

Original filed in  
Personals  
(989.99.3)

AARON SHULMAN  
AN INTERVIEW BY BARBARA GREENWALD SCHRANK

Barbara Greenwald Schrank, a journalist and writer by profession, living and working in New York city, was born into the Segel family of Warren. During her childhood and adolescent years in Warren she grew up near and with the Aaron Shulman family and came to admire the scholarly and patriarchal figure of Aaron Shulman. So on a return visit to the family in Warren, she set out to record the life experience of this outstanding person who had a profound impact on the Jewish community both young and old. The following interview has been taken from typewritten notes made by Barbara Schrank probably during the early 1970's.....

I was born in Russia in the year 1887 in a small village in the state of Minsk. When I was about eight years of age I went away to a Yeshiva Moriv. My parents stayed in the village. We were eight children in this family, four brothers and four sisters. My father was a teacher. I stayed in the yeshiva until I graduated at seventeen and a half years. The yeshiva was supported by donations by what you call eight days -- one day in one house, one day in the the other house. We were sleeping in a synagogue with 150 boys on hard benches. Our pillows were our little coats. And the food, we didn't have it at that time. In later years, it was customary that the larger yeshivas already had dormitories with food, but in our time everyone who belonged to the synagogue used to give a scholar, a yeshiva "bocher", a day to eat, so naturally, since I had to eat seven days in the week, I had to have seven different homes. Some days we didn't show that we were short a day, so we lived on bread with water. It was a very poor life.

In 1905 the Russians began to have pogroms and we decided we had to leave Russia. My father went away in

America three years before and he was still was there. He went to Scranton Pennsylvania. He had what you call "landsleit", you know, people that came from the same town. When I was graduated from my school I had a position in a shtetl. I was a teacher and a schochet (ritual meat slaughterer) and performed all the services that they needed and eventually I supported half of the family because my father wasn't able to send anything. Then my father wrote me that I have a better chance if I come to America after I have my diplomas, because eventually we'll all go to America. He liked it there.

So, after the pogrom in Minsk in early 1906 and after I graduated I went back to get some more diplomas (smicha) from various rabbis, I met my future father-in-law, who was one of the rabbis and I met one of his daughters. I kind of liked her, but at that time her father asked me where my parents were and I told him my father was in America. He said, "From our family, none of us will go to America. He didn't like it because America was not religiously inclined and he was a very strict, religious man. A month later they had a pogrom and twenty men were killed on his door. and he himself was saved by a non-Jew. They hid him and his wife and my wife in a stack of hay and they were there for 24 hours before the pogrom finally stopped. So when they went out saved, my father-in-law said, "I'm sorry and if anyone of us will be able to go to America, I will send them."

He wrote a letter to our rabbi from our town and asked if he knows a young boy whose father was in America and who

intended to go to America too. Did he went to America or not? So the rabbi showed me the letter and I answered him that I didn't go to America, I'm still here. I told him that I would like to go but I don't know what to do. I asked him his advice. He answered me, cleverly, "I couldn't give you advice by mail. If you want my advice you can come over to the city." So I came down there. Then he told me the story about the pogroms. "Before, you told me that you wanted to go to America." In the meantime, I had only once sent his daughter a New Year's greeting card -- I didn't correspond with the girl as it wasn't customary at that time for a yeshiva bocher to do so. I didn't look for a matchmaker, though. We understood each other. So I said now if she's ready to go, I will go.

My father sent me a ticket, but I said to Shoshia, my intended wife to be, "do you have enough money to buy a ticket of your own, because, I have no money to give you?" So her father said "yes, we'll buy her a ticket." We were married on April 4th and I came to this country May 21st. That was our honeymoon.

When I came to New York, Warren at the same time had chartered a congregation, about the year 1905 or 1906, and they were looking for a man able to be a teacher and a shochet and a cantor and everything. So they wrote to a rabbi in New York city asking if he could send anybody. When we came to New York, we came to the chief rabbi and I showed him my credentials and asked if he could get a position for

me. He said he would try and so the next day I went to Scranton to see my father. When I came to Scranton, the rabbi of Scranton said, "I've got a place for you if you want to go in a small country." I stayed with him over Saturday and on Sunday I came in Warren and I'm still here.

When I came here there were a few Ukrainians, a few Lithuanians, a few Rumanians and a few Galitzianer Jews. Altogether there were 14 families. After Russia, naturally, this was a nice town. When I came here they said they would try to see that I make a living although, they said that they can't give very well, since they were all poor people working for a dollar a day. They paid me \$25 a month. Each family paid \$1.75 a month. I was a shochet, a mohel, a teacher, a cantor and I made the mikvah for the women, too.

First, we had to get some meat. So, we got a Gentile butcher and I went down to the slaughterhouse. Then, we didn't have a Sefer Torah. Every morning I had to go to the meat market to see that the meat should be distributed. I had to stamp it, to seal it, because we cannot have anything handled by non-Jews. We were supposed to have services Friday night and Saturday morning and I didn't have any Bible to read in. So I sent away to the Jewish Publication Society and told them I had just come to Warren and I'm a young man and we have no money, but if they trust me and send me a Sefer Torah and when we finish reading the Torah on Simchat Torah, we'll have a party and maybe I'll call some people from the suburbs and we'll all chip in and send the money.

So they trusted me and sent me a Torah. All they charged me was \$82.00 and I made a Simchat Torah party. We made \$135.00 and we still have the Sefer Torah...now it's worth \$3000.00. We paid them and the rest was a start for the congregation and that's how we began. That's how it was up until 1918 when we bought the synagogue.

The second year, I saw that we could not afford to go out of town for a mikvah, so myself and another man built the mikvah. It didn't cost us anything. Mr. Sontag gave us permission to have his summer kitchen in his house for this purpose. He also circumcised the newborn boys.

You ask if I have seen any religious changes in the last 50 years? Well, naturally, it's more modernized, but the service is still strictly Orthodox, we have a good Sunday School for the children and it goes a little more to English. So far nobody has attempted a change to Conservatism, I think most of the Jewish community will not want to see a change. Maybe in time...everything changes in time. In the surrounding towns there were a lot of community congregations and they went Reform or Conservative. Do I think this is a danger? No, I think it will always be, especially since Israel was erected, that gave a push. I don't know in what form it will be, you understand, we cannot say, like anything else. Even Israel itself...there are various people there and various thoughts.

The whole trouble is that intermarriage is increasing quite a bit and I don't know what can be helped with it.

We've seen it from good families, religious families, strict Orthodox. This we don't understand why. Inter-marriage today is because the youth have no foundations and parents themselves are wondering. The fundamental principle has faded away and now people take it with a grain of salt. In old time, G-d forbid, if anybody intermarried, it was a schande. Nowadays, if anything happens in a family, even from the great families, even the rabbinical families, they don't disown and they don't sit shiva. We know from history that when the Jews were exiled from Jerusalem to Babylonia there were so many intermarriages that when they built the Second Temple there were very few Jews. So this isn't a new thing.

Only one thing here...When G-d says to Abraham, "you'll go through plenty troubles, but, one thing I promise you: The Jewish people will always remain. There will always be Jews." Because we are the only nation that goes on..We are still existing. I don't know what kind of Judaism is going to be practiced, but, we were, we are and we will be forever. This is my faith. I can't say that we'll all come back to the real traditional Jew that was...take synagogues in America. Conservatives have so many synagogues and the Orthodox very little left over. But the little bit that's left over, that's the kindling. Time will tell, but, I'm hopeful that the Jewish people will always remain.

TIPHERETH ISRAEL SYNAGOGUE founding was started with a meeting early in the spring of 1918. It was the 13th

anniversary of the founding of the original congregation of Jews in Warren. A religious community had more or less already been established. It had a Sefer Torah, minyan on Friday night and Saturday morning, a Hebrew teacher who was also the Shochet and had a Mikvah. A few days after the meeting, Mr. Louis Segel reported that he had spoken to one of the members of the United Brethern Church and was told they were ready to sell their church as they were building a new one. A special meeting was called. A committee was formed and appointed with George Waxman, chairman, F. Kornreich and A. Shulman as co-workers on the building committee. They met with the church people, explained that they were few people with not much money and they obtained the building for the price of the lot, \$4400.00. The deal was closed. We did not worry where and how we would get the money. We had in the treasury, \$230.00 and the Jewish formula we called in Hebrew "G-d will show us the way to obtain the money." Betoken. Each Jewish family in Warren was asked to give what it could and \$1000.00 was gathered at the meeting. We got money from neighboring Jewish communities...Corry, Titusville, Oil City, Ridgeway, St.Marys, Dunkirk, Kane, Franklin, Sheffield, Johnsonburg, Bradford and Jamestown and Olean in New York state. We also received money from Warren gentiles.