

AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF
AARON OLBUM

September, 1971

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At a reception in honor of ^{my} great-granddaughter Sarah Denmark's confirmation at the Denmark home in Steubenville, Ohio, I met two young Rabbis from the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati, Ohio. They were in Steubenville to conduct the confirmation services at the Temple there. During a conversation with one of them I mentioned that I was a former Cincinnati, and one of my memories as a youngster was seeing the late Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, of the Mound Street Temple and founder of the Hebrew Union College. This led to a correspondence with Dr. Jacob R. Marcus, of the American Jewish Archives, who sent me an Autobiographical Questionnaire, which prompted me to write this Autobiography.

I was born in Kosloff, Russia (near Odessa) on January 8, 1881. Mother kept a record of the birthdays of her children by the Hebrew calendar, and it was many years later, when we checked the Hebrew dates in an English calendar, that I discovered that I was born on the 8th, not the 10th, the date that I had been using as my birthday. For the sake of convenience, I have continued to use the 10th.

My paternal grandfather, Israel Issar Olbum, lived in Zlotapol, Russia. He did not come to America. My maternal grandparents, Joseph Liebshevitz (1831-1899) and Jennie Liebshevitz (who died in 1903) emigrated to Dayton, Ohio about 1882. My parents, Mayer Olbum (1855-1925) and Gustie (Genendel) Liebshevitz Olbum (1857-1924) started on their journey to America in 1883 with their three sons, Isaac, Abraham, and (me) Aaron. The trip to their point of embarkation was delayed when they were forced to stop in Broad, Germany, where mother gave birth

to brother Mack (Michel) on July 15, 1883. He was the first German Jew in our family.

We finally arrived in Dayton, Ohio, where my Liebshevitz grandparents had preceded us. Father started out to make a living as a tinware peddler. He would start out early Monday morning with a pack of tinware on his back, canvass the nearby country districts, and return early Friday afternoon. He never worked on the Sabbath. Soon he was able to buy a horse and wagon and to start peddling fruits and vegetables in the city. He did quite well, making a nice living, but one thing constantly worried my parents: the Jewish community at that time was very small, and there were no facilities to lead a Jewish life and to give their boys a Jewish education. So after my grandparents, for the same reason, moved to Cincinnati, my parents decided to follow them to the metropolis, and we moved to Cincinnati.

I was enrolled in elementary school, and my parents engaged a Rabbi to come to our house after school hours to teach the boys Hebrew. Later he prepared me for my Bar Mitzvah, which took place in a Shul on the upper floor of a store building on West Fifth Street. I think this was the original Beth Hamedrash Hagodel Synagogue, which later moved to a former Christian church building on Kenyon Avenue. Grandfather Liebshevitz held the position of Shammass in this synagogue until his death in 1899.

Some of my cousins, descendants of my Liebshevitz grandparents, under their present name "Liebschutz," are at this time in business in Cincinnati: Leon Liebschutz and Sons (ladies wear) and Harry Liebschutz and Son (hosiery). Harry Liebschutz was active in the affairs of the Reform Jewish Home for the Aged, in Cincinnati. Another cousin, also in Cincinnati, whose mother was a Liebshevitz, is ^{MAX HORN OF} Max Horn & Son (office furniture). On my father's side, my

cousin Esther Jarson, widow of the late Isaac N. Jarson (Pepsi-Cola), is the daughter of the late Fannie Olbum Max. Fannie was my father's sister.

The Jarsons were active members of Adath Israel Synagogue of Cincinnati, and Esther, ^{IS THE} founder of the Isaac N. Jarson Memorial of the building fund of that synagogue.

After finishing elementary school, I went to the First Intermediate School on Baymiller Street, where I graduated (seventh grade). There was some talk about my going to High School, but I decided to help out at home and started looking for a job. I tried many, with very little success. I didn't seem to be able to hold a job for more than a few weeks. Among the jobs I tried were sandpapering wood frames at a pattern maker's shop, press boy at Henderson Lithographic Company, helper in the distributing department of the Cincinnati Times-Star, paste boy for a paper hanger, distributing circulars, and house-to-house selling of household supplies.

I was a regular reader of the Help Wanted columns of the Cincinnati Enquirer, which were posted daily at their building. One day I answered an ad of the Krohn, Feckheimer Shoe factory at Ninth and Sycamore Streets and landed a job that was to last several years.

Later I also worked at Wolf Brothers shoe factory on Seventh Street near Central Avenue. This factory was within about a half hour's walk from our residence; and as long as I held this job, Theresa brought my lunches to the shop every day, walking both ways.

I started at the first shoe factory at \$9.00 a week and earned as much as \$25.00 a week when we worked steady; but when work slowed down, we worked half time, and there were periods when we were laid off completely for weeks at a time.

When I was about sixteen, I met beautiful Theresa Karlan, daughter of David and Pearl Karlan. They had emigrated from Kishinev, Russia, a few years before. After a courtship of several years, we were married on July 3, 1900, a marriage which lasted more than seventy years. We had three children. Lillian and David were born in Cincinnati in 1901 and 1906, and Ira in Pittsburgh in 1912. Lillian graduated from high school, then worked in our office at the store. In 1922 she married Simon Penn, and in 1925 they moved to Wheeling, West Virginia, where they went into the retail jewelry business.

David, after graduating from the University of Pittsburgh and its Law School, practiced law and became active in politics. He held such positions as Director of the Bureau of Elections of Allegheny County, member and later chairman of the Allegheny County Sanitary Authority, Director of Public Safety of the City of Pittsburgh, member of City Council of Pittsburgh, and in 1961 was elected to a ten-year term as Judge of the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County.

Ira graduated from high school and decided against going to college. He went to work in our store and took a business course at night college for a couple of years. He was inducted into the Navy in World War II and was sent to Africa. After the war he returned to the store, took over many of my duties, and was largely responsible for the move to a larger store, with the resultant increase in our business.

We have six grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren. My father-in-law was anxious for me to go into business and thought that I should open a retail shoe store. He seemed to think that, after having worked in a shoe factory for several years, I was qualified to run a shoe store. He died in 1904 and, with the \$2,000.00 insurance money he left us, it was understood that I was to become a shoe merchant. So I rented a storeroom on Linn Street, a nice residential neighborhood

in the West End, and opened a shoe store. I knew very little about business in general and the shoe business in particular, and the venture proved a failure.

It was while selling out the shoe business that I received a visit from Ben Karp, of Karp Brothers, who offered me a job in their furniture store at 235 West Fifth Street. I told him that I knew nothing about the furniture business, but he offered me \$16.00 a week to start, and I accepted his offer. In a couple of years I was managing the store at \$20.00 a week.

My brother Ike had married and moved to Pittsburgh, where he was doing well in the furniture business, and Mack soon joined him.

On Ike's occasional visits to Cincinnati, he would urge me to quit my job and move to Pittsburgh, where he thought I could do much better going into business for myself. After much discussion, long deliberation, and a trip to Pittsburgh, Theresa and I decided to make the move. When I gave my employers notice, they thought that I was using the Pittsburgh story for the sole purpose of getting a raise in salary. They finally realized that I was going to quit and offered me an increase of \$5.00 a week. It was not easy to turn down a \$25.00 a week steady job, but our minds were made up; and in January, 1909, we moved to Pittsburgh.

Not long after that, my parents and their six sons and three daughters and their families had all moved to Pittsburgh. In addition to my parents, the Olbum family then consisted of Ike, his wife Clara and son Leonard J.; Abe, his wife Annie and daughter Miriam; Aaron, his wife Theresa and children Lillian and David; Max J., his wife Wilma and daughter Bernice; Elizabeth, her husband Milton Miller and daughter Mildred; and Mack, Harry, Hannah, and Josephine, who were single. Ira was added later; he was born in 1912. Josephine married Morris Zirman in 1933, and they had one child, Gary.

My activities in the Jewish community of Cincinnati were centered in the Sir Montefiore Association, which was organized in 1898 and which I joined shortly thereafter. This organization, which was a forerunner of the present day Young Men's Hebrew Associations, had a great influence on the lives of the young men who participated in its activities. We had high ideals and visions of a cultural center that was to be the common meeting place for all elements in the Jewish community. The athletic and social affairs were well attended, but the greater emphasis was on a program of cultural and educational activities. Student Rabbis from the Hebrew Union College often addressed our meetings. As an organization, the Sir Montefiore Association lasted only a few years, but it made a lasting impression on its members and ~~had~~^{had} a profound influence on their later activities and interest in the affairs of the Jewish community of their city.

A series of reunions were held many years later, beginning in 1937 and lasting until 1958, and I attended each one. They were held at the Lexington Avenue Synagogue in Cincinnati. A few years after moving to Pittsburgh I joined the Pittsburgh Young Men's Hebrew Association, which was organized in 1910, and became active in its affairs. I served as its president from 1919 to 1925. I also did some work in the United Jewish Fund and in the Beth Shalom Congregation (Conservative).

My business career in Pittsburgh began in a used furniture store with my brother Mack as a partner; and when father moved to Pittsburgh, he joined the partnership. After World War I, we got into the army surplus business. We attended auction sales at army camps and purchased large quantities of surplus goods, such as metal bunks, cots, blankets, and cast iron coal heating stoves. We found a ready market for these items, and this venture proved quite profitable.

In 1915 we opened a new credit furniture store, which we called the Pitt Furniture Company, and continued to operate the original store as Olbum Furniture Company. The business prospered; and in 1927 we incorporated the Pitt Furniture Company and opened a larger store in downtown Pittsburgh. All went well until the market crash (1929) and the depression that followed in the early 30's. And then came brother Mack's tragic death in 1930. He was drowned in the upper Allegheny River while on a fishing trip in a new motor boat.

Our five-year lease had expired in 1932, and in 1933 we closed the downtown store and merged with the North Side store, which we had continued to operate as the Olbum Furniture Company. The merged store became Olbum-Pitt Furniture Company, Incorporated. Business was beginning to improve, and we were making a fair comeback when the St. Patrick's Day flood of 1936 almost wiped us out. With a little help from our creditors and the bank we were able to continue in business.

Then came World War II. Ira was inducted into the Navy and was sent to Africa. Upon his return at the conclusion of the war, business began to improve. In 1950 we moved to a larger store several blocks away on the same street, a much better location. In 1955 we bought the warehouse building where the store is presently located.

In the early 60's, Urban Redevelopment took over our store building on Federal Street, and we moved our business into our warehouse building. We received about \$20,000.00 from Urban Redevelopment for our unexpired lease.

For several years we had been experimenting with the furniture rental business; and, after moving into the warehouse building, Ira devoted much of his time to its development, with considerable success. He was considered a pioneer and an authority in the furniture rental business and was often consulted by

furniture dealers from other cities about going into the rental business.

At this time I had been semi-retired for several years, and Ira had taken over complete charge of the business. After Ira's death in 1969 I took over the management until we sold the business to the present owners in 1970. Theresa had been ill for several years, and on the 16th of September, 1970, she passed away in her 92nd year. On June 18, 1971 David died suddenly while attending the Allegheny County Bench and Bar Association Convention at Seven Springs, Pennsylvania.

And now, in my 91st year, after parting in the past two years with my dear wife and two wonderful sons, I am looking toward the sunset, with love and fond memories of my departed in my heart.

I am grateful to the Almighty for His most precious gifts, a loving and dedicated wife and companion of more than seventy years, two fine sons, whose respect, love, and devotion I prized so highly, and a wonderfully devoted daughter who has been, and may she continue to be, my strength and comfort. These were blessings beyond compare. We mourn the passing of Ira and David. Their years were all too short; but in my sorrow, I feel proud of their achievements and their many good deeds for others. Theirs was a good life, and they will live on in the hearts of their family and friends and those who come after us.

To adjust to a new way of life at my age is not easy, but with the love and devotion manifested in so many ways by my dear daughter Lillian and son-in-law Simon, two widowed daughters-in-law Anne and Helene, my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the transition may not be as difficult as anticipated.

It is a great pleasure and rare privilege for me to be here to observe the development of ^{THE} personalities, talents, and characters of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. In this, and in the fruition of my hopes for them, I may yet find a measure of happiness on the road that lies ahead.

ANECDOTES

When my parents got ready to move from Dayton to Cincinnati, they packed their belongings into the uncovered wagon that father used for peddling fruits and vegetables, hitched up the horse, and, with their four children, started on the sixty-mile journey. Their goods consisted of a couple of feather beds, a table, chairs, a few pots and cooking utensils, and a supply of food. We had a pretty good horse; and father, who loved horses (he was a horse shoer by trade) and had lots of experience with them in the old country, felt certain that, with slow driving and plenty of rest, his horse could stand the trip. We drove during the day, stopping frequently to rest, and in the evening camped by the roadside. The children would gather a lot of dry twigs for a fire and father would cook the potatoes, make the coffee, and we had a great time. The feather beds provided a good night's rest.

The horse held out very well, and we reached Cincinnati in a few days in good condition. Our first residence in Cincinnati was at 338 Clark Street, below Freeman Avenue, in the West End, where we lived for several years and where several of the children were born. We were the only Jewish family in that neighborhood but had very little trouble. After a few fights between some of the gentile boys and our older boys were settled, we became good friends with our neighbors. After a few years we moved to a Jewish neighborhood on Carlisle Avenue.

For some time after moving to Cincinnati, father peddled fruits and vegetables with a horse and wagon. Later he rented stands in the Sixth and Court Street sidewalk markets and did quite well. Father had learned a trade in Russia. He was a blacksmith and horse shoer. He had a favorite shop on Carlisle Avenue where he had his horse shod and spent a little time occasionally discussing his

trade with the owner. One day the owner indicated his desire to sell his shop and retire. Father, after much bargaining, bought the shop and went back to his old trade. After a year or two he gave up this place and bought a shop near the Horse Auction on East Sixth Street. Here he was kept busy but was having trouble shoeing some of the wild horses and mules that were brought into the auction from the West. Some of them had never been shod before, were wild and hard to handle. Father had to shoe them, although it was a dangerous and very difficult job. He solved the problem by building stocks. Four posts, sunk deep into the ground to which two cross bars were fastened lengthwise, comprised the stocks. A sling of wide leather straps was attached to the cross bars, and a hand crank was fitted to the end of one of the bars. The sling was put under the animal's belly and, by turning the crank, he was lifted from the ground. His legs were fastened one to each post, and then the shoeing could proceed without much danger. This device worked, and father acquired a reputation for shoeing wild horses and mules.

Usually, when a particularly wild animal was brought in to be shod, a crowd gathered. It was quite a novelty to see a Jew shoeing a wild horse or mule in the home-made stocks.