

Tree of Life Synagogue, 1897-1957
Oil City, Pa.



History of the Tree of Life Synagogue

Without some written record of the past, coming generations would not know the course of early events which influenced the lives of their parents and grandparents. So, very humbly, we offer a presentation of early activities gathered from the minutes of the Trustee and Congregational meetings.

The Tree of Life Synagogue, in existence for some fifty years, has been the center of Jewish life both spiritual and secular. Not only were its leaders pioneers in cooperating with members of other faiths, but they participated in all phases essential to building a good community which has kept pace with the progress of America.

All through the years the Synagogue has been loyal to the prophetic ideals of Judaism. It has been a spiritual, social and educational center.

This, then, is the story of the Tree of Life and of the people who "built a house of the Lord, the God of Israel."

The first generation of Jews to settle in Oil City, although from different parts of Europe with various ritual and cultural backgrounds, felt an urgency to establish a permanent place of worship. Much of the early history is shrouded in obscurity. Just when the Building was completed we cannot say, but "Tree of Life" was ready for use sometime in 1897. Costing about \$30,000.00 and carrying a large mortgage it gave evidence of the great faith in the future possessed by the sixty members.

Would that we could now hear the discussions and the arguments that certainly must have preceded before any agreement was reached. These conferences were mainly in Yiddish, partly in Slavic and "Deutsch" and even in attempted English. Could electronics be retroactive just to resurrect only the Yiddish phases of the arguments, this spirited and warm language would be revived, for in no other tongue can people wax so vehement without profanity or so intense without fanaticism.

This attractive edifice, at 17 Plumer Street, was constructed of red brick, interlaced with white, and decorated by two large domes on the roof. The stained glass windows were beautifully proportioned. The building was two stories high. The Sanctuary occupied the entire second floor with the Ladies' Gallery in the rear. The Sanctuary accommodated 350 people and usually was filled only on High Holidays or some special service.

The Bimah, or reading platform was in the center of the main floor. An ornate crystal chandelier was suspended from the ceiling high above the Bimah and was installed about 1918. The essential "Aron", the Ark housing the Torahs, was recessed in the east wall. In order to build this Ark, it was necessary to excavate part of the hillside.

The first floor was used for Cheder (religious school), Sunday School and small membership meetings. The first floor was remodeled in 1930 to provide cooking and dining facilities. The newly revived Sisterhood aided financially in

this endeavor and their zealous members cooked and served many of the refreshments.

For many years, The Plummer Street location met the needs of the Jewish Community. As the Jewish population increased and more and more families moved to the South Side, the Synagogue location became undesirable. No visionary could have foreseen the difficulty involved with parking and transportation problems. The Synagogue served its purpose well and long. Much honor and homage must be accorded the unswerving and self-sacrificing group that started and maintained this "Beth Keneseth."

It is impossible to recall the names of all the founders, and our apologies to those we have omitted through the lapse of time. These men stand out: Messrs, "Long" and "Yankee" Braunschweiger, Abe Silberberg, Sam Lewis, Max and Dave Jacobs, B. Baer, Wolf Cohen, A. M. Lowentritt, S. Brodsky, Sam Cohen, Herman Manheim, L. Danheiser and I. M. Mintz.

The Synagogue's earliest known spiritual leader was Rabbi Jacobs, followed by the versatile Rev. M. G. Levensohn who served in various duties until his death in 1916. One of the most unique incidents occurred during the twenty years Rabbi Finsinger served the congregation. Because of some unremembered dispute, a number of the members withdrew and were dubbed by the historical name, "Coxey's Army". They held services for a period of two years in a rented room on the third floor of the present Reick building on Elm Street. To complete the separation, they went so far as to establish the Sage Run Cemetery which is still in use.

After two years the Congregation solved their difficulties and reunited in Shalom. The Congregation has since been blessed with unity. All matters pertaining to Synagogue affairs are amicably settled by due process of Democratic principles.

Many of us will recall with fond memories some of the active members of the earlier days of the Synagogue: Louis Backer, H. Batrosky, Abe Broida, Isaac Broida, Jacob Broida, S. Barton, H. I. Cohen, Seal Cohen, Simon Cohn, Chas. Friedman, M. Goldstein, Joseph Heyison, Dave Heyison, Sheamon Keller, Abe Kraus, Sam Levinson, Max Lewis, Michael Mogilowitz, Dr. C. A. Mintz, Sam Magdovitz, Ben Rosenberg, Jacob Snyder, Jacob Solovey, J. Schultz, H. Schultz, Barney Slesnick, Dave Slesnick, Harry Slesnick, Oscar Slesnick, Abe Vinn and Harry Zand.

Many Rabbis have served the Congregation notably, Rabbis Olewsky, Zelznick, Tolochko, Siskin, Greenfield, Helfgott, Glynn, Newberger, Mallinger and presently Rabbi Morris Sklar.

We recall with appreciation and warmth the memory of the many men who served their congregation. Many of the present generation will remember with more than a passing thought such men as Simon Cohn, who was loved by both Jew and Non-Jew. We will always remember such strong and active participants as Nathan Rosen, Charles Goldberg, Harry Grant and Samuel Grant.

From Clarion, Pennsylvania, we remember the names of Milton Wein and Sol B. Harris. Despite the distance from Oil City, they participated in all religious rites and social affairs of the Tree of Life Synagogue as well as the interfaith activities in their own community. Mr. Harris will also be remembered as an officer and trustee of the Synagogue.

Reading through the minutes as compiled through the years, one cannot help but feel the life and breath of the Synagogue as it has progressed from its infancy to the present date. Many of the growing pains that we today are experiencing were prevalent in the days gone by. For any individual to attempt to decide which are paramount of all the decisions and highlights, would be an impossibility. Therefore an attempt will be made to chronologically list many interesting excerpts that are found in our minutes of the Tree of Life Synagogue as the years passed.

If it were possible to photostat for posterity many of the pages of minutes that are available and record them in this book, there would be many hours of fascinating reading. Many are classics that must be included for a smile, and therefore will be copied verbatim as written in the minutes, and the spelling noted for their description and meanings.

The earliest known recorded meeting of the Synagogue was held December 23, 1917. The President was C. A. Mintz. A motion by A. Silberberg and seconded by I. Miller "that the President instruct Rev. Finesinger and Rev. Levensohn to go to Pittsburgh sometime during the month of January and get examined by either Rabbi Sibitz or Rabbi Ashinsky, and get a certificate to show they are capable of looking after Kosher meats."

MARCH 31, 1918

"President: Mr. Max Lewis: Vice Pres. Mr. Seal Cohen"

APRIL 8, 1919

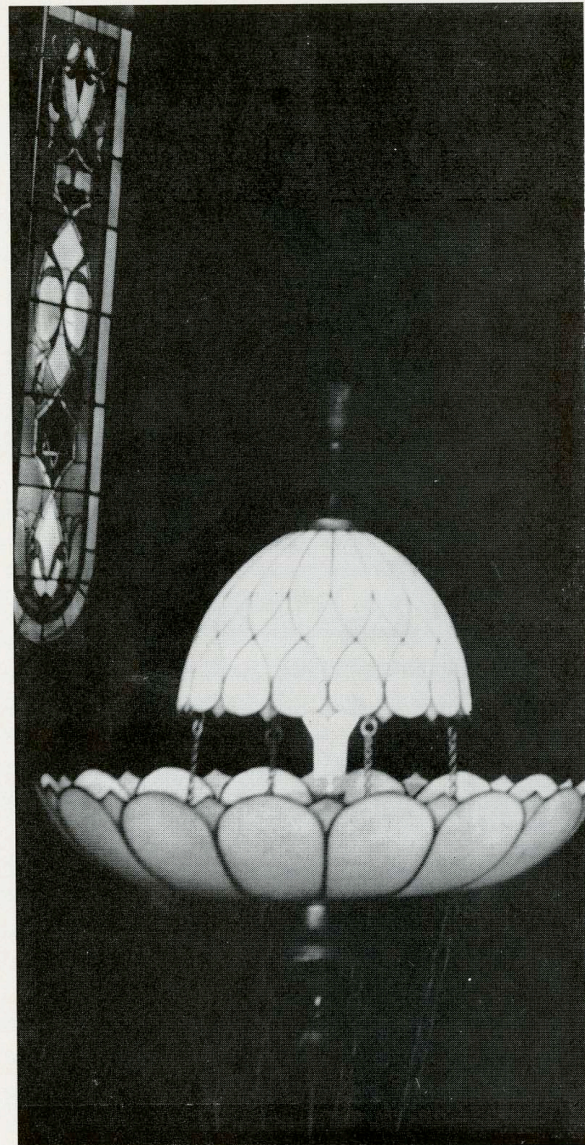
"Mr. Eli Levine accepted as member." "A motion by Sam Lewis and seconded by Seal Cohen that after this meeting every application for a new member must be brought and acted upon at a regular meeting, and not at a trustee meeting."

JANUARY 11, 1920

"Motion by Harry Kessler and seconded by Sheamon Keller that only sons of members of the Congregation capable of performing and leading the Congregation in prayer, be the only non-members to do so. Passed."

MAY 8, 1921

"C. A. Mintz offered the Congregation the plot of ground owned by himself and Mr. Miller, near Titusville, to be used as a cemetery, with the rights reserved for family plots, for himself and Mr. Miller. Passed. Ladies Aid Auxiliary allowed the privilege of installing a telephone in the Synagogue, at their own expense and upkeep."

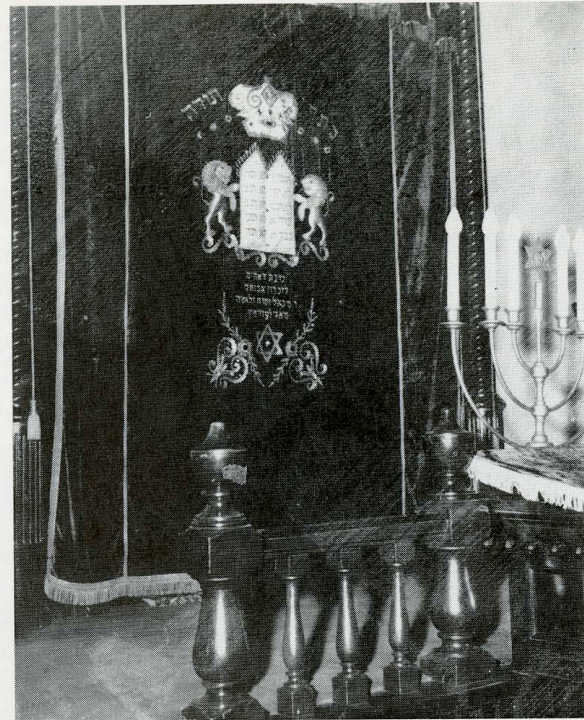


AUGUST 7, 1921

"Members were notified that a fine of \$3.00 will be imposed on them if a private minyun is held that will interfere with the regular Shul minyun."

JANUARY 13, 1924

"Mr. Julius Stahl proposed as a new member. It was moved and passed that the Congregation have a little celebration and entertainment because of the newly acquired addition of four Sefer Torahs. Also to invite the Ladies of



the 'Thalmud Thora,' to this celebration and divide the proceeds equally."

OCTOBER 5, 1924

"Motion was made by Mr. M. Mogilowitz and seconded by Mr. D. Heyison that the secretary notify 15 different members each month to be present at a minyun for a Yartzeit, and if not able to attend must give a satisfactory excuse or send a substitute." Passed.

OCTOBER 16, 1927

Regular meeting was held. Pres. M. Mogilowitz called order. The minutes of the last special meeting were read and approved with a correction by Dave Jacobs that the secretary apply his signature to the minutes. The President takes up the question before the house about the 'Rabby'. A motion was made by Dr. Mintz and seconded by Sam Slesnick that the Shool shall call for a man with a perfect American English so that everybody could understand him. Motion was then made to read that "we send for a man of capable experience and possessing fully the English language and being able to deliver a sermon need apply."

NOVEMBER 6, 1927

S. Rosenthal made an appeal to the members not to carry on any argument or grudge fight with any of the salaried men of the Congregation, but instead carry their complaints to the board of trustees. He also suggested to fine or expell such members that will 'insolt' any of the above mentioned. This was taken by 'aclomation' as a gentlemens agreement."

MARCH, 1931

Fruits of the Tree of Life—monthly magazine published by the Jewish Community Center of Oil City, Rooms 38-39-40 Woolworth Building. Staff composed of Rabbi J. Gerson Tolocko; Dr. H. Rosenberg, Editor; Jacob M. Mogilowitz, Sports; Jake Pitler, Sports; Minnie Magdovitz, Social Editor; Julius Broida, Business Manager; Jerome Silverman, Circulation.

In the year 1931, Mr. Harry Grant in a conversation with Rabbi Tolochko were discussing the need of a Community Center and the following was recorded in the April Issue of this magazine. Mr. Grant—"I do not wish to discourage you, but I am afraid that: "It is going to be a beautiful dream." . . . The Rabbi's eyes twinkles, he pointed his finger towards me and said: "My friend, it will NOT be a dream!!! OIL CITY NEEDS a community center, Oil City WANTS a community center, Oil City SHALL HAVE ONE!!!"

APRIL 1931

Jewish Community Center Officers 1931: Mr. Jacob M. Mogilowitz, President; Mr. Abe Broida, Vice President; Mr. Abe Lang, Secretary; Mr. Julius Broida, Treasurer.

Membership Committee: Max Salkin, Dave Cohen, Abe Broida, Mary Mogilowitz, Evelyn Snyder, Loretta Cohen and Harry J. Grant.

Entertainment Committee: Dave Cohen, Chairman; Abe Lang, Mrs. Helen Broida.

House Committee: Jake Mogilowitz, Julius Broida.

Organization Committee: Dr. H. Rosenberg.

Board of Directors: Rabbi J. Gerson Tolochko, M. Mogilowitz, Seal Cohen, Harry J. Grant, Dave Jacobs, Sam Rosen, Ellis Goldstein, Mrs. Nathan Rosen, and Miss Bertha Silberberg.

AUGUST 28, 1931

**From the Fruits of the Tree of Life,
Rosh-Ha-Shona Edition—5692-1931**

Editorial by John O'Donnell—Editor Oil City Derrick.

"If I may be pardoned for doing so, I would adjure the Jewish people here to read again their own illustrious history, than which there is none more replete with romance or sacrifice and none so rich in spirit and devotion."

"Had I the time I would consider it a mark of honor to my own faith to follow the Old Testament to the foundation of Judaism in the Persian age to the present day. For without the Old Testament there could hardly have been a New."

"There is no literature other than the Hebraic which offers us any description whatsoever of the events marking that formative period between creation's dawn and the opening of the Christian era. There are no traditions, beyond those of Israel, which bring mankind closer to a Supreme Being."

"Judaism furnishes the foundation for Christianity. Without Israel this would be a pagan world. To the Jews were handed the Ten Commandments, the basic rules for the guidance of all human conduct. It is upon your shoulders that the civilization of the past two thousand years have been builded.

"To conceive of any Jew's not knowing the history of his race is preposterous. From the fall of Babylonia down to the United States and Zionism it is a story of suffering, torture and persecution without human parallel. The Jew who does not revere the teachings and traditions of his faith is recreant to thousands of years of his ancestry."

"My message would be incomplete without this—that one of my fond dreams would be to realize that the Jewish people of Oil City are good, steadfast, worthy members of their faith. What the world is fairly crying for today is more Faith, Hope, Charity—for "A Brotherhood of Man under a Fatherhood of God"—for better Jews and better Christians."

JANUARY 14, 1934

"Motion by H. Stahl and seconded by H. Grant that the Congregation approve a plan for religious Sunday School, providing it does not interfere with regular Hebrew School." Passed.

APRIL 20, 1935

"Messrs Julius Broida, J. Mogilowitz, Harry Cohen and Israel Backer were proposed as active members. They were accepted by acclamation."

NOVEMBER 24, 1936

"Special meeting was called by members under the title known as, "Petition's of Members." After considerable discussion, none of the signer knew why they signed the petition. Mr. J. Snyder then moved that a vote of confidence be given our President, M. Mogilowitz for his handling in an excellent manner all present difficulties of the Shul. It was unanimously carried with applause from all members from A to Z."

APRIL 13, 1939

"Mr. Sam Rosen moved and seconded by Mr. J. Snyder that a rising vote be accorded to Mr. I. Backer for his dynamic and successful conduct of Shul affairs during his past year in Shul presidency." Passed.

OCTOBER 8, 1940

"Mr. J. S. Cohn brought up the question whether Shul should approve of religious training and teaching plan advocated for High School students, by which a number of Jewish students would attend "Cheder" in Synagogue under supervision or tutorship of Rabbi and receive scholastic credit therefore. It was taken under consideration and tabled for a future meeting."

JUNE 25, 1941

"Mrs. Julius (Helen) Broida was present at the meeting, by invitation. She represented the Sisterhood. Her mission was on the desire of the Sisterhood to help make certain improvements in the appearance of the downstairs Vestry Room of the Shul, especially to improve the ceiling and repaint the walls. She explained that her organization presently had \$75.00 as a contribution to such work." "Mrs. J. Mogilowitz also was present at the meeting and offered full

cooperation of local Jewish women towards a projected desire to erect a Chapel in the Tree of Life Cemetery."

MAY 14, 1942

"Mr. M. Posner moved that mixed services be allowed for the first eve of Sh'v'ous, seconded by Wm. Marx." Passed. This was the first time mixed services were allowed. (Ed. note)

AUGUST 9, 1944

Editors note: First mention of a new Synagogue. Several members then told of meetings held informally about new Shul. No action.

OCTOBER 26, 1944

Mr. H. Grant moved "That Shul members give standing vote of thanks to Mr. Herman L. Stahl for 'davining' so excellently as Bal T'filah during recent Yomin Noraim (High Holiday)." Several members seconded and unanimously showed assent by standing. (Ed. Note. Mr. Stahl followed this practice for many years, and his remuneration was a love of the Synagogue's functions).

AUGUST 23, 1948

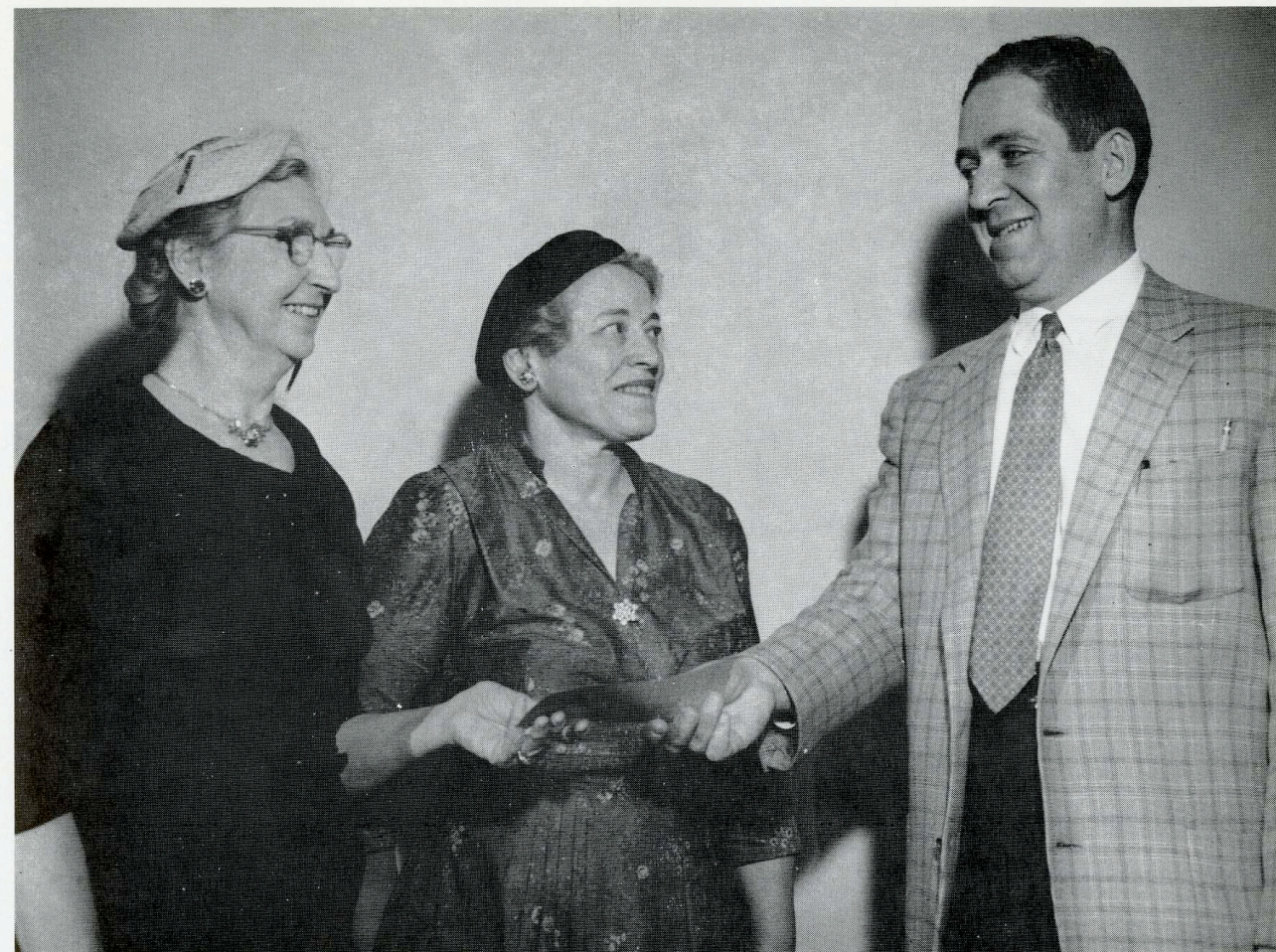
Mr. Julius Broida brought up the subject of a new Community Center and Synagogue, discussed it from many angles, and various sites for same. The subject was tabled for a subsequent meeting.

MARCH 1, 1950

"Motion by J. Stahl and seconded by M. Rosen that the president appoint a committee to look into the possibility of buying a lot or property for future site of Synagogue." "The committee appointed were J. Stahl, Louis Brody and H. L. Stahl."

APRIL 14, 1952

"After a lengthy discussion following the needs of the U. J. A. and the possibility of a new Synagogue-Center, a question and a motion by D. Cohen, "Do we want a new Shul-Center?" By a majority vote of "Yes," an amount of approximately \$100,000.00 was agreed to be raised over a period of five years for a building fund. The President then requested all volunteers for



Left to Right: Mrs. Abe Salkin, Mrs. Louis Salkin, Mr. Milton W. Rosen. Sisterhood members presenting check to Building fund committee member.

the committees, as Mr. D. Cohen volunteered to act as chairman. The following then volunteered, Louis B. Brody, M. Rosen, S. I. Slesnick, H. L. Stahl, I. Backer, J. Mogilowitz, I. Adelson, H. Brody, J. Broida, J. Stahl, J. Schultz, L. Cohen, J. Silverman, Wm. Goldberg, C. Wein and Dr. H. Schleider."

JUNE 1952

Early in 1952 Julius Stahl, a local realtor and member of our congregation, opened negotiations with Mr. J. D. Trax to acquire the present site of our building known as the "Venango Club" located on the corner of West First and Division Streets. Mr. Trax, on behalf of himself and Emma R. Roess, the co-owner of the building, entered into an agreement with Mr. Stahl for the sale of the premises on June 24, 1952.

The agreement was executed by Mr. Stahl on behalf of the congregation. It is interesting to know that Mr. Trax, shortly thereafter, made a generous contribution to our building fund.

MAY 1952

The first meeting of the newly organized building fund was held at the home of Mr. Louis Brody. At this time, the committee proposed various plans that could be used for the purpose of obtaining pledges from all the members of this area. Despite obvious difficulties, pledge cards were printed. The Finance Committee laid plans for the biggest project that this Congregation of about seventy members had ever undertaken. Money was pledged on a five-year plan.



Groundbreaking ceremony, November 11, 1956. Herman L. Stahl turns first shovelful of earth.

AUGUST 25, 1952

A petition for incorporation of the Oil City Tree of Life Congregation as a non-profit corporation, was presented to the Court of Common Pleas of Venango County, Pennsylvania. The petitioners were as follows: Julius Stahl, Joseph Schultz, William Goldberg, Jacob M. Mogilowitz, Israel Backer, Raymond S. Friedman, Seal Cohen, Isadore N. Adelson, Sam I. Slesnick, and Milton W. Rosen.

The original officers named in the Articles of Incorporation were: H. L. Stahl, President; Herman Brody, Vice-President; Dr. Harold Schleider, Secretary; Abe Lang, Financial Secretary; Morton Stahl, Treasurer; Julius Broida, Louis B. Brody, David N. Cohen and Harold Snyder, Trustees. The Decree incorporating the congregation was signed by the Honorable Lee A. McCracken, President Judge, on the 25th day of August, 1952.

SEPTEMBER 5, 1952

Mr. Julius Stahl transferred the title of the present Rabbi's home to this corporation. The necessary funds to this home were raised largely through the efforts of Mr. Sam Rosen and Mr. Joseph Snyder. Mr. Rosen, who now resides in Santa Barbara, California was a past president and an active member of the congregation during his years of residence in Oil City.

JANUARY, 1953

Rabbi Morris Sklar assumed his duties as Rabbi, and Spiritual leader of the Oil City Congregation.

OCTOBER 29, 1953

A deed to the present Synagogue grounds was executed by J. D. Trax and Musa M. Trax, his wife, and Emma R. Roess, to the Oil City Tree of Life Congregation, a non-profit corporation, thereby placing the title to the property in the name of the Congregation.

NOVEMBER 30, 1953

The excitement and the momentum of the original drive had subsided. The \$100,000.00 in pledges necessary for the building fund was one-third subscribed. Activity was at its lowest ebb. It was then that Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Silverman entertained the entire community at the Exchange Hotel in Franklin, Pa. The enthusiasm aroused at this dinner resulted in the successful completion of the building fund campaign.

APRIL 11, 1956

The entire congregation met at the Synagogue, to approve plans for additional methods of raising funds. At this meeting, preliminary plans of the proposed Synagogue-Center were submitted for the approval of the members. The designs were enthusiastically received.

APRIL 25, 1956

Several plans were submitted to the planning committee. The plans and specifications submitted by Mr. Gordon Hayes, Architect from Buffalo, New York were approved.

OCTOBER 30, 1956

Bids from various interested contractors were opened at the office of Attorney Milton W. Rosen and the contract was awarded to the Associated Contractors of Conneaut Lake, Pennsylvania.

NOVEMBER 2, 1956

The contract for the erection of the building was signed on behalf of the contractors and the corporation.

NOVEMBER 11, 1956

Formal groundbreaking ceremonies were held on this Sunday afternoon. Mr. Herman L. Stahl, honorary chairman of the building committee turned the first shovel of dirt for the new Tree of Life Synagogue.



Ground breaking ceremony, David Cohen, general chairman delivering short address.

Members of the Congregation were joined by clergymen and officials of county and city government. Mr. David Cohen, Chairman of the building fund project, served as master of ceremonies while Judge Lee A. McCracken represented Venango County and Mayor R. R. Van Kirk, the local municipality.

A blessing relevant to the occasion was offered by Rabbi Morris Sklar.

Brief inspirational messages and words of joy and gratitude were offered by Mrs. A. B. Slesnick, co-chairman of the building fund and President of the Sisterhood, Mr. Jacob Mogilowitz, President of the Tree of Life Congregation, and Mr. Milton W. Rosen, chairman of the plans committee.

It should be noted for the record that several men have served the Synagogue's activities for many years, but notably, those who are still

active in community affairs, and have served for a period of longer than ten years are, Mr. Israel Backer as President, Vice-President and Trustee; Mr. Jacob Mogilowitz as President and Trustee; Mr. Herman Stahl as President and Trustee; Mr. Abe Lang as Financial Secretary; Mr. Joseph Snyder as Secretary; and Dr. Harold Schleider as Secretary.

SEPTEMBER 22, 1957

A memorable day for local Jewry. A feeling of sadness was experienced by all those who attended the final Mincha services at the old Synagogue. Mr. Israel Backer, Vice-President, spoke eloquently of many incidents, both sad and humorous, that were the life of this Synagogue. It should be noted that forces of nature played a strange role on this particular evening. During the Mincha services and upon leaving



Removal of Sefer Torahs from Old Synagogue, Sept. 22, 1956.
Left to Right: Mr. Julius Broida, President; Rabbi Morris Sklar; and Mr. Israel Backer, Vice-President.

the Synagogue with the Sefer Torahs, a heavy downpour of rain descended from the skies. Upon arrival at the new Synagogue, the rains let up and a beautiful rainbow crossed over the sky. We were at our new Synagogue.

This being a joyous event, the program followed a pattern similar to that of Simchas Torah. A procession, members bearing the scrolls walked around the entire Sanctuary seven times, with every available male given an opportunity to carry a Sefer Torah. The Rabbi chanted, "Hear O Israel, the Lord, Our God, the Lord is One."

Many of the men were honored by removing the Sefer Torahs from the Old Synagogue namely: Joseph Schultz, Abe Levine, Rabbi Morris Sklar, David Slesnick, Louis Salkin, Dr. Leo Levine and Sam Shefty Slesnick.

Others who entered into the new Synagogue with the Sefer Torahs were David Cohen, Marvin Kessler, Sam Slesnick, Charles Wein, Harold Snyder, Keva Miller and Isadore Plotkin.

Men honored by placing Sefer Torahs into Ark were: Dr. Harold Schleider, Abe Lang, I. Backer, Julius Stahl, Jacob Mogilowitz, Milton Rosen and Abe Silverman.



Candle lighting ceremony honoring women for their participation in Sisterhood and Building Fund Committees.

Left to Right: Mrs. Morris Sklar, Mrs. Louis Salkin, Mrs. A. B. Slesnick, Mrs. Abe Lang, Mrs. Julius Broida, Mrs. David Cohen, Mrs. Alfred Rosin, Mrs. Harold Snyder, and Mrs. Harold Schleider.

The Scrolls of the Torahs were then placed in the Ark with the traditional prayers of, "Return, O Lord, unto thy resting place; Thou, and the Ark of thy strength. . . . Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace. Turn Thou unto thee, O Lord, and we shall return: renew our days as of old.

A beautiful candle lightening ceremony was then held with each of the following women lighting a candle handed to her by Mrs. Morris Sklar. These women were honored for their various activities and leadership in Sisterhood and the Building Fund Program; Mrs. A. B. Slesnick; Mrs. Louis Salkin; Mrs. Julius Broida; Mrs. Abe Lang; Mrs. David Cohen; Mrs. Alfred Rosin; Mrs. Harold Snyder; and Mrs. Harold Schleider.

Mrs. Harry Shalof presented a vocal solo, "Veulai," a song that tells of renewed hope and faith in the future.

At this time all the lights in the Sanctuary were turned off, and with the sanctuary in complete darkness, Dr. and Mrs. Leo Levine were escorted by the Rabbi and the President of the Synagogue, Julius Broida, to illuminate the Eternal Light, in memory of the parents of Mrs. Leo Levine, Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Broida. Rabbi Sklar then chanted the blessing, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast kept us in life, and hast preserved us, and enabled us to reach this season."

Remarks of welcome were given by Mr. David Cohen, chairman of the building program; Herman L. Stahl, honorary chairman; Mr. Julius Broida, president of the Congregation and Rabbi Morris Sklar. Concluding Maariv services were conducted by Dr. Harold Schleider, who was chairman of the evening's program.