

Reminiscences of the Jewish Community of Canonsburg

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It was the second year of the twentieth century, 1901, when young Sam Finkel and his lovely bride, Mary, rode with their horse and buggy into Canonsburg. There they pulled up reins to become the first Jews to settle in our town. They hitched their horse and hopes to their new community and never looked back.

They were a part of that vast wave of immigrants from Eastern Europe that washed up on American shores. The industrial revolution was in full throttle. It spawned an appetite for labor and industry that only a flood of immigrants could sate. The telephone, electric motor, horseless carriage, the railroad stretching from sea to shining sea-- had long since ceased to be considered miracles.

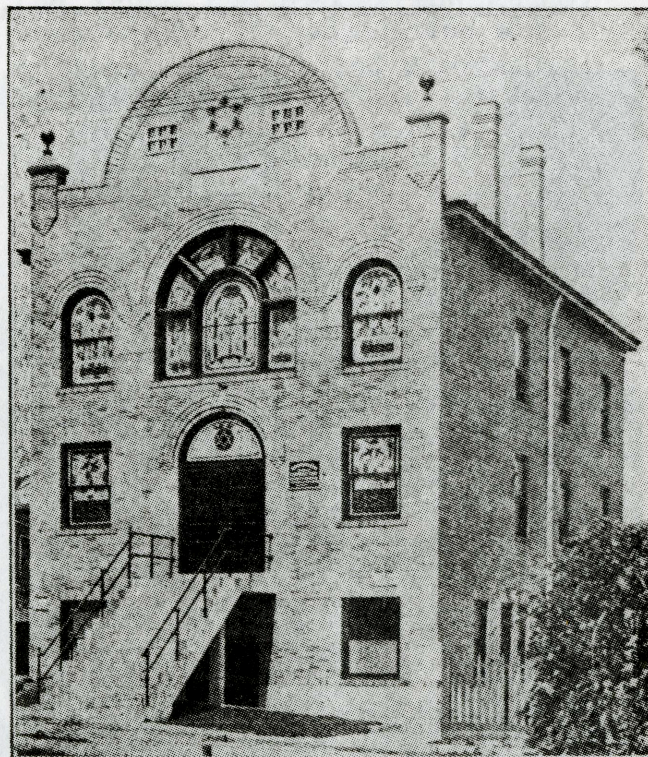
It wasn't long before the Finkels were joined by a growing cadre of Jewish families; the Sam and Jake Morris's, J. D. Levine's, E. L. Marcus's, Sam Rosenberg's, Sam Burg's, etc. When the adult male Jewish census reached ten (*Minyon*--the number or quorum needed to conduct a religious service), the Jewish group became a community. It was big enough to hold services but too small to build their own edifice. Their religious service found its voice above Jacob Morris's clothing store at Jefferson Avenue and Pike Street.

It was not until 1913 that the community grew large enough to support a synagogue. But it was in the year 1914, thirteen years after Sam Finkel first arrived, that the Canonsburg Hebrew Association, Tree of Life Synagogue was incorporated under the laws of the Commonwealth

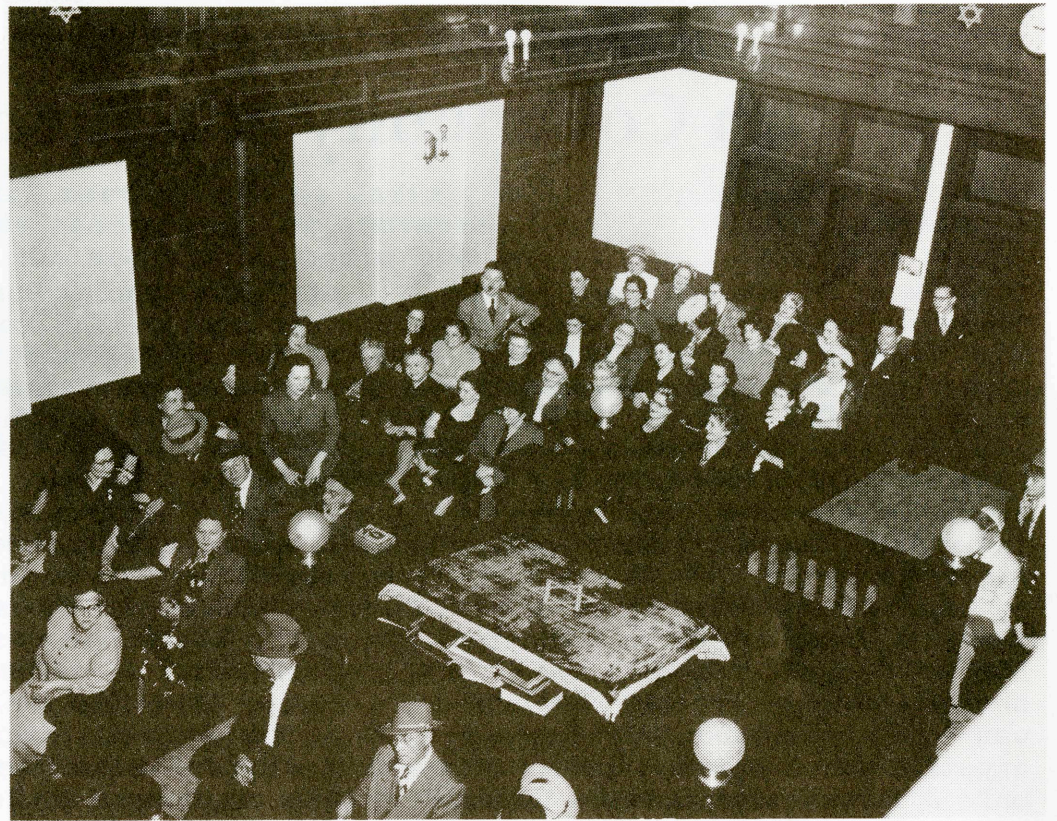
of Pennsylvania, Borough of Canonsburg. The roots of the Tree of Life (*Etz Chaim*) took firm hold. That same year the synagogue was built between the home of the late Dr. Boze and the Sons of Italy Hall on Ashland Avenue.

The Daily Notes, in its October 22, 1914 edition, heralded this memorable event for the Jewish Community of Canonsburg with the story of the ground breaking and construction of the new Jewish House of Worship.

Records show that the contract to build the edifice was let out to the architects H. Rubenstein Co. of Pittsburgh. It was to have a seating capacity of 600. It took



Tree of Life Synagogue



These photographs of the interior of the synagogue show the *Bima* or table where the *Torah* or Holy Scroll was read. The photographs were taken on the occasion of the alumni meeting in 1949.



the munificent sum of \$7,000 to erect the structure. That is less than half the cost of building a single room today.

In 1928 the Tree of Life Synagogue (*Shule*) underwent a facelift, refurbishing the front entrance, bricking in the outer steps, and adding two study rooms in the process.

The *Daily Notes* in its March 23, 1914 edition chronicled the first Jewish event held in our town, that of the Bar Mitzvah of Emmanuel Morris, son of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Morris of West College Street. It was held in the Odd Fellows Hall before a rapt audience of 200 guests.

Being a Congregation of the Ashkenazic (Eastern European) persuasion, it not only took on the Ashkenazi format of prayer, it adopted the architectural style as well.

The Holy Ark (*Oren Hakodesh*) which cradled the sacred Torah scrolls (five Books of Moses) rested on the Eastern Wall as it does in every synagogue (*Shule*) worldwide. So when Jews prayed they faced east toward Israel, Jerusalem and the Holy Mount as they have done millennia, long before there was a United Nations.

The Holy Ark was flanked by ornate wooden likenesses of Lions of Judah and covered with a blue velvet curtain, on which was inscribed the golden lettered words in Hebrew, exhorting the worshipers to "Know Before Whom You Stand".

The Eternal Light (*Ner Tomid*) which burned continuously hung over the Ark. Straight backed chairs flanked the Ark where the Rabbi, president, and officers sat during the services.

In accordance with Ashkanazic dictates the *Bima* platform was located in the center of the sanctuary surrounded by pews which naturally faced the ark. It was on the large table in the center of the *Bima* that the Sacred Scrolls were

placed to be read with scheduled portions of the Law on Saturdays, High Holidays and Festivals.

To accommodate the Orthodox injunction forbidding mixed seating of the genders, a balcony was installed where the women could sit and pray.

October 1915 saw the first election of officers. Sam Finkel to no one's surprise ran unopposed to become the "George Washington" of the Congregation, its first president. Filling out the roster were Sam Rosenberg, vice president, E. L. Marcus, secretary, Thomas Penner, treasurer. The By-laws Committee included Sam Burg, Sam Finkel, J. M. Klein, J. D. Levin and Sam Rosenberg.

The by-laws were typical of any civic or religious organization except for one unique phenomenon. Indigenous to the infrastructure of an Orthodox Congregation was a court called the *Beth Din* (House of Judgment). This court, consisting of congregants and generally headed by the Rabbi, was empowered by the Congregation to adjudicate and settle complaints and grievances between members. It is interesting to note that the litigants involved, who had the option to go to a squire or civil court, by and large accepted the judgment of the *Beth Din* (Court) as sacrosanct. I know of no other organization that has such a similar instrument.

To carry the point further, slander was considered a crime; punishment could be meted out, and in excessive cases could result in expulsion from the congregation.

The whole concept of the court (*Beth Din*) within the Congregation was adopted from Jewish Communal life in Europe whose antecedents were in ancient Israel. Take note that the court did not supersede civil law.

Like in all Jewish communities, the synagogue was central to Jewish communal life, naturally prayer had primacy in its purpose.

The synagogue held services daily. Morning, (*Shachrit*) afternoon, (*Mincha*) and evening (*Maariv*). The format hearkened back to Ezra the Scribe and the 120 men of the Great Assembly almost 2500 years ago around 475 B.C.E.* The prayers were recited in ancient Hebrew, the holy tongue, some of the very same prayers recited by Christ in his lifetime.

As previously stated a service required a quorum of 10 male adults. The prayer leader (*Baal T'Falla*) as the name implies conducted the services. The prayer leader did not necessarily have to be a Rabbi, any knowledgeable layman with acceptable synagogue skills could conduct services.

The prayer leader intoned phrased passages melodically. The liturgy (*nigunim*) varied with the Sabbath, High Holidays, Festivals and daily prayers. The Liturgy also varied to a lesser degree with the geographic areas from which the worshipers originally came. Our Congregation subscribed to the liturgy of Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Hungary, etc.

Every synagogue had capable prayer leaders, Canonsburg was no exception. The late Sam Finkel and Sam Rosenberg were fine prayer leaders.

Saturday (Sabbath) was and is the holiest day of the week. It begins Friday night (*Kabaalah Shabbat*) as it ushers in the Sabbath "Queen."

The liturgy and prayers are different and, as stated before, the Sacred Scrolls are read. The reader is called the *Bal Korah* (a master of reading). Reading the passages required special training. The Holy words are handwritten on parchment. There are no vowels.

As in all other Jewish Congregations, one of the strongest threads that wove the tapestry of

* B.C.E. (*Before the Common Era*) is an alternate designation corresponding with B.C.

Canonsburg Jewish Communal life was incorporated in the Hebrew expression *derek eretz*, literally meaning "the way of the world."

Derek Eretz, Talmudically inspired in its broader terms, meant commitment to help less fortunate Jews such as the poor, hungry and the sick. The concept of *Derek Eretz* served as an umbrella for the ancillary organizations that underpinned the concept of helping less fortunate Jews. Organizations like *Lechem Aniyum* (bread for the poor), *Hachnosis Orchim* (food for the wayfarer), *Bichur Cholim* (visiting the sick) were based on this.

One of the most popular projects was the Jewish National Fund, created in 1901 for the purpose of purchasing and reclaiming land in Israel. The organization featured the distribution of small blue and white tin canisters which were placed in every home for every occasion. The funds collected purchased much of the land of what is now Israel. Much of the land bought was from absentee land owners.

Like all Jewish communities the synagogue was central in all Jewish life. Not only was the synagogue a place of worship, it also physically accommodated the educational and social needs of the Congregation.

The sanctuary was on the main floor. The social hall was on the basement floor. It not only accommodated all social functions, it served as a meeting place for various organizations functioning in the congregation. A stage for entertainment and lectures was installed.

The synagogue had a dual function, primarily for prayer in tandem with providing Jewish education. In the infrastructure of the congregation the Rabbi played a pivotal role. He was not only the spiritual leader, he was also responsible for the Jewish education for the children, a top priority in Jewish tradition.



Sunday School held in the synagogue c.1916

Education was two pronged, first Hebrew education classes were conducted daily Monday through Thursday, generally 4:30 P.M. to 6:00 P.M. There were no classes on Friday, since Sabbath began Friday evening. Naturally there were no classes on Saturday. Saturday was devoted to prayer only.

Our Rabbis were by and large stern, no nonsense and knuckle rapping when needed. Some of the earlier Rabbis taught in Yiddish. It was a twelve-month schedule with no summer vacation. The only variation in the schedule was during the summer months. Then classes were held in the morning only.

The second prong was our Sunday School, an American phenomenon strange to the European milieu. It was designed to augment the curriculum of the *Cheder* (public class for Hebrew study) especially for children who could not attend *Cheder*.

It was introduced in 1916 by the late Miriam Schoenfeld of Pittsburgh. At one point, the student body swelled to 80 students. The Sunday School curriculum concerned itself with the Bible, Jewish history, and

customs of the Jewish holidays. It was taught in English by competent teachers, well versed in the subjects assigned to them.

One of the first principals was the late Judge David Weiner, followed by an impressive list of principals. Most prominent of these was Elliot Finkel. I myself joined that list in the waning years of the Congregation.

The Canonsburg Jewish community, like all other communities, had a chronic problem with finances. With a membership of 50 families who were assessed \$5 per month for dues with some additional occasional contributions, you can imagine how small the Rabbi's salary was. Retaining a spiritual leader for an extended period of time was an almost impossible challenge. The Rabbis were by and large a remarkable breed, proud and dedicated to perpetuate Judaism.

Thus, in the shifting sands of my memories, emerges a parade of Rabbis such as Lamb, London, Plotkin, Glyn, Goodman, Cantor, Schuvalsky. I owe my knowledge, respect, pride and

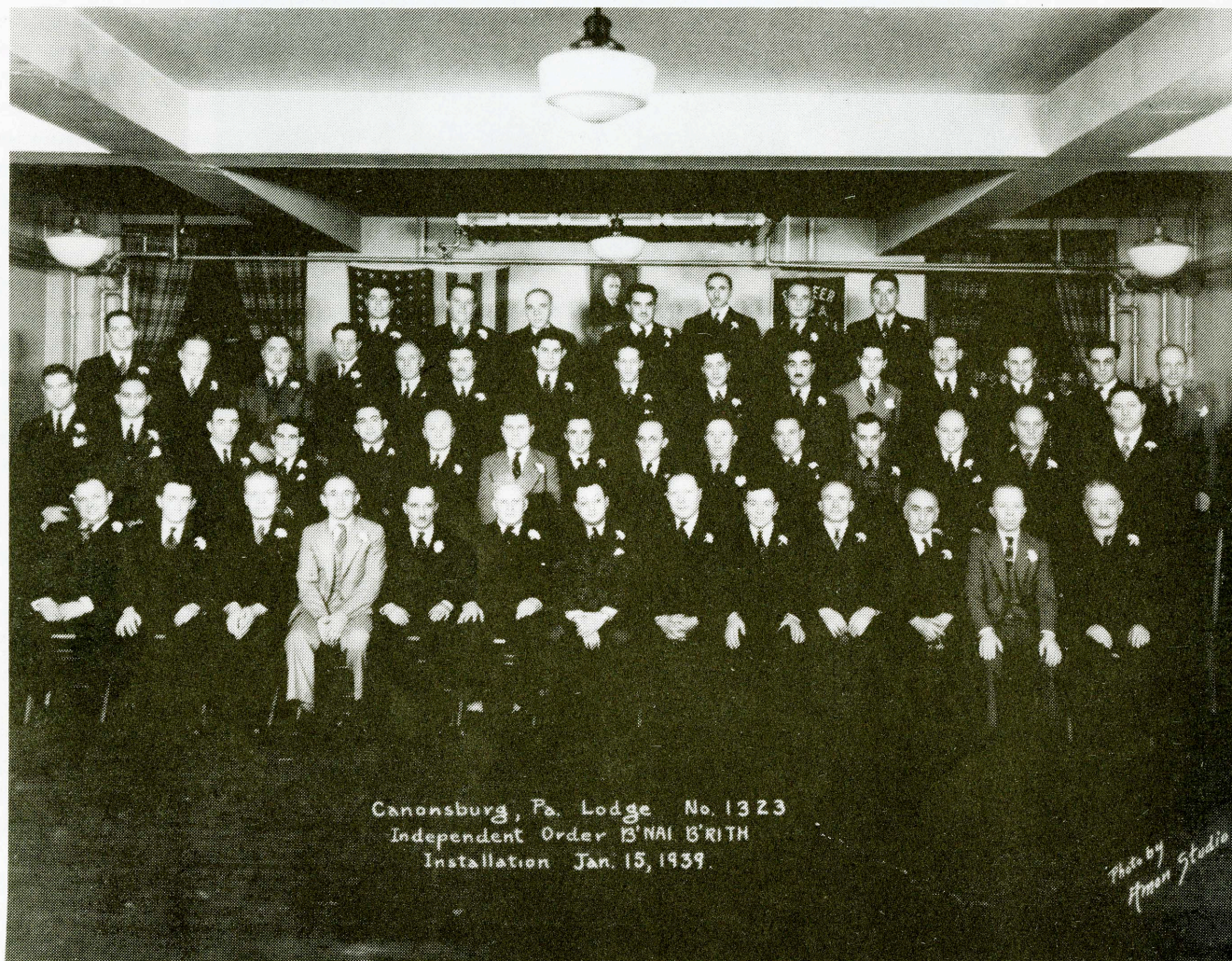
love of Judaism to these dedicated men.

The Congregation had a vigorous and active membership. All sectors of the Jewish community were involved. There was a very able and energetic sisterhood whose first president was Mrs. Sam Finkel.

The congregation had an active B'nai Brith Lodge, a Zionist Group,

Haddassah and Jewish Youth Group called *Aleph Zadick Aleph* (A.Z.A.) The synagogue also sponsored a boy scout and cub scout troop.

There is an interesting footnote concerning A.Z.A, the fraternity better known as the Junior B'nai Brith. The A.Z.A. was founded in 1924. The Canonsburg chapter, No. 24, installed September 26, 1926,



First row, left to right. Morris Weisman, Alex Moscov, Morris Piechenic, Sam Markowitz, Sam Toder, Eli Marcus, Rabbi Benjamin Cantor, Hyman Klahr, Shi Benowitz, Max Hoffman, J. D. Levine, Abe Katz, Sam Karwan. Second row. Harold Finkel, Elliott Finkel, Meyer Potashman, Harry Levin, Milton Pinsker, Abe Fickman, Morris Popover, Izzy Toder, P. Shomfeld, Victor Levine, George Skirble, Sam Cushner, Al Sheffler, Ben Levine, Jack Cohen. Third row. Carl Feldhorn, Morris Lebeau, Adolph Zeman, Harry Katz, Sam Morris, Phil Cohen, Dave Lebowitz, Ted Chertoff, Mize Bales, Al Tabeck, Jerson Chertoff, Dr. Finkel, Izzy Levin, Louie Levin, Max Bernstein. Fourth row. Sam Friedfeld, Anchel Berg, Hirsh, Alan Levin, Dr. Kantor, Tom Penner, Sam Margolis.

Photo courtesy Arnold Cushner.

was the first chapter to be installed east of the Mississippi. In an unprecedented reversal of role, the A. Z. A. chapter sponsored the birth of the B'nai Brith Lodge, a unique case of the offspring giving birth to the parent organization. The civic minded B'nai Brith Lodge erected a flag pole near the Borough Building in honor of the Canonsburg servicemen of all wars. It was dedicated July 4, 1941.

On another subject, in the early days of the community most of the congregants kept Kosher homes, ate only Kosher meat. Thanks to the effort of Sam Burg, a well known and respected grocer, Kosher meat was made available, thereby eliminating the need to go to Pittsburgh to purchase meat.

The name Sam Burg yields pleasant memories of the feats of a remarkable man. Those of us 65 or

over remember him with reverence for his thoughtfulness and benevolence.

Sam Burg, a poor young immigrant from Galicia, Poland arrived in Canonsburg in the early 1900s to set up shop. Capable, sensible and practical, he soon built up a flourishing grocery business.

Sam Burg will be remembered as a guardian angel by many youths of different faiths. To those who wanted higher education, but couldn't afford it, he quietly provided funds. When there was a strike or a layoff, when the flow of funds would stop for the workers, the flow of food never stopped. He extended credit until they returned to work and could pay it back. He was Canonsburg's original equal opportunity patron. Neither color nor religion had any impact on his readiness to help the less fortunate. If there



First row, left to right. Julius Morris, Jesse Cohn, Ida Klee Green, Helen Klahr Cushner, Sadie Klee, Bess J. Zucker, Florence Klahr, Elliott Finkel, Florence Finkel Chertoff, Judge Dave Weiner. Second row. Harry Levin, Anchel Burg, Alvin Katz, Harry Katz, Pearl Karwan, unknown, Hyman Klee, Sylvia Klein Fink, Isadore Toder. Third row. Anchel Zucker, Zelig Klahr, William Katz, Sam Friedfeld, Selma Skirble, Dorothy Benrovitz Friedfelt, Meyer Karwan, Manuel Morris. Picture taken in the basement of the synagogue, c.1949.

ever was a "good Sam," literally it was Sam Burg, a legend in his own time. His untimely death in 1940 was mourned by Jew and non-Jew alike.

At the onset of World War II, the Canonsburg Jewish Community reached its peak in membership, about fifty families. The congregation made a significant contribution to the efforts in World War II, with many of the young men served in all theaters of war, including the front lines in Germany and in the Pacific.

After the war ended, membership began to decline. The decline was gradual. The older generation passed on. Some of the younger generation moved away, and by the mid 1950s the membership dwindled to the point where a Rabbi was no longer needed. The last High Holiday Service was held in 1960. The synagogue building was subsequently sold to the late John Crisofi who operated a janitorial supply business. He used it as a warehouse for his merchandise. It was subsequently dismantled in the redevelopment program. The holy artifacts now reside in the Washington, Pa. synagogue.

Looking back, I can't help but reflect how vigorous and active the members were, not only in Jewish activities, but in civic affairs as well. On a personal note, I point with pride to my brother Harry Katz whose herculean efforts kept the McMillan log cabin at its rightful place on the campus grounds of Canonsburg High School. This historic landmark, built about 1781 by John McMillan, was the forerunner of Washington and Jefferson College. Since then, Harry has distinguished himself in the pest control industry, is Research Associate at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and was selected as the Man of the Year in the Pest Control Industry for 1990.

Parenthetically, of the fifty families in the congregation, 21 have

members in the professions. Jerry Klein is a prominent Rabbi in Dallas, Texas. In law, the congregation is represented by the late Judge David Weiner, Adolph Zeman, Allen Levin, and Israel Davis; presently by Elliott Finkel, Sidney Hoffman and Manual Potashman. In the field of medicine there was the late Sidney Safran, Milton Graditor, Harold Markowitz and Wayne Klein. Drs. Harold Slone and John Adler are currently practicing. In the field of dentistry, the late Louis Kantor and Dave Finkel once practiced dentistry; currently Falk Kantor and Dave Katz are practicing. The brothers, Alfred and Jesse Devon, are practicing chiropractors. In sociology, Dr. Harold Weismann is a professor at Hunter College. Adolph Slone, a Carnegie Tech graduate, was the President of Schenley Industries. The late Dr. Jack Rosenberg with a PHD in Chemistry developed a process that improved the steel-making industry. Harvey Potashman, food entrepreneur, founded and is co-owner of the Food Gallery chain.

In retrospect, in reviewing an era long gone, I find that time has not dimmed the precious memory of a once proud, robust community that left its mark on our town. Those pioneers who founded our community were grateful for what America did for them and determined to give back more than they received, and indeed they did. I'm proud to say that Canonsburg is a better place for their having settled here. One can not ask for nor need say any more.

I wish to express my thanks to the editors of the Jefferson College Times for the opportunity given in assigning me the task of writing the history of the Jewish Community of Canonsburg. It was not only a labor of love, it evoked pleasant and precious memories of my growing up in that wonderful Jewish congregation and community.