine there would be much to it if we did spot it. At the time, when you Googled the name “Temple Jacob,” you were misdirected to the congregation in Flint. Not especially helpful to newcomers. In making the move, there was an unspoken agreement between Beth and me that even if we were not going to go completely “off the *Derech* (path),” ratcheting back our observance would inevitably be part of this move. So, Temple Jacob, being a Reform congregation, suited us just fine.



Figure 1: The author and his family attend synagogue at Temple Jacob in Hancock, Michigan. Temple Jacob is the second oldest active synagogue in the state. (JHSM collections.)



Once I had started my job with Michigan Tech, before Beth made the move with the rest of the family, I finally found the synagogue. I knew Copper Country had a rich mining history, eponymously so, that generated a fair amount of wealth. But the copper-domed building thrusting a golden *Magen David* high into the sky, 40 feet above me, was immediately humbling. How had we missed this? Awestruck by the gloss-brick, sandstone, and stained-glass façade, I had trouble imagining the size of the community that would have had to exist here to justify such a creation. It seemed otherworldly. And in that moment, I understood what the university archivist meant when she told me, “Jewish history here is truly unique.”

The shul sits on a postage stamp of a lot and occupies nearly every square inch of it. The building was constructed at a time before parking was a consideration—not that the Orthodox community that built what was then *Adas Yisroel* would have cared to have a parking lot in any case. When I did finally manage to get inside, I saw some of the original community’s marks. For instance, although a *mehitza* (dividing wall) does not separate the oak pews, there is a glorious balcony facing east which years ago would have vaulted the women and young children over the men. That wonderful balcony would have afforded the preferred view of the bimah and the enormous stained-glass windows on all four walls of the square sanctuary. Nowadays we have to keep the stairwell to the balcony locked because it is so attractive to the exploratory and dare-devil urges of the gaggle of young boys who prowl the building during our post-service meals.

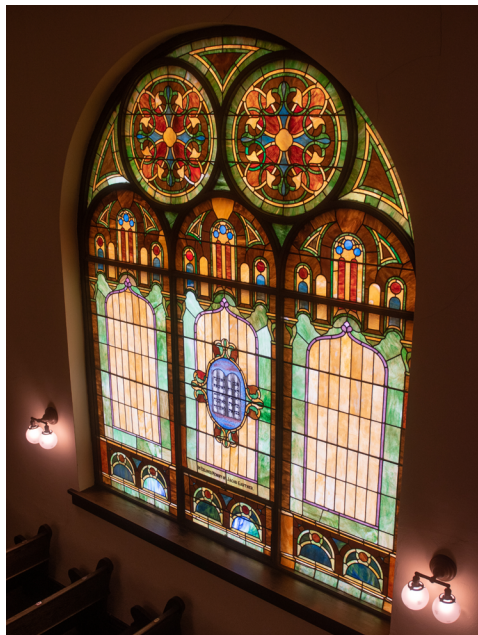


Figure 2: Stained-glass windows line the walls of Temple Jacob's sanctuary. (Courtesy of author.)



The present-day synagogue community is just a sliver of the size of the congregation that held daily *minyanim* (public worship) a century ago. With the bust of the mining industry, the population of the entire area collapsed, scattering the ethnically diverse miners to the post-World War I economic centers of the Midwest. Most Jews left at the same time. But the Michigan College of Mines stayed. And blossomed—eventually becoming Michigan Technological University. Many of the current members of Temple Jacob are affiliated with the university in some manner. Providing a base level of activity for the few-but-dauntless Jewish students attracted to this remote locale serves as a major focus of the synagogue’s post-mining mission.



Figure 3: Temple Jacob’s interior includes a balcony, where women and children worshipped when the synagogue was an Orthodox congregation. Today, it is a Reform temple. (Courtesy of author.)

For most of the area’s population who drive by the synagogue, the building likely stands as little more than an historic curiosity. Much like the kippah I wear. I have tried explaining why I wear a kippah here, when, for the most part, I did not wear one in Saint Louis. Perhaps it is part of an earnest internal transformation I sought in making the move to this place of five months of snow and ice. Perhaps wearing a kippah all the time is my way of ensuring my best behavior, knowing anything I am seen doing will be taken as representative of Jews everywhere. Perhaps I just like being different. It elicits frequent stares and infrequent questions. “Does that mean you’re a rabbi or something?” the owner of The Tire Shop once asked while pointing a finger to the top of his head. “Cause that’s what the guys putting those winter grippers on are calling you.”



Living up here in this land that eats cars, you have to have a tire guy. Many are the conversations I have had in his waiting room while my tires were being swapped. When G-d was handing out gab and affability, the stoic Finns left a surplus for others. The owner of The Tire Shop must have been near the end of the line because he took at least a triple helping. If you get the chance, ask him for advice on teaching your child to drive.

“No—but I’m kinda like an ambassador,” was my answer to him. And it is true. How many times have I been stopped while shopping in Econofoods or Walmart by a Jewish mother telling her child, “See! I’ve told you we’re not the only ones up here!” They often turn to me, “I hear there’s a synagogue in the area. Do you know where it is?” And they’ve approached me more poignantly after the numerous tragedies that have recently befallen Jewish communities. Most meaningful have been the expressions of sympathy from the local folks. I remember walking through Walmart the week after the Tree of Life synagogue massacre in Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018. People became quiet as I passed among them. Then, a big man, with a full salt-and-pepper beard and wearing a black leather vest, approached me at the bagged romaine. With a quiver in his voice he said, “I want you to know how painful it is to see that bullsh*t. I’m so sorry.”

Now, I do not want to leave some utopian impression about the days we have spent in the Upper Peninsula. There is another essay’s worth on the heartaches and confusions of raising a Jewish family and navigating these challenging times up here. But despite those difficulties, despite profound political and religious differences, here in this winter sanctuary, stunning in its beauty, full of interesting people, surprising kindnesses, and purposeful living, a full-hearted, good life can be scooped out.

David Holden is president of Temple Jacob in Hancock, Michigan, and manages library technology for Michigan Technological University. After graduating from South Lyon High School and Albion College, he spent over twenty years in St. Louis, Missouri. In 2015 David moved to the UP with his wife, Liz, and their four children, where he enjoys seeing snow in the sukkah and from the Seder table.



 CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Neighbor Boy

Alinda Dickinson Wasner

For my childhood playmate, Henry Lustig, born in Prague. Prankster and lifelong friend, we sat on the grass at Temple Beth El on Woodward arguing about life's pesky little and bigger problems. For the way he made me laugh and weep, sometimes all at once.

Always the mysterious one,
 Said his parents drugged him
 When he was a baby
 And hid him in the trunk
 So he wouldn't cry
 When they crossed the border.
 Who, when he is thirty
 Shows me a news clipping
 Of his family on the last transport,
 The one Shanghai-ed in China
 The only port that would accept them.
 And when he asks me to dance
 Junior year
 I can't remember
 What I wanted to ask him
 Except I suspect he asked me on a dare
 And I hate the beautiful blue dress
 He says reminds him
 Of the ocean
 And I hate my father
 For spending so much for it
 My father who refused
 To ever talk about war
 Who gets up and leaves the room
 When old Army buddies
 Start talking about
 Who they gunned down
 In darkness and daylight
 And only recently
 Have I seen photos
 Of the prisoners he helped release
 From Mauthausen



And only now I recall how he walked to work
Every day at the coat factory
In our small town
With my friend's dad
Still new to the US
Who may or may not have
Shared the story
Of his boy swaddled
And barely breathing
When it was safe enough
To open the trunk
And sunlight swirled
Around them
As if the ocean would swallow them whole.

Alinda Dickinson Wasner is the author of three full-length books of poetry, with another due out in 2023. Her work has appeared in over 40 small-press print and online journals. The recipient of many literary awards and a Prague Writer's fellowship, her work received second place in Ireland's International Poetry Prize and was nominated for "Best of the Net." Dickinson Wasner moved to Detroit in 1966, where she taught in Detroit Public Schools for 37 years.



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Words of Childhood:
Growing Up in 1940s Detroit*Dan I. Slobin*

Words bounced off walls and drifted into our ears; flowed out of radio speakers, Yiddish grandparents, African American cleaning ladies, and white American teachers. We heard all kinds of English, from Dad's "okee-dokee," to Miss Mulally's "Now, children, put your thinking caps on," to the voices of FDR and Truman and Walter Winchell. And the Lone Ranger and Henry Aldrich and Baby Snooks. And the words the older boys said with their not-quite-grasped, but clearly mysterious and forbidden, meanings.



Figure 1: The author's family, circa 1952: (clockwise from left) Judith Slobin (mother), the author, Norval Slobin (father), Sima Liepah (maternal grandmother), and Mark Slobin (brother). (All photos courtesy of author.)

And there were all those other languages, too. Grandma and Grandpa's people spoke Yiddish to one another, switching back and forth to accented English. Grandma sang little Ukrainian play-songs to us. Russian seemed a



prestige language—the language in which Uncle Joe would recite dramatic Pushkin poems on evenings of *deklamatsiya* (recitation). Mom likewise might recite a Pushkin poem she had learned in school in Russia. But Hebrew was the queen, the language everyone should know, if only to read out loud. Since my parents were Hebrew teachers, it was also a language to be understood. My passion was for Yiddish and Russian—I ended up speaking Yiddish and Russian quite well, for an American boy. And later, I managed serviceable Hebrew while doing research in Israel.

Learning one of the Jewish languages was simply part of life for my generation growing up in Detroit in the 1940s and 1950s. Some kids came from secular, left-wing families and went to the Yiddish school at the Workmen’s Circle. Some were Orthodox and went to Yeshiva. And there was a whole spectrum of Hebrew schools linked to congregations. There was also the non-denominational United Hebrew Schools, where Mom and Dad had met as teenagers and where they taught modern Hebrew, with a commitment to language and culture, but not religious practice. Since they were both teachers, they wanted to spare my brother and me the burdens of classroom learning, so they taught us at home, with varying success—depending on the language, age, and our mood.

Languages got mixed and mixed-up beautifully. Grandpa would refer to us as the *boycheklakh*. Now, as a linguist, I can pull that expression apart: English *boy*, with the Slavic diminutive *-chek* tacked on, and pluralized with the old Judeo-German *-lakh*—the “cute little guys.”



Figure 2: The author sitting on the hood of the family car, a 1937 Plymouth, on Hazelwood Avenue in Detroit, circa 1947.



Bits of Yiddish proverbs, folk expressions, and other useful words would pop up in the midst of English talk, like “Don’t *hock a chaynik!*”—which literally translates to “don’t chop a teapot,” but really means something like “cut it out—we’ve heard enough of that argument before!” Or, “I’ll just tell him I’m busy, and *fartik!* (finished, that’s that).”

My grandparents’ generation—first-generation immigrants—took English seriously. They went to night school; read daily newspapers, magazines, and books; and seemed to prefer to speak in English, even among themselves. Later on, I recognized the accents and studied the strange grammar. As a kid, it was just the way they talked. Perfectly understandable—and *heymish*—comfortably homey.

We were not like those immigrant families where the language of the Old Country was a private adult code to keep things from the children. My parents wanted us, somehow, to still live in the Old Country, in spirit. So Mom would sit me down on the living room couch after supper and teach me my Yiddish *aleph-bets*. I still have *Der onheyber*—“The Beginner” (1947). On the first page is a black-and-white drawing of two children, hand-in-hand. The boy has a cap, a striped sweater, and knickers: *Dos iz Berele*—“This is Berele.” The girl has braids and a short skirt: *Dos is Serele*—“This is Serele.”

In time, the content became instructive. For example, in the next book, *Mayn sprakbbukh*—“My Language Book” (1948), we read a story that mimicked our real Jewish Ukrainian lives in Detroit. Little Dovid, playing in the street with his friends, told his mother he was too busy to go to the store to buy butter. Without saying a word, Mama went herself. At dinner, Mama asked Dovid to read a school composition he wrote in her honor for Mother’s Day and then told him it was not acceptable:

“Why not?” Dovid asked.

“Because everything that you wrote isn’t true.”

“For example?” asked Daddy.

“He writes that he loves his Mama, that a mama is a treasure, you can’t get a mama for all the money in the world, but when I sent him to get butter . . .”

Dovid lowered his eyes, which had filled with tears, “Forgive me . . .”

“Why should I forgive you, since you’ve written a lie and made a fool of me, the teacher, the children?”

Dovid hugged his mama and said that it wouldn’t happen again.

And Mama forgave him.



Heavy reading for a nine- or ten-year-old, but preparation for years of fruitless discussions, long letters, and phone calls.

That story illustrated the trouble with words: the conceit that all of life could be put into words and resolved by words. Say the right thing, and a problem seems to disappear (but why does it keep popping back?). Say the wrong thing, and earn rejecting silence or sudden disagreement or worse. We were always struggling for the common narrative, the family formulas that allowed us to know who we really were, had been, were destined to become.

But words were fun, too. There were the remarkable puns—not just in one language, but preferably in two or three. And the endless and endlessly challenging anagram games, in which my brother and I were pitted against Mom and Dad in building ever larger words from the letters cast upon the dining room table: I think I am safe with a word like “MASTER,” but then Dad adds an “S” and takes it away as “STREAMS . . .” When we get really good, we challenge Dad, finding the “P” that lets us grab his word and turn it into “STAMPERS.” (Is this why I grew up to be a psycholinguist?)

The joy of words was also that you could learn so much from them. Dad gave us a blank check for buying books: my brother and I would make forays into Downtown Detroit in the 1940s and 1950s, hopping on a bus and wandering about second-hand bookstores and record shops. And the public library was a treasure trove: those smells, those well-worn volumes, those strange worlds and adventures one could take home for a few weeks—for free. Especially the county library in northern Michigan where we spent a month each summer. There, whole books could be devoured in a day or two on the beach. And in the evenings Mom and Dad would take turns reading out loud from some gem from the Benzie County library, like *Cheaper by the Dozen* or *The Egg and I*.

Words brought pleasure even at a very young age. Mom read poetry to us from as far back as I can remember. Sitting on the couch with her (when it was not a Yiddish lesson) listening to *Hiarwatha*: “By the shores of Gitche Gumee / By the shining Big-Sea-Water . . .” I did not understand all of it, but loved the rhythms and her voice as we wandered through the mythical life of “our” Native Americans. I was convinced all of the dirt trails through parks were old Native American trails and arrowheads might be buried in our backyard.

Words also were messengers from the outside world. All of those radio voices. During The War, the family clustered around Grandma and Grandpa’s big wooden box, with its single great speaker and tiny dial, all dark and shining with coats of furniture polish. Sitting on hassocks and couches, listening to a voice that everyone treated with such seriousness. It was FDR.



One spring afternoon in 1945, the phone rang. It was Aunt Vera. Mom let out a scream and rushed to the kitchen to turn on the little yellow plastic radio on a corner shelf above the sink. The announcer said the President was dead. I had been playing with a tennis ball but stopped. I knew they were talking about the voice we always listened to, the one that everyone admired so intently. I lay down on the couch, bounced my ball quietly up and down on the floor, and cried. I think it was the first time I cried for anything that happened outside of the family. I was six.



Figure 3: The author (right) asked to wear the FDR campaign pin on his sweater for this studio portrait with his brother, Mark Slobin (left), circa 1944.

To see moving images from the outside world in the 1940s, we had to go to a movie theater, so we created our own private moving images from the words in books, comic books, and especially, radio shows: weekly evening programs like *The Lone Ranger*; Saturday morning shows, *Let's Pretend* and *Ask Mr. President*, during which Dad taught us history as we tried to guess which president was being played by Edward Arnold; and terrifying late afternoon airings of *The Shadow*. On weekend afternoons, with the sun streaming in through the Venetian blinds in the living room, making dust dance in the air, we did quiet things while the family



listened to the Metropolitan Opera or the New York Philharmonic—perhaps the closest we came to a weekly religious experience.

And so I became a psycholinguist, studying languages all my life, exploring how each language casts its own forms on our thinking. I guess it all goes back to the words of childhood.

Dan Slobin, PhD, born in Detroit in 1939, is an emeritus professor of psychology and linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, studying relations between language and thinking across languages and cultures. He writes and translates poetry, as well as travel memoirs and essays on the arts and history. He is also a photographer, makes pen-and-ink drawings, and plays and improvises classical piano.

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IN MEMORIAM

Ellen S. Cole

1942–2021



(Courtesy of Elayne Gross Photography.)

On April 21, 2021, JHSM unexpectedly lost a beloved member of its pantheon of past presidents. Ellen Sue Cole led JHSM from 2005 to 2009, including two years with co-president Arnold Collens. This was one among many ways she served the organization. She is also remembered as a board member, event chair, yearbook committee member, docent, tour guide, and educator. In addition, she sat on the board of JHSM's supporting operational organization, the JHS of Michigan Heritage Foundation, helping to ensure JHSM's future. Fellow past presidents recall Ellen's warmth, kindness, follow through, dependability, and humility. Her presidential messages in *Michigan Jewish History* celebrated group efforts and JHSM's *heimish* reputation, which she helped cultivate. She was a team player who moved through life with integrity and purpose.

Born in Detroit on March 3, 1942, to Archie Philip Grey and Lydia Solovich Grey, Ellen completed bachelor's and master's degrees in education from Michigan State University and Wayne State University. She devoted her career to teaching, working for more than 35 years with the Southfield Public School District. As



an elementary school teacher, she taught her students about Michigan history, even when it was not part of the curriculum. Fittingly, after leaving the classroom and coming to JHSM's helm, she prioritized developing bus tours for students, teaching them the community's history through its touchstones.

Ellen embodied so much of that history. Like her brother, James D. Grey (also a JHSM past president), she was a descendant of founding families at Detroit's Temple Beth El, Congregation Shaarey Zedek, and Temple Israel; Ferndale's Machpelah Cemetery; Birmingham's Clover Hill Park Cemetery; as well as Traverse City's Congregation Beth El, home to Michigan's oldest continuously used synagogue building. She acquired her love of history from her pharmacist father, who led her on versions of the driving tours she would go on to develop for JHSM. Archie Grey had changed his name from Goldstein in 1936, when antisemitism in Detroit was especially high.

As Ellen's family likes to say, she never stopped working. While president of JHSM, in 2007 she oversaw the installation of the historical marker at William G. Milliken State Park and Harbor, commemorating Detroit's first Jewish resident (Chapman Abraham) and the 181 Michigan Jewish soldiers of the Civil War. It continues to be a go-to stop on our walking, bus, and bike tours. Also in 2007, she helped develop the "Settlers to Citizens" bus tour of Detroit Jewish history, which won the Historical Society of Michigan's Outstanding Educational Program award that year. Fifteen years later, that program still serves as the basis for many of our public and student bus tours.

Projects like these demanded research, and Ellen was always ready to pitch in. She was an avid reader, amassing scores of history books. She also leaves behind a rich legacy of service. In addition to her work with JHSM and the Heritage Foundation, she was known for bringing gifts to those dealing with illness or immobility. She was also a devoted canasta and bridge player, loved to garden and travel, and had a world of friends.

Preceded in death by her husband Michael Robert Cole, nephew Jeffrey Andrew Grey, and sister-in-law Ruth Nemon Grey, Ellen leaves behind two children (Dr. James [Lisa] Bramson and Julie Bramson Zalla) and four grandchildren (Ryan and Kyle Zalla, and Eli and Zoe Knisbacher), as well as her brother Jim, nieces Rachel Grey Ellis and Emily (Jordan) Berman, great-nieces and nephews, cousins, and friends, many of whom volunteered with her at JHSM.



IN MEMORIAM

Philip Parker Mason¹

1927-2021



(Courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit.)

Dr. Philip P. Mason served as an inspiration and leader in organizing the preservation of the Detroit Jewish community's archives, which are among the largest Jewish archival collections in the US. Mason, the founding director of the Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, at Wayne State University, died May 6, 2021, at the age of 94. In addition to serving as the Reuther's founding director, a position he first occupied in 1958, his contributions to the larger archival profession and as a historian with an extensive publication record, consultancies, and teaching portfolio, reflect a depth and variety not often found in the academic community.

Born in Salem, Massachusetts, on April 27, 1927, Mason was the son of Homer Philip Mason and Mildred Trask Mason. After graduating from high school in Beverly, Massachusetts, in 1945, he joined the US Navy. Following his

¹This in memoriam was adapted by Walter P. Reuther Library Archivist and former JHSM Director Aimee Ergas from an original blog post by Dr. Louis Jones, May 10, 2021, online at: <https://reuther.wayne.edu/node/15030>.



World War II service, Mason entered Boston University where, with the help of the GI Bill, he received a BA in history (1950) and continued his education at the University of Michigan, receiving an MA (1951) and a PhD in history (1956). During Mason's tenure at the University of Michigan, he worked at the Bentley Historical Library, where he first learned about the importance of archival work. This experience inspired him to pursue the work that would fill most of his career. While still working on his doctorate, he took on the position of Archivist for the State of Michigan. Thereafter, he was appointed director of the University Archives at Wayne State University, with a joint appointment in the Department of History. He would remain at WSU for the duration of his long and productive career.

The relationships Mason nurtured with Walter Reuther and other leaders of the UAW, especially Leonard Woodcock, paved the way for that union to contribute over \$2 million towards the construction of the Reuther Library in 1975. With additional funds from the UAW, the Leonard Woodcock wing was added in 1991. It was under his tenure as director that Mason collected some of its most prominent collections, including those of the UAW; United Farm Workers; the Detroit Branch of the NAACP; the American Federation of Teachers; the American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees; the Industrial Workers of the World; Rosa Parks; and countless others.

For the Jewish community, Mason was an important force in the movement to preserve its history. As early as 1971 he served on a committee of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture to encourage the establishment of archival holdings at Jewish institutions across the country. In 1975, years before the internet, he published a directory of these Jewish collections for scholars to access. In the 1980s Mason worked with JHSM to bring to the Reuther Library the papers of Philip Slomovitz, who founded the Detroit *Jewish News* in 1942 and served as the voice of the city's Jewish community for almost 50 years. Slomovitz had donated thirteen four-drawer filing cabinets of papers to JHSM. Judith Levin Cantor, Sylvia Babcock, Alan Kandel, and Joe Kramer archived them, but because JHSM did not have a place to store the papers, it arranged with Mason for the documents to be located at the Reuther Library.

In the late 1980s Mason began working with a committee of historians and leaders to deposit the archives of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit at the Reuther Library, where they remain to this day. Chaired by Hon. Avern Cohn (see in memoriam on page 95), the committee included Cantor, Irwin Shaw (director of the Jewish Community Center), and Sharon Alterman. The Jewish Community Archives (JCA) was formally established in 1991 and now includes more than two million documents chronicling the growth and development of Federation, its member agencies, and other local Jewish organizations and



individuals. Alterman, a former JCA director, remembers that Mason was “very supportive” as the process began and as collecting grew over the years.

Philip Mason’s publication record is vast. In addition to his directory of Jewish archival institutions, he wrote about Michigan’s role in the Civil War, Michigan-based foundations, the Ambassador Bridge, Prohibition, Harper Hospital, copper mining and culture in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, the Prismatic Club, and a history of American roads. Through his suggestion, the Wayne State University Press established the Great Lakes Book Series on local and regional history, with Mason as its founding editor.

Archival education was an important part of his work at WSU. Established in 1962, WSU’s Archival Administration program was one of, if not the first of, such programs in the country. Through Mason’s numerous connections, he placed his students in positions throughout the United States and Canada.

Few archivists could boast of the contributions that Mason made to archival and related professional organizations, including the Michigan Archival Association (founder), the Midwest Archives Conference (founder), Society of American Archivists (SAA) (secretary, 1963-1968; president, 1970-1971), the Michigan Oral History Association, the Oral History Association, the North American Labor History Conference (founder), and the (Michigan) Local History Conference (founder).

Mason was the recipient of many prestigious awards and honors. In recognition of his efforts to preserve the Slomovitz papers and establish the JCA, JHSM awarded Mason, along with Dr. Leslie Hough, its Leonard N. Simons History-Maker Award in 1996. The award honored Mason and Hough for their outstanding contributions to the enrichment, conservation, knowledge, and dissemination of Michigan Jewish history. Other honors included SAA Fellow (1963), the Distinguished Graduate Faculty Award (1985), an award from the Michigan Association of Governing Boards (1985), the WSU Distinguished Professor of History Award (1990), the WSU President’s Exceptional Service Award (2001), and the Alumni Service Award (2005). In 2008 the US Senate, through the office of Senator Carl Levin, honored Mason with a resolution, which appeared in the Congressional Record, and he later received the Historical Society of Michigan’s Lifetime Achievement Award (2009).

Following his retirement, Mason and his wife, Marcia, spent time between Eagle Harbor, Michigan; the Detroit metropolitan area; and Arizona. They worked on a number of historical projects, including the founding of the Eagle River Museum in Michigan. Dr. Philip Mason’s legacy lives on in the many students he taught and the many organizations to which he contributed.



IN MEMORIAM

Ruthe Goldstein

1937–2022



(Courtesy of Brett Mountain.)

On February 1, 2022, JHSM lost a beloved friend, devoted volunteer, knowledgeable historian, and amazing educator. Ruthe Goldstein, a veritable encyclopedia of Michigan Jewish history, was integral to the development of JHSM's early programs for schoolchildren and created and led numerous bus tours of historic Jewish Detroit for both children and adults. Through such programs and tours, she touched the lives of thousands of people. It was only fitting that in 2019 she received JHSM's inaugural Outstanding Educator award, which honors individuals who have demonstrated an above-and-beyond commitment to interpreting the history of Jewish Michigan for students, families, and/or the general public.

JHSM award recipients are asked to write profiles of themselves for inclusion in our annual Bulletin. Ruthe was reluctant at first, shy about publicizing her accomplishments. In the end, she beautifully captured her story and achievements—so well, in fact, that no tribute could honor Ruthe better than her own words. Ruthe's profile from the 2020 Bulletin is reprinted below.



Ruthe Goldstein was born in 1937 in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, to Abe and Bea Katzman. Four months later the family returned to Detroit where Ruthe and her younger sister, Judie, grew up. During Ruthe's childhood her parents were very active in the Jewish community. Their involvement inspired Ruthe's lifelong commitment to Jewish service, beginning with her participation as a teenager in the Jewish youth groups, USY (United Synagogue Youth, the youth arm of the Conservative Movement), BBG (B'nai B'rith Girls, a Jewish teen girls' movement within B'nai B'rith Youth Organization), and Young Judea (a peer-led Zionist youth movement).

After graduating from Detroit's Mumford High School, Ruthe attended the University of Michigan. She then earned a bachelor of science degree in education, a master's degree in math education, and an education specialist certificate in math at Wayne University (now Wayne State University). She met her husband, Sam, in 1958, and they were married in June 1959. Ruthe began teaching in a six-room schoolhouse. After a leave of ten years to raise her children, Jonathan and Deborah, Ruthe found herself missing teaching and returned to the classroom as a middle-school math teacher. Ruthe went on to teach in the Detroit Public School system for 34 years.



Ruthe Goldstein teaches participants about the history of Congregation Shaarey Zedek during JHSM's "Exploring Our Past: A Bus Tour of Three Former Synagogues" on July 17, 2018. (JHSM collections.)

Ruthe's service to the Jewish community, begun as a teen, has continued throughout her life. She has spent countless hours contributing to her local shul, Congregation Shaarey Zedek, which she considers her "second home." She has held leadership roles, serving as Sisterhood president and as a member of the



board of trustees. She also has organized Shabbat lunches and has put her love of education to use, teaching Hebrew-school classes and co-authoring *100 Years of Shaarey Zedek*. Her greatest personal accomplishment was advocating successfully for an adult b'nai mitzvah class to give individuals, like her, who did not celebrate a b'nai mitzvah, the chance to do so later in life. Ruthe was part of the first class and aided many subsequent classes in the process. Elsewhere, Ruthe has been involved in the Women's League for Conservative Judaism and served as president of the Centennial Chapter of Jewish Women International.

Other volunteer positions have allowed Ruthe to share her passion for education with thousands in the Jewish community. In 1983 Ruthe became a docent at the Holocaust Memorial Center. She served as a member and officer of HMC's Docent Steering Committee and received an award for 30 years of service to the organization. In 2003 Ruthe began sharing her expertise on the history of Detroit's Jewish neighborhoods as a docent, director, and officer of JHSM. Described by other longtime JHSM members as a "supreme authority" and a "living library," Ruthe has brought Michigan Jewish history alive for schoolchildren, retirees, and everyone in between. She has written scripts for bus tours and developed programs that introduce her audiences to Detroit's historic Jewish neighborhoods, including the people, customs, beliefs, and practices.

In 2020 Ruthe received the Tikkun Olam award "for helping to 'Repair Our World'" at the annual Eight over Eighty event sponsored by Jewish Senior Life. As part of her lifelong commitment to Tikkun Olam, Ruthe has tried to live by the following principles:

- Be a good moral human being
- Participate in your community
- Help those who are climbing the ladder

In abiding by these tenets, Ruthe has been a source of inspiration to students, mentees, and fellow community members.

Ruthe's adherence to the foregoing ideals, wealth of knowledge, and love of teaching made her a natural choice to receive JHSM's inaugural Outstanding Educator award. As Ruthe trained so many of our current volunteers, her impact on JHSM will continue.

Ruthe Goldstein was the wife of the late Samuel Goldstein. She is survived by her children Jonathan Goldstein (Cheri Bashara) and Deborah Goldstein; grandchildren Tyler Goldstein, Samantha Goldstein, and Marc Green; great-grandchild Hazel Heidenreich-Goldstein; sister Judie Blumeno (Arnold Levitsky); and many loving nieces and nephews. JHSM and countless others will miss this inspirational human being.



 IN MEMORIAM

Judge Avern Cohn

1924–2022



(Courtesy of Cohn family.)

On February 4, 2022, JHSM lost a longtime friend and supporter, Judge Avern Cohn. Cohn was born in Detroit on July 23, 1924, to Irwin I. and Sadie Levin Cohn. He enrolled at the University of Michigan in 1942, but left school the following year to serve in the army. After being discharged in 1946, he enrolled in the University of Michigan Law School, receiving his JD in 1949. Cohn practiced law with his father at the Law Offices of Irwin I. Cohn (1949 to 1961) and then at Honigman Miller Schwartz and Cohn (now Honigman LLP) (1961 to 1979). During this time he served on the Michigan Civil Rights Commission (1972 through 1975) and on the Detroit Board of Police Commissioners (1975 through 1979). Cohn was appointed as a United States District Court Judge for the Eastern District of Michigan by President Jimmy Carter effective September 26, 1979. He retired from the federal bench in December 2019, at age 95.

Cohn was the husband of Lois Pincus Cohn and the late Joyce Hochman Cohn, and the father of Sheldon Cohn, Leslie Magy, and Thomas Cohn. He also leaves behind Lois' daughters Lisa (Kent Kleinman) Pincus and Julie Pincus; grandchildren Harrison Magy, Ilyse Magy (Justin Hall), Daniel (fiancée Lauren Alexander) Magy, Bennett



Magy, Hannah Magy, Jonathan Cohn, and Jeremy Cohn; and great-grandchildren Delia Maghally and Emmett Maghally.

Close friend and colleague Eugene Driker reflects below on Cohn's impact on all who knew him.

The recent death of United States District Judge Avern Cohn has brought forth a great many recollections and tributes all centered on just what an extraordinary and unique individual he was and how many people and institutions he influenced over the course of his 97-year life.

The Detroit Jewish community has given rise to an amazing array of talented and dedicated men and women who have made our city well-known nationally for the quality and breadth of our leadership. Avern Cohn occupies a very special place in that pantheon.

Best known for his 40 years as a federal trial court judge, Avern was also deeply involved with many other institutions and causes. Early in his career he served on the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, then on the Detroit Police Commission, where he worked tirelessly to help Mayor Coleman Young integrate the largely white command structure for a department that was overseeing a largely black city.

Avern was a proud member of the Jewish community, serving in the important position of president of the Jewish Federation of Metro Detroit. His work in the Jewish and broader communities brought praise and recognition on a regular basis. He and his wife Lois were together honored as Activists of the Year by the Jewish Community Relations Council, and Avern was presented with the coveted Fred M. Butzel Memorial Award by Federation and the Dennis W. Archer Public Service Award by the Detroit Bar Association.

For the readers of this journal what is particularly significant is the attention Avern paid to history in every facet of his life. Most of us have never encountered anyone who so infused historical information and texts into his work as a lawyer, a communal leader, or a federal judge. In its documentary about Detroit's Jewish Community, Detroit Public TV Channel 56 included an interview with Avern in which he observed that his Jewishness helped him be a better judge more than being a judge helped him be a better Jew. Here I believe Avern was calling upon his firm belief in the concept of *tikkun olam*, the obligation stemming from the Talmud to "repair the world." Avern took that historical injunction very seriously, always seeking to find a better solution through the thicket of human problems that confronted him as a judge.

Recognizing the importance of preserving and recounting the story of Michigan Jewry, Avern was a dedicated supporter of JHSM, both financially and intellectually, for more than 50 years. In 1992 JHSM bestowed on him the prestigious Leonard N.



Simons History-Maker Award in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the enrichment, conservation, knowledge, and dissemination of Michigan Jewish history. Avern mentored JHSM presidents, wrote articles for its publications, sponsored lectures, and was instrumental in establishing the Cohn/Prentis Family Foundation Jewish Writers Fund, which supports authors of works appearing in the organization's highly acclaimed journal, *Michigan Jewish History*.

What made Avern's voice so powerful for so long was his unyielding belief in the rule of law, in an independent and courageous judiciary, and in democratic institutions. From his thousands of judicial rulings to the hundreds of letters to the editors of newspapers that he was forever writing, Avern never stopped promoting his unshakable confidence in our system of government and its importance to our society. And he understood the Jewish antecedents, from the prophets and others, for so much that forms the backbone of our way of life. In these fraught times, we are especially grateful that Avern continuously reminded us of these bedrock values he held so dear.

Avern of course had immense intellectual curiosity. He loved to learn and never stopped until his final breath. And that learning covered topics most of us would never think of. Who else in his tenth decade would become intrigued with the travels of Alexis de Tocqueville through Michigan in the early nineteenth century and underwrite the cost of publishing a magnificently illustrated booklet documenting his exploration of our state, complete with newly drawn maps?

Avern was well known for distributing articles, clippings, and even modest Post-it Notes with a brief fact scrawled on them to a wide circle of friends and colleagues. His capacity for sharing obscure information that was of interest to him was limitless.

Avern was fallible and readily admitted it. He understood his weaknesses, which often played out in his courtroom as he displayed impatience with an attorney who he felt was inadequately prepared or otherwise not "measuring up." And that impatience sometimes rose to the level of an oral "spanking" that Avern would administer to the hapless lawyer. But Avern had a tremendous capacity to recover his balance, and with great frequency followed an intemperate outburst with a note or phone call of apology. That took guts, and Avern had it, going so far as his willingness to reverse himself on decisions when he was shown by the losing lawyer that he erred. While many a judge would simply give a disappointed lawyer directions to the appeals court, Avern had the unusual strength of character to admit that he had made a mistake and forthwith correct it.

But to our good fortune, those mistakes were rare. When it came to the art of judging, Avern had no peer. He could cut to the heart of a case in a flash, often understanding the real issue better than the lawyer arguing before him. His



encyclopedic knowledge of the law, often augmented with rich historical insights, made his opinions a treat to read.

Of course, one of the most endearing and enduring characteristics of Avern's years on the bench was his refusal to detach himself from the life of the community he called home. While the nature of judging and the applicable ethical rules often create barriers between a judge and the real world around him, Avern found a way to remain engaged in civic life, and we are all the better for it.

How many Detroiters, when confronted with a difficult issue touching on some aspect of public policy, would instinctively say, "Let's find out what Avern thinks"? And this was not because the problem necessarily had a legal component, but rather because its solution required judgment, experience and, as we say in Yiddish, "*sachel*" (common sense), all of which Avern had in abundant measure.

Since Avern so often turned to historical sources to support a point he was making, let us do the same by comparing how his blend of judging and social engagement followed in the path set by the first Jewish Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis. In his biography of Brandeis, Professor Melvin Urofsky recounted how, even after he joined the Supreme Court, Brandeis remained closely connected to the issues that so occupied him in private practice before he took the bench, including trends in legal education at his beloved Harvard Law School.

Professor Urofsky wrote:

As he entered his eighth decade, Louis Brandeis seemed indefatigable. Aside from his work at the Supreme Court, he kept up extrajudicial activities that one might easily have mistaken for full-time employment. At times his wife Alice probably wondered why in 1916 she thought that her husband's days of knight-errantry were over.¹

Judge Cohn certainly followed the Brandeis model, deeply engaged in far-reaching developments in the law and legal education, while serving as our own knight-errant to whom people and institutions turned for ideas, wisdom, and guidance on an array of issues.

And when in his 96th year he recognized that it was appropriate to step down from the bench, he did so with grace, acknowledging that it was "time to pass on my responsibilities to others." Many of his friends and colleagues then predicted that even without a robe and a courtroom, Avern would continue to contribute significantly to the civic good. He did exactly that, never slowing down in his zeal for attacking injustice and working for a more perfect society.

Avern Cohn enriched our lives in ways too numerous to count, but we know that for almost a century our city, state, and nation benefited so greatly from the intellect and extraordinary talents of this remarkable man.

¹ Melvin I. Urofsky, *Louis D. Brandeis: A Life* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 642.



Judge Avern Cohnisms

Cohnism (*kōn-iz'əm*) *n.* A word, phrase, story, or dialogue spoken by Avern Cohn, frequently accompanied by expressive gestures, facial movements, and dramatic intonation for appropriate emphasis. — Bryan Anderson

Judge Avern Cohn's repartee with attorneys and others in his courtroom became legendary—so legendary that his former law clerk, Bryan Anderson, compiled a book of some of the most memorable “Cohnisms.”¹ Some of our favorites are reprinted below:

Do you know how to swim? . . . It's a good thing, because you're drowning.

I realized I was being played like a violin, so I took away his bow.

Have you ever been to a Yeshiva? This sounds like an exercise in Talmudic exegesis.

You should learn that I'm almost always right. Not really, but by virtue of position.

I was on the edge of my seat . . . but that was only to keep me from falling asleep!

Keep your voice down. I'm the only one who shouts in this courtroom.

This is a palace of justice!

You catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar.

Some lawyers find out the judge who's been assigned to their case and they say, “Ah Ha!” Others say, “Oy!”

The only thing more interesting than observing the inner workings of a judge's chambers is watching hot dogs being made.

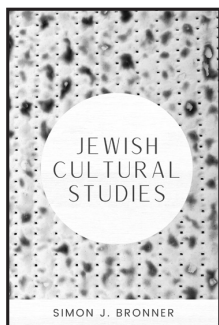
The wheels of justice grind exceedingly slow, and they don't grind very fine.

The fact that wisdom comes too late is no reason to reject it.

¹ Bryan Anderson, ed., *“This is a Palace of Justice!”: A Collection of Cohnisms* (Ann Arbor, MI: The Bessenberg Bindery, 2005).



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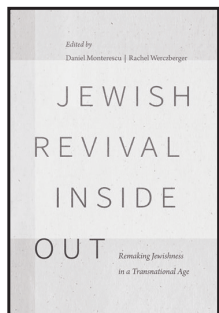


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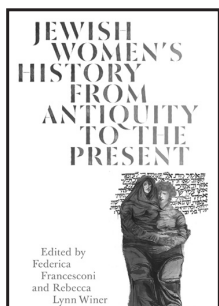
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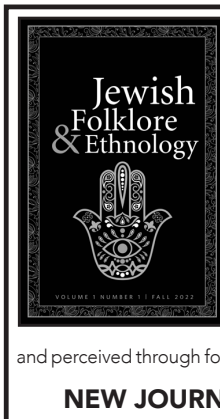
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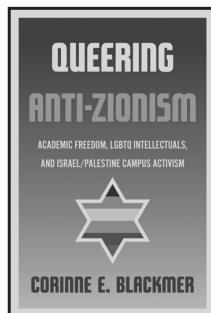


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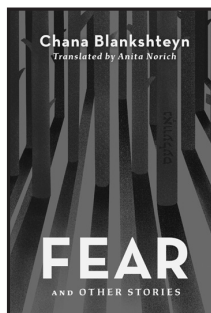
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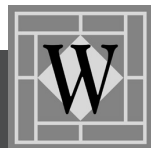


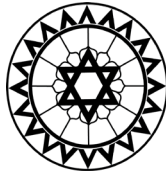
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