

# Mt. Pleasant synagogue's roots wither

Barry L. Reeger photo

By James G. Lakely

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

The memory of Morris Barron will endure in Mt. Pleasant, but his beloved synagogue will not.

Nearly a century of Jewish history will come to an end later this year when the Tree of Life Congregation gives their Church Street synagogue away — possibly to the borough fire department next door.

Last month's sudden death of the 83-year-old Barron, a patriarch of Mt. Pleasant's only synagogue for decades, passed along to his friends the inevitable task of closing it down.

"A lot of synagogues are closing down in small towns," said Bernie Barron, Morris' nephew. "The (Jewish) populations are diminishing."

That is especially true in Mt. Pleasant, but it wasn't always the case. According to Milton Poster, 83, an unofficial town historian and Morris Barron's closest friend, the Jewish population in Mt. Pleasant thrived in the first half of this century, and the Tree of Life Congregation was there to serve them.

"If it hadn't been for Morris Barron, we wouldn't have had anything," Poster said. "He picked up the tab, too."

Names like Volkin, Poster, Koppelman, Leibovitz, Glick, Abromson and Levin were anchors of the town — founding clothing stores, car dealerships and law firms. Those Jewish families, at least 55 strong in the mid-1930s, Poster said, brought their children to the high holiday services held at the synagogue.

In those days, the high school graduated large numbers of Jewish children and the Jewish population hovered in the hundreds for many years. Mt. Pleasant's class of 1930, Poster said, graduated 370 students and 45 of them were Jewish.

"That is a hell of a percentage," said the former Mt. Pleasant athlete and car dealer as he reminisced in the first-floor meeting room of the synagogue.

But as the children of those families grew up, they left Mt. Pleasant, and the bedrock of the town's Jewish community got old and smaller in number. Vivian Poster, Milton's wife, said that when their daughter graduated from Mt. Pleasant in 1969, "she was the only Jew."

That was a portent to leaner times. Bessie Levinson, who now serves as the congregation's last president, said her roster now lists only "15 souls" of the practicing Jewish faith in Mt. Pleasant.

To hold Jewish prayer services in remembrance of the dead, you need 10 men present, Barron said. But lately, holding those services at the Tree of Life required the importation of Jews from other congregations.

"Nobody stays here. They go away to college and never come back," said Mrs. Poster. "I have never felt (the exodus of Jewish youth) like I feel it now."

Mrs. Poster said that it wasn't too many years ago when the adult children of the synagogue's founders would plan to return to Mt. Pleasant to observe the high holidays of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hoshana in the beautiful sanctuary.

Encircled by 20-foot stained glass windows and a 100-year-old ark that contained the congregation's torahs, the upstairs sanctuary served as a beautiful setting for a bar mitzvah or an observance of a high holiday.

But with the decline of the Jewish population, the sanctuary hasn't been used for anything more than death memorial services in more than 10 years, Barron said.

The torahs have been donated to a Pittsburgh congregation, and unless a suitable candidate can be found for the ark, it will remain in the sanctuary. No matter who ends up with the deed to the building, Poster said it is vital that the integrity of the sanctuary not be compromised.

"We want the synagogue to look intact the way it is now," Poster said.

Nat Abromson, a fourth-generation member



Vivian Poster descends the stairs of the Tree of Life synagogue in Mt. Pleasant for the last time

of the congregation who had his bar mitzvah in the sanctuary, said no official decision will be made about the fate of the building until more meetings are held in the coming weeks.

"There were lots of meetings," said Abromson, whose grandfather served as rabbi for the congregation. "I have been active in the synagogue all my life. It is a very emotional time for all of us as you might imagine. There are lots of memories in that building."

Having the opportunity to visit the preserved sanctuary in the future softens the blow, but when the scant Tree of Life Congregation treks to Latrobe to observe Yom Kippur next month, they will leave behind part of their history.

Mrs. Poster said when it became apparent the synagogue had to be abandoned, it "felt like a death." But wisdom from her father has helped put it in perspective.

"Nothing lasts forever," she said. "My father told me, 'The longer you live, the more changes

you are going to see.' Those words were in my ears when I heard (the synagogue was closing)."

The deed for the synagogue lists "The Tree of Life Congregation" as its owner — purchased from the First Presbyterian Church for \$3,500 in 1938. That was a bargain and a grand improvement for a congregation that first held services in a log cabin as early as 1806, Poster said. More recently, the congregation utilized a small building across the street from the current synagogue that is now a parking lot.

These are difficult times for Poster, his wife admits. It's not just the closing of the synagogue that gets to him, she said, but the death of a man who was as important to the upkeep of that synagogue as he was to Poster's life.

"I lost my best friend. I'm going to miss him," Poster said, his voice breaking and his face flush with emotion. "He was one hell of a guy. He helped more people in this town than anyone else. But I wish he took better care of himself."