

SOUTHWESTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA
JEWISH RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS
A History of a Noble Experiment in Jewish Education

Prepared by

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in honor of

the 140th Anniversary of

the founding of

Rodef Shalom Temple

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. Walter Jacob, Rabbi of Rodef Shalom Congregation, has organized symposia during the 140th anniversary year of the Temple's founding to commemorate the many programs and services sponsored by Rodef Shalom and its auxiliary organizations throughout its history. Perhaps no program developed by this Temple is as unusual as the one known as the Southwestern District Religious Schools.

For over 60 years the Southwestern District of Pennsylvania Jewish Religious Schools Committee provided a unique form of religious education for Jewish children in isolated communities throughout the Tri-State area. It is exactly 30 years since they ceased operation in 1966. Today, when there are sophisticated models for the education of Jewish children from Kindergarten through Confirmation, there are hundreds of people in the Pittsburgh area who still recall with fondness a time when pure devotion and dedication by hundreds of volunteer teachers and Mothers Clubs made possible a network of schools that was unparalleled in its time and perhaps ever after.

IN THE BEGINNING

How did it happen? What and who gave it life? Why was it created? This monograph is one component of the commemorative observances of the 140th anniversary of the founding of Rodef Shalom Congregation so it is appropriate (and historically accurate) to note that initially it was the brainchild of Dr. Lippman Mayer, Rabbi of Rodef Shalom Temple, (then called the Eighth Street Temple). In that year at the first general meeting of the Columbian Council, Dr. Mayer had proposed to the membership that Sabbath Schools be initiated for the education of children of immigrants so that they might learn something of their faith. This religious education, he believed, was an essential ingredient of the Americanization activities the Council was to organize. In a letter from Mrs. Pauline Rosenberg, President of the Columbian Council, to Mrs. S. L. Fleischman, secretary, dated October 24, 1895, she says:

Dr. L. Mayer [Rabbi of Rodef Shalom] delivered an address in the Synagogue on Washington Street and succeeded in interesting quite a number of the adult members of that congregation sufficiently to assure their sending their children to the Sabbath School to be taught under our supervision....It (will) start on November 4, 1894 in their synagogue. I consider this a great achievement knowing the reluctance of that class to anything like enlightenment and their blind antipathy to any member of the Reform Congregation.

She suggested meeting prior to November 4 to confer with Dr. Mayer "who is admirably adapted to

cope with the problems these people present to us.

The broad scope of these activities has been documented by archivist Rachel Balliet Colker at the Senator John Heinz Regional History Center. Dr. Mayer believed that children needed to be educated in Jewish history, customs and ceremonials. This mode of education was not normative for many immigrant families, most of whom came from a nominally Orthodox background. It took great courage to propose this concept, but the parents must have been equally courageous to entrust their children to a man whose religious manner differed from anything with which they were familiar.

On the first Sabbath in November of 1894 classes began in the Washington Street shul (now relocated and known as Beth Hamedrash Hagadol-Beth Jacob). The Columbian Council sponsored and administered the program with instruction provided by volunteer teachers. In a letter to the Sunday School Committee of Rodef Shalom, the president of the Columbian Council asked to have a meeting with the Board of the Temple so that certain policy questions could be posed.

The questions were:

- 1) To whom should we look for authority when information is desired? Answer: To Dr. Mayer who (also) is Superintendent of the Sunday School.
- 2) Are Jewish parents who are non-members (of Temple) required to pay to send their children to Sunday School? Answer: If they can't afford it, they aren't taxed by a tuition fee.
- 3) Who pays the expenses for the equipment for the Sunday School? Answer: Children (of Temple members) are supposed to buy their books. If they can't afford to do so, the Temple pays.

Soon the program outgrew its quarters in the Synagogue and moved a few times, always in the Hill District environs. Teachers did more than instruct; they washed faces and fixed lunches. The older children were pressed into service to help in "minding the little ones". Religious education was expanded to include socialization activities.

In 1899, one of the older girls, Miriam Schonfield, age 12, started teach the kindergarten class of the Jewish religious school of what had become the Columbian Council Settlement. Seventy five children were enrolled in the school. In May, 1900 the Settlement was moved to 1835 Center Avenue and, in 1907, at the age of 20, Miss Schonfield was made supervisor of the religious school.

No history of the Southwestern District could make a pretense to authenticity without (paying) tribute to Miriam Schonfield. Her personality gave light and dignity and love to the work. Her name became a byword, and a password, and a challenge

to cooperative effort and understanding and accomplishment. As the chain of the Council's religious schools grew, she nurtured them and bound them together. Before the day of the automobile or bus, she traveled up and down the rivers, organizing, encouraging, laughing, teaching, loving, and loved. And she went about her important work without real teaching material....[Since few] textbooks were available in 1910....she....used the oldest textbook of all: the Bible. Interpretative material came....from the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and from ...creative and enterprising teachers. Miriam Schonfield carried the schools through the years when the American Jewish community was experiencing its early growing and fusion pains.

The foregoing quote is from Mildred Weinberg Kreimer, Field Supervisor from 1942-1946 and author of an article, "Southwestern District Religious Schools Celebrate 60th Year" published in 1953.

The religious school she directed quickly grew. Even the mothers had a Bible class. In 1908 the National Council of Jewish Women (the name was changed in 1904) decided to carry its religious school work into other parts of rapidly expanding Pittsburgh and its neighboring communities.

A Religious Schools Committee was formed with Mrs. Moses Ruslander as Chairman. She organized the mothers of the McKees Rocks community and together they founded the McKees Rocks Religious School. This model of organization was to serve the District well throughout its history. Next to be organized was Beth Jehuda on the North Side with Donora following soon after. During World War I there were eighteen schools, with an average attendance of over 1,000 pupils and 100 voluntary teachers and superintendents.

THE GROWTH YEARS

In 1915 the first confirmation program was held and met with such enthusiasm that Confirmation was incorporated in all the schools thereafter. Students from Carnegie and Lawrenceville made up the confirmation class with the service being held at the Arcade Theatre. The program was arranged by Lawrenceville superintendent, Oscar Harter, who would become Field Supervisor in 1946. A report published in the Jewish Criterion of that year stated that:

[T]he Religious Schools...will this year make rapid headway in being able to gather in all the Jewish children in our District, so that every child can be inspired by knowing the beauties of their faith. Whilst up to this date all of the parents are not manifestly as much interested in the schools as we would like, we already notice a vast improvement over last year in this respect.

1916 saw Confirmation extended to 20 religious schools, 18 of which held joint (union)

services at the Nixon Theater. During that year Rabbi Mazure of the Tree of Life Congregation spoke to a meeting of principals and teachers and advocated the founding of a teachers institute. This occurred in the fall of 1916 and thrived until the Second World War.

Following the model established by Mrs. Moses Ruslander, chairman of the Religious Schools Committee, every new school was established concurrently with the organizing of the mothers of that community into a Mothers Club. This Mothers Club was encouraged, from the beginning to assure financial responsibility for the upkeep of the school. In many cases it took a community several years to become responsible for its portion of the expenses. In such cases the Council Religious Schools Committee bore the necessary expenses. Sometimes as local Councils of Jewish Women were formed in small towns, they assumed the responsibility for the religious school. In other communities, Hadassah groups, sisterhoods, brotherhoods or B'nai B'rith chapters were responsible for sponsoring the schools. But always the Mothers Group was the preferred model. In most cases the local groups were assessed a fee of \$1.00 per child. However the Committee in Pittsburgh would "help out" if this assessment was too burdensome for a community.

Textbooks were purchased and loaned to schools which could not afford to buy them. The Religious School at the Irene Kaufman Settlement (which evolved from that first Columbian Council School) known in the records as the Center Avenue Religious School, was always supported in full by the Committee. The office of the Field Supervisor (as the top administrative post was called) was in the home of Miss Schonfield.

In the May, 1921 annual report of the Pittsburgh Section of the National Council of Jewish Women, published in the Jewish Criterion, Mrs. Louis Amshel, Committee chairman notes that there are 25 schools including those at Morganza and Thornhill (correctional institutions). Teachers' institutes were held every month at Temple Rodef Shalom. Many of the schools organized by Miss Schonfield became the nucleus of new synagogues. The Council president felt this phase of the Council's work was:

...invariably intensely interesting as well as extremely beneficial to both the children and to the members of the Council who have availed themselves of the privilege of attending these (Confirmation) exercises and witnessing for themselves the very great work of the Sabbath School Committee. In Braddock, 175 children were enrolled with a Mothers Club of 75 organized by Miss Schonfield. Several plays were put on [by the children in that] community in the course of a year. The splendid talent displayed by some of [them] was a revelation to the people of Braddock. The attendance at one of these plays at the Carnegie Music Hall [in Braddock] was approximately 1,500.

Schools in operation at this time included South Side, Charleroi, Penn Ave., McKees Rocks, Kittanning, Canonsburg, Beechview, Monongahela, Ford City, Butler. By the middle 1920s nearly

60 schools were enrolled at one time. Added to the list were Ambridge, Bentleyville, Carnegie, Fayette City, Hazelwood, Homewood, Irwin, Jeannette, Johnstown, McDonald, Mt. Pleasant, New Kensington, Vandergrift.

During this period of growth the Pittsburgh Jewish community's population was about 56,000 according to Jacob Feldman, author of *The Jewish Experience in Western Pennsylvania, a history: 1755-1945*. The Jewish population of some of the outlying communities was as follows:

McKeesport	5,000	Carnegie	450
Braddock	2,000	Donora	300
Homestead	1,100	McKees Rocks	250
New Kensington	650	Mt. Pleasant	200
Washington	575	Canonsburg	150
East Pittsburgh	500	Vandergrift	85
Greensburg	450	Leechburg	63

During this period Miss Schonfield traveled extensively to the individual schools, sometimes reaching 3 communities on one Sunday, using public transportation. During the year 1923 she visited 20 communities, organized 7 new schools, coordinated a total of 32 schools and instructed, individually, in classes and in monthly Teachers Institutes, 33 superintendents and 154 teachers with a total pupil enrollment of 1,629.

RODEF SHALOM SISTERHOOD BECOMES COSPONSOR

In 1923 the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods incorporated into its program the education of unaffiliated Jewish children. Rodef Shalom Sisterhood decided it would be most appropriate for them to join with NCJW since many of the women in the Sisterhood had been working through NCJW on the Religious Schools Committee. The Temple, including its Rabbis were very much involved with the program.

Before the two groups formally joined together there was a period of time between 1923 and 1925 when NCJW endeavored to enlist women from other movements in the effort. In 1924 there was an all day meeting of the Mothers Clubs of the various communities and the Southwest District Council. Mrs. Louis Affelder spoke for Rodef Shalom Sisterhood, and Mrs. Aaron Vitman for the Women's League for Traditional Judaism.

By 1925, however, Mrs. J.de S.Freund, President of NCJW in her annual report, stated:

Just a year ago in accepting the.....cooperation of the Rodef Shalom Sisterhood, the Pittsburgh Section has been the instrument through which the Pittsburgh Jewish Women's Religious Schools Committee was formed and which has developed a unique combined movement of sisterhood and council for the extension of religious schools throughout the Southwestern District of Pennsylvania. Thus for the first time have the Council and Sisterhood united in a definite piece of work and in concentrating on religious schools they have found a project worthy of their mettle. If the tenets of our faith are to be carried on to future generations there is no better way than through the religious training of our children.

After a year's trial the two groups have decided to continue their association thus marking a great forward step in Jewish women's work as it proves that such union of forces is not only possible but highly desirable. It is hoped that at some not too distant day the local Religious School Committee which has grown into a District wide group will become a statewide work covering completely the religious schools needs of our Pennsylvania Jewish children....In order that Council Sections, of which there are 25, sisterhoods, auxiliaries and mothers clubs may have equal credit they will change the name to **Southwestern District of Pennsylvania Jewish Religious Schools Committee.**

The budget will be as follows: \$1,875 each from Rodef Shalom Sisterhood and National Council of Jewish Women; the balance to be raised by quotas assigned to communities on the basis of \$1.00 per child. Expenditures will fall between \$4,300 and \$5,200 per year providing for the first time a full time secretary to the Field Supervisor.

The foregoing material was published in the Jewish Criterion in May, 1925.

Thus was the new entity born. As the president of NCJW said in her 1925 annual report:

This District (of NCJW) is best known for its 43 religious schools, 325 teachers and superintendents and 3,000 students under a well coordinated system of which the Pittsburgh Section is an important part. Some have asserted that this is the function of the synagogue or sisterhood, but not Council.. *But it must be borne in mind that this (program) reaches all phases of Judaism.* [emphasis added] It does not advocate (R)eform, (C)onservative or (O)rthodox. It offers Judaism in whatever form the community desires--our only stipulation is that the teaching be in English. However Hebrew instruction can be and often is supplementary. In connection with the well organized religious school there has developed subconsciously a phase often overlooked.

While little children are led along religious lines, youth at college age are apt to drift. Most of our teachers are drawn from the ranks of students at local colleges and receive personal instruction from the Field Supervisor. There is stimulation towards things essentially Jewish and spiritual.

And so many schools developed, each with a unique history. The opening of the Hilltop School in 1925 is recalled by Grace Fivars in a letter and subsequent interview, her family having played a central role in its establishment:

Among the many schools served by the Southwestern District was one in an area of Pittsburgh known as Beltzhoover, a tiny neighborhood several street-car zones away from the rest of the Pittsburgh Jewish community. The Beltzhoover initiative was spearheaded by (my parents) Morris and Irene Fivars, who operated a small grocery store at 715 Estella Street. It was Morris Fivars who walked in all directions within a five mile radius to contact Jewish families in Beltzhoover, Mt. Washington, Knoxville and Mt. Oliver. In 1925 the Hilltop Religious School opened at Weil's Dance Hall on the third floor at 239 Climax Street. The space was donated by Henry and Hattie Weil, founding members of the Hilltop Jewish Community. Morris Fivars had recruited about 25 families. He became the pivotal figure in the congregation. He arranged to borrow a Torah for special occasions; he organized High Holiday activities and he sponsored the Reverend Herman Mermelstein who conducted the services. Irene Fivars was the first president of the congregation. She served for 10 of the 15 years the Hilltop Religious School provided services for the Jewish families in Beltzhoover.

Miss Fivars is one of many former students and teachers who remember Miriam Schonfield with great respect and affection.

She had a way of drawing people to her that subsequent administrators lacked. Those who knew Miss Schonfield never forgot her. To be in her presence was a rare privilege. She cared about everyone she touched and remembered everyone's name. The Teachers Institute she organized was virtually the only opportunity for young people in outlying areas to meet other young Jewish people. She provided young teachers (and most teachers were as young as 16 to 21) with an opportunity to grow. She was so inspiring that these young teachers worked for no pay, receiving only the money for carfare.

Miss Fivars remembers leaving her home at 7:00 A.M. on Sunday to reach her teaching assignment. She used two streetcars to get to her school at 9:30. She did not mind this long journey however, because of her dedication to Miss Schonfield and her program.

Another young teacher, Sarah Bachrach Mishelevich, was 16 years old in 1926 when she taught in the New Kensington Beth Jacob Religious School where her father was the rabbi. That year she attended the Teachers Institute held in Miss Schonfield's home on Forbes Avenue.

In a telephone interview with Ms. Mishelevich, she recalled Miss Schonfield instructing the teachers in appropriate methods of communicating with students. During the course of this instruction Miss Schonfield asked the teachers, rhetorically, what they would do if a student were to raise her hand with a question during an instructional session. Ms. Mishelevich, thinking she was asking for volunteers to answer a question, raised her hand. Immediately she perceived her error and was very embarrassed. But Miss Schonfield graciously and quickly replied, "Now this is a response that shows you were paying attention." This moment has stayed with Ms. Mishelevich for 70 years.

Much has been written in weekly reports in the **Jewish Criterion** of those years, but nothing is as eloquent in portraying the philosophy and the fervor as the following report by Miriam Schonfield.

MISS SCHONFIELD'S ANNUAL REPORT

The only report written by Miss Schonfield extant is the annual report for 1927/1928 an excerpt of which follows:

In giving a report of the Religious School work for the Southwestern District, one hesitates to know just what would be most interesting to our members, but as there are so many different phases of our work and the time is so limited, I will try to point out the most outstanding features.

What the coming generation is to accomplish depends in no small measure on the type and amount of religious education that it is enabled to acquire; it has therefore been a grave responsibility that has rested upon our religious department under whose training the children have been placed. We all know that the religious training of the child comes under two channels, the home and the religious school. The school gives the children the theory, and in the home, they find the practical application of their religion. In Judaism, ethics and religion are dissolubly bound together. The root of a Jewish ethical life being profoundly religious, the belief in one God, the moral creator of the world, and the Father of mankind. The crowning character of our religion is that it consists not of an immutable torpid system of dogmas, but is in constant process of growth and development. As a mighty stream hastens ever onward in its course, and accommodates itself in the channel in which it flows, so is Israel's religion--a living stream that incessantly pursues an onward and forward path.

If we have deserved the reputation of being most generous in charity, to our

religion is due the credit. If we have encouraged learning, it is because our religion enjoins study. If our home life has been beautiful and family relationships admirable, it is again due to the stress our religion places upon filial piety. If we are loyal to our country it is only because our prophets taught us to pray for the land in which we dwell and to seek its welfare. And where we have failed to do these things, it is not because we were true Jews, but untrue Jews, disloyal to the best in our faith.

In our schools this year, we have tried not only to impart knowledge, but to deepen faith. We have taught the children history and the ideals and principles and ethics of our religion, so that they could translate it into life. To say 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' and to really express it in action. We have tried to build up a character in the children that will bring them nearer to God. We have asked our mothers in our districts to teach the children to pray and to recall the lesson to the children during the week, thus helping the children to remember what they have learned.

When I returned home in September, I discovered that in most districts, a change in staff was desired for many reasons. Among which they cite that the injection of a new superintendent in the school tends to give it new life, and prevents undue familiarity between superintendents and pupils. They also claim that after awhile, the superintendents lose interest in that district, and a change always works for the better. A great many of my boys had graduated from school and gone to different cities, so that it was necessary to retrain old boys to assume new duties in new districts, where they must learn to understand the psychology of the Mothers in that district and the children in that school.

Of the 41 schools now in progress, there has been a change in superintendents in every school with the exception of four. There has been a change in the teaching staff of all the schools, in some, the entire corps of teachers was replaced, whereas in others, a few new teachers have augmented the old group. This transfer meant reteaching the old group, and training the new. Our corps of teachers consists of boys and girls from nine different fraternities and two sororities. We find in our midst lawyers, school teachers, business girls, business men, and high school students.

I have found this change and transfer of teachers and superintendents from one school to another, a necessity every year. Our entire staff numbers 275 regular teachers, 37 substitutes, 41 superintendents, 11 substitute superintendents, and 14 coaches. The substitutes have also been trained to take up the work.... and are ready at a few hours notice to step in wherever they are needed. The teachers are trained individually in my home.

What exactly do I mean by a night's instruction in my home? Let me give you a cross section of an evening spent in my home in the training of a boy or girl. First I talk with them personally, to find out their reaction, background, become acquainted with the type I am dealing with, and learn how much academic and Jewish education they have had. After ascertaining these things, I am ready to teach pedagogical methods of putting over the lesson, by presenting model lessons of psalms, proverbs, commandments, history, ethics, Midrash and the sayings of the Fathers.

I teach them how to use the material I have given them (outlined curriculum) for their particular work, and stress above all, the responsibility of the teacher to his class, the necessity of applying himself, and of knowing his work so well, that he can present it without books or papers. I demand that all preparation be done outside the class. The instruction given to our teachers and superintendents, in one evening, if divided up into parts and presented, as is done by the Institute or Normal Schools, (note: forerunner of teachers colleges or schools of education) would take a long period of time, and then the teacher is given only one phase of the work at a time.

Whereas I, by devoting three or four hours at one stretch, to the individual, present the problem from all angles, so that the teacher may go directly to a class, and has a thorough idea of what he is supposed to get across. We give him a typed curriculum, containing the work for each week's lesson clearly outlined, and have appended model lessons of psalms, proverbs, commandments, moral lessons, prayers, an a list of books pertaining to his work, to be used for reference, so that he may be able to present his work with a broadened point of view. If problems arise, which are very serious or perplexing to him, he comes back for instruction and advice as often as he needs it. The superintendents hold teachers' meetings once a month, where the work is gone over, and the problems of the school are discussed.

The teacher also has an opportunity to attend the monthly Institute meetings where Rabbis and Educators give lectures and Open Forums, which are a great help in solving problems and explaining more intensively the work that we are doing. We conduct three Institutes, one in Johnstown, known as the TriCounty, for Nanty-Glo, Portage, Windber, Altoona, Barnsboro, and two schools in Johnstown; The Valley Institute for Scottdale, Greensburg, Latrobe, Mt. Pleasant and Connellsville, and one in Pittsburgh for 33 schools. As an example of what we are doing in the Institute, this past month Rabbi Irving Levey of Cincinnati, addressed the Tri-County meeting on "The Interpretation of Jewish Ceremonials."

Rabbi Goodman A. Rose of Pittsburgh (Beth Shalom) gave one of the most inspirational lectures at the Valley Institute on the subject of 'Facing our Jewish

Obligations'. And in our Pittsburgh Institute, which was the finest we have had this year, Rabbi Charles E. Shulman of Wheeling, W. Va. Gave a most enlightening discourse on 'Religion and Youth'. After the lecture, Rabbi Shulman came to my home with a number of students and until the wee hours of the morning, answered questions, inspiring and informing them of the many movements in Judaism which have occurred in the past century.

We conduct four Roundtables for Superintendents during the year. This year Mr. Chester Bandman and Rabbi B. A. Lichter (B'nai Israel) addressed two meetings and inspired the boys in their work. I myself addressed a third meeting giving instruction and advice. The purpose of the Roundtable is to present problems which confront the superintendents in the various districts as a whole, for solution, and an interchange of ideas and suggestions.

In addition to these meetings, we also conducted three Confirmation Roundtables, with a special Confirmation committee, to draw up the questionnaires for Confirmation, to mark the papers on their return to our office, and to make plans for the different Confirmation services.

Our curriculum embraces a course of studies from the Kindergarten Age through Post Biblical History. No child is confirmed unless he is 15 or over, and has the proper attitude. If perchance there is an exceptional case, where a child is only fourteen and has been in the work for eight years, and has developed the proper attitude, then, and then only, do we confirm him. The Rabbis say that it is the attitude rather than the age which counts.

Our curriculum is quite comprehensive. This year we have Post-Confirmation classes in many schools where the boys and girls study the history of the Jewish race in China, Spain and other European countries, and current events. I visited one of these classes the other evening with a former superintendent. This class which meets in the evening is composed of twenty boys and girls from the ages of 17 to 20. They are a very eager and enthusiastic group, ready for all the information I could possibly give them. I helped them choose a name for their organization and after much discussion, decided to call themselves the 'Torchbearers'. In addition to the Post-Biblical work, they are discussing Jewish Current Events, reading books written by Jewish authors. This class in the West End is indeed an example for other districts to emulate.

Our curriculum because of its elasticity and broadness is in great demand. We have sent it, this year, to Washington, D.C.; Youngstown, Ohio; Omaha, Nebraska;

New York City; Warren, Ohio and Williamsport, PA and besides, have helped many other districts throughout the United States by sending out materials and suggestions.

Our Assembly takes the form of service, Bible reading and a story, songs, and reports. For each holiday there is an appropriate service, both for Jewish and secular patriotic days. Each Jewish holiday is fittingly celebrated with plays, programs and parties.

The Center Avenue Religious School which is under my personal supervision, I use as a training school for young, inexperienced teachers who are not sufficiently equipped to go out to teach on Sunday mornings. After a year or two directly under me, they are fitted(sic) to enter into any school and take up the work.

I have organized six new schools this year, West End, Rankin, Beth Hamedrash Hagodol, McKees Rocks Progressive, Brownsville and Torath Chaim. In West End there had not been a Religious School for ten years. One of the Mothers came to me and asked me to come in and organize their district. I was amazed to find a group of 45 children. These people are so interested and enthusiastic in their work, that they have been able to pay for all their materials. There is splendid cooperation from teachers and superintendents, each teacher having come for instruction to my home. The boys and girls from the ages of 17 to 20 have organized a night club, which I have described above. For this class of 20 students, we have been successful in securing a young Jewish art student from Tech (Carnegie Institute of Technology), a graduate of Rabbi Philo's school, to teach this class. The boys and girls themselves pay their instructor.

In Rankin, the Rabbi with a committee of women, came to my house and spent an evening, persuading me to come to his district. We have organized a school which is most successful, and which has the full cooperation of the Sisterhood. The teachers, who are mostly local girls, came to my home for instruction, and are taking their work very seriously. The cooperation of the Rabbi in that district is indeed a delight.

A committee of ten men, backing the Beth Hamedrash Hagodol Religious School asked our organization to enter and organize a school. The teachers were taught in my home, then I went to the school, taught the children in the different classes, instructed the teachers in putting their work across. Fortunately I was able to secure one of my old superintendents to take over the school.

The children of the McKees Rocks Progressive School, with few exceptions had never attended a Religious School. This district felt that they needed a school, asked the permission of committee to organize and with their consent the school was

opened. So far we have met with success, and the teachers come often for instruction.

Brownsville, another new school this year, was handed over by the local people as it had been a miserable failure. Since we took it over, we have met with phenomenal success. I visited Brownsville but once to organize and grade the school. I instructed the teachers. The staff of this school come all the way from Brownsville to attend our Institute meetings. They are very enthusiastic.

This past month has witnessed the opening of the sixth district, that of the Torath Chaim Religious School, at 728 North Negley Avenue, East End, Pittsburgh. This school already has a splendidly equipped community house, with well ventilated rooms for each class, pianos, and all necessary facilities for both physical and spiritual advancement of the child.

Besides my visits, my secretary visits a school each Sunday morning. This official visit from the office brings back the strength and weakness of a particular district. Although at the time she cannot do any doctoring, yet it means much to me to know just what is going on. Whether or not the teachers are putting the material across in the right way; whether or not they have the proper materials, if they are following my curriculum, if the superintendent is putting pep into his assemble and conducting it along the right lines if the children and teachers come on time, and whether or not the interest of the children is sustained by the teacher. My secretary never interferes with the work, she only observes.

A visitor from our Committee going to our town schools would be of the same service. Some may ask "How can the committee be helpful?" It is not necessary for anyone to teach, for that is the duty of the Field Supervisor. We would like to have them visit the Assembly, visit the classes and if they see that the superintendents and teachers come in late, are ill prepared,It is indeed pleasing to see visitors sufficiently interested to come to the plays and entertainments, and I feel that at least two visitors from our committee should attend the confirmation exercises, especially in the town schools.

..... During my work throughout the year, I have tried to sum up some of the strengths ...and weaknesses of our schools and I have decided on the following--the strength of the school lies in the fact that physical conditions are as they should be and that the Mothers; Club, Sisterhood, or Council section has a strong vital President to push things along in that particular community, and the committee is willing to follow out the advice of the Field Supervisor, and to sacrifice both time and money in order to help this particular piece of work.

Where the club President or committee is inefficient, where they count everything in dollars and cents, where Mothers allow the children to stay away from Sabbath School, or permit them to oversleep, or keep them home on account of weather conditions, and are prone to criticize each little mistake of a teacher or superintendent and to enlarge on any little thing which may happen in the district, instead of trying to understand, that school is bound to fail.

My work is not limited to the Southwestern District alone, but extends to all parts of the state of Pennsylvania, as well as to the coast. Recently I was invited to come to Pennsylvania State College to address the Jewish student body at a meeting of the Society for Advancement of Judaism. This was indeed a source of great joy and inspiration to me.

I organized the girls at State College into a club for Jewish Culture, to be sponsored by Dr. Theresa Cohen, a member of the faculty, and also secured the cooperation of a number of boys in assisting with Jewish Religious work. The meeting was very well attended and the student body was so enthusiastic and pleased with my address, that I was extended a very cordial invitation to return very soon. I visited the Phi Epsilon Phi house and had a heart to heart talk with the boys, and at the Beta Sigma Rho fraternity house we discussed the Bible.

I was also asked to come to Williamsport to conduct with Rabbi Cronbach of Cincinnati a three day Religious Education Conference for Williamsport, Lock Haven and Sunbury....When I arrived in Williamsport, I was informed that I was to occupy the pulpit that evening in Sunbury...As I saw a great many men and young boys in the audience, I emphasized the relationship of parents to the synagogue and the duty of the father to the growing boy. I was enthusiastically received.

The next day, many Sunbury people accompanied me to Williamsport where I conducted a children's service at the Saturday morning service in the Temple. I told the children stories and spoke on a few of the old heroines in the Bible. In the afternoon I spoke on "Religious Training in the Home" before a group of adults from the surrounding towns.

Several of the colored preachers from Williamsport attended and thanked me for some of the information I had given them. In the evening I addressed the group on "General Principles for Teachers and Parents" discussing the subject from three different angles--How to Prepare a Lesson, How to Present a Lesson and What to expect of the Parents. On Sunday morning at the Religious School session at the Jewish Community Center, I gave several model lesson demonstrations using the children from Sunbury, Lock Haven and Williamsport and environs for pupils in the

classroom.

I put on an experimental Kindergarten lesson with those of the lowest grade, and the lesson on Ruth was demonstrated in Grades 3-4, before the entire assembly. In the afternoon I gave an address on "Responsibility of the Parent and Responsibility of the teacher and one Phase of Child Psychology". In the evening I gave several model lessons on Psalms and Proverbs for teachers and superintendents in Rabbi Mantinband's home. Dr. Cronbach also gave four lectures.....

Besides our regular schools we conduct a school for the Jewish Children of the Western Pennsylvania Institute for the Deaf.We also conduct a school for the Jewish boys in the Western Pennsylvania Training School at Morganza and Thornhill. The children who unfortunately are incarcerated in these institutions look forward with eagerness to the visits on Sunday of the Sabbath School Teachers. They know the psalms and provers off by heart and the teacher has only to give the real interpretation and explanation of the work covered. Mrs. Bacharach, myself and a teacher, Mr. James Hendel visited the school when the boys took part in an operetta. It was an interesting experience for all of us.

[I]t is indeed pleasing and gratifying to know how far reaching our work has become....the case of a young Jewish boy who had become disillusioned and discouraged through his environment and family. He called me on the phone one evening and asked if he might come over to visit me. Before he left ..he was interested enough to ..take a class at the Center Avenue Religious School. I am sure he will...gain back his confidence and have a more optimistic view of life.....An interesting incident is that of a....sophomore at the University who was very lonesome until he met a Jewish group at the home of the Field Supervisor.

He had decided that Pittsburgh was very drab and uninteresting and after he had found a center where he could pour out his joys and troubles, he became happier. It is indeed pleasing to know that we can reach just such boys through our work and help them find an interest....My work has been very pleasant as the rabbis always unselfishly are willing to cooperate. ..Never can we let down for a moment or rest on past laurels, for as Ruskin says, 'We must not lower the level of our aim that we may more surely enjoy the complacency of success.

REMEMBRANCES OF THINGS PAST

In her report Miss Schonfield refers several times to her "boys". These were the superintendents of the schools and she admired them. We are fortunate to know what at least one of "Miriam's boys" thought of her and of the operation through the personal reminiscences of

Bernard Steinberg, a member of Rodef Shalom, in an interview conducted in June, 1996.

At the end of 1928 I was a freshman at the University of Pittsburgh. I received a telephone call from Miriam Schonfield, whom I had met before. She told me that her nephew, Bob Lowe, her sister's son, who lived in Erie, was coming to Pitt as a freshman. She wanted me to meet her nephew. I agreed to come to her home on Forbes Avenue and meet Bob. When I visited Bob at Miriam's home for the second time. Miriam talked to me about the possibility of becoming a teacher in the Southwestern District religious school system.

I was about 18 and a half and had never given such matters any thought although I was a 1925 confirmand of Rodef Shalom Congregation. Miriam felt I would do well. I began my first assignment as a teacher in the fall of 1929 at the Beth Jehuda Synagogue on the North Side. Abe R. Cohen was the superintendent and was also a law student at the University of Pittsburgh. He subsequently became a prominent attorney. I taught the pre-confirmation class. Abe retired at the end of that school year and suggested that I become the superintendent.

During my year as a teacher I was not paid; however I did receive money for carfare. When I became superintendent I was paid \$5.00 per session which meant per week. The reason I knew Miss Schonfield was that my sister, of blessed memory, was one of the first persons to teach for Miss Schonfield. She taught at the Center Avenue School where Miss Schonfield was the superintendent. Miss Schonfield had many wonderful attributes; a good administrator, a good organizer, a good stimulator of people to get involved. In the period when she served there weren't too many people who were competent in the field of Jewish education.

She was the Southwestern District, 100%. She had an ability to motivate people to serve. She was a dynamic person in an era when there weren't too many women involved in such endeavors. The male teachers and all of the superintendents were known as 'Miriam's boys'. I was very happy to be known in this way because I remember Miriam with great fondness.

My first assignment as a superintendent was at the Hilltop School. Just recently I saw Grace Fivars who told me that she remembers me as the superintendent of her school, the Hilltop school. (See Interview with Grace Fivars) Then in 1931 I became the superintendent in Carnegie. The next year I was sent to Coraopolis. I had to take the train to get there. In 193 I was the superintendent in Greensburg. My duties were to conduct the assembly before classes began and substitute for any teacher who might be absent. I received all of my teaching materials from the District office.

Once a month I attended a teachers' institute at Rodef Shalom. In fact in 1932 and 1933 I was the president of the Teachers Institute. My service to Southwestern ended in 1933 and the next year Miriam passed away. I felt privileged to have served under her tutelage.

Another person who remembers Miss Schonfield from this time period is Dr. Paul Forman who was interviewed in June, 1996.

My memories are focused mainly at the Center Avenue Sabbath School, as it was known when I began as a young child in 1929. My memories are clear, vivid and warm. I eagerly anticipated attending each session. The director, the atmosphere was warm and welcoming. It was a large school. Physically the Irene Kaufmann Center was a very comfortable facility.

The individual most responsible for this warm, inviting atmosphere was the superintendent, Miriam Schonfield. She opened each week's session with an assembly which included a Sabbath service led by her. The service was almost entirely in English with the exception of the Sh'ma, Kedushah and MiChamocha. The part I loved best were the beautiful stories that Miss Schonfield used to tell. Thinking of her now as I relate my memories makes me feel very emotional.

She was a warm, inspiring leader. She incorporated homilies from Pirkei Avot into her stories. She was a story teller, par excellence. She had favorite expressions when telling these stories that I still remember, such as 'This too will pass' or 'everything in moderation, nothing in excess', 'what is distasteful to you do not do unto others'. Years later I learned that the latter phrase was one of Hillel's sayings, but I didn't know that at the time. This was true teaching and learning at its best. The subject I loved best was Jewish history. It was a good base upon which I continued to learn throughout my life.

This exposure to Jewish history helped me to understand the world in which I was living, how I was to fit into it and why I experienced the things that I did in the outside world. These memories are in sharp contradiction to the memories I have of Hebrew School, which I attended just a few blocks away on Center Ave. Although it is only within the past 15 years that I have been a regular Sabbath worshiper at my Conservative synagogue, those early services remain strongly in my memory.

We used the Union Hymnal for our services and for the music we sang. We had a piano accompaniment and everyone participated. As students were confirmed, many of them became teachers in the Southwestern system. My brother, Herman, of blessed memory, and my sister Ann, as well as myself all taught. My brother and I

both became superintendents. I served as superintendent in the Carnegie, South Side and Homewood schools while my brother served in the Ambridge and Carnegie schools. Many field supervisors followed Miss Schonfield and while they were good, no one could match her.

Another student at the Center Avenue School remembers Miriam Schonfield with fondness. Allen Goppman, president of Adath Jeshuren, an Orthodox synagogue in Pittsburgh, began his Jewish education in 1931. He remembers Miss Schonfield as the "lady in charge" and "quite nice to know." He was interviewed in June, 1996.

Social life for many of the teachers and superintendents was enhanced by activities sponsored by the District. Fund raising balls were held yearly during this period. According to the **Jewish Criterion**, a December 1930 Benefit Ball held at the Fort "Pitt Hotel with Bernie Armstrong, organist at the Stanley Theatre playing with the Gibby Lockhart orchestra was a "brilliant social success." A 1932 special "live program" featured Dick Powell, Bernie Armstrong, Dorothy Bushey and Rody Klamman at the Schenley Hotel.

In 1932 several Purim plays were produced. Purim and Chanukah plays in many of the schools in the District were directed by people who served the District as coaches. The Jewish Criterion for March tells of two plays performed at the Center Avenue School coached by Mrs. Samuel Lichter, a member of Rodef Shalom Congregation. The Criterion article goes on to say that "The Committee notes that since the successful Purim play at the Center Avenue School, many new children have enrolled in the school and more mothers are coming regularly to services conducted by the School." Mrs. Lichter is still a member of Rodef Shalom and recalls the plays and other performances which she directed under the aegis of Miss Schonfield.

THE TORCH PASSES

1933 was Miss Schonfield's last year as Field Supervisor. Unknown to all but a few close associates, she was ill with cancer and January 25, 1934 at the age of 45 she died. This woman who had no formal education beyond high school created a system of Jewish education that was without parallel and influenced the lives of thousands of people, only a few of whom are mentioned in this report.

Miriam Schonfield's legacy of Jewish interdenominational education continued for some 30 years after her death. The Jewish Criterion articles of the period note programs offered at Poale Zedeck which was part of the District. Rabbi Shapiro of Poale Zedeck officiated at the confirmation exercises of Beth Jehuda on the North Side in 1935. I.A. Abrams of Hebrew Institute addressed the Teachers' Institute on the topic, "Orthodox Judaism" while Rabbi Herman Hailperin of Tree of Life Synagogue addressed the teachers on "Conservative Judaism". During this period Abe R. Cohen was Field Supervisor.

By 1937 it was becoming more difficult to recruit teachers and so an article was published in the Jewish Criterion (September 24) making an appeal for volunteers:

In order to continue to render Jewish education in those communities where means of Jewish education are lacking. This organization which has been established over 25 years is claimed to be the only one of its kind in the United States.

There are already 140 teachers in the service who give their time voluntarily and make an earnest attempt to serve youth and the Jewish cause. Since a number of schools have applied for admission to this organization, the Southwestern District is in urgent need of a number of volunteer teachers who have had a formal Jewish education.

The article referred to a statement by Dr. Solomon Freehof of Rodef Shalom Temple.

The fact is, the Southwestern District is unique in American Jewish life. It is a network of Jewish schools teaching a variety of religion, history and Hebrew subject. This network of schools is maintained conjointly by the Council of Jewish Women and the Sisterhood of Rodef Shalom Temple and by whatever help any other group is willing to give. The teaching has hitherto been entirely voluntary. Hundreds of young Pittsburgh men and women serve the cause of Judaism at great inconvenience to themselves, but nevertheless willingly and ably. One of the greatest problems of Jewish education in America is how to reach the people in the smaller towns where there are frequently seven or eight or ten Jewish families and who because their numbers are few, generally have not the ability or even the initiative to establish a congregation and a school. Through the Southwestern District such isolated communities are given an opportunity for modern education.

Through the end of the 1930's the schools continued to flourish. Saul S. Spiro became the Field Supervisor in 1938. At that time there were schools in 30 communities serving 1,000 children who were taught by 200 volunteer teachers. In January of 1939 the Teachers Institute held at Rodef Shalom featured Professor Hugh Wing of the University of Pittsburgh who presented a talk entitled, "The Nature of Facism in America". "To end the evening in a lighter vein" as the Jewish Criterion said, the social committee arranged for their 'learned ladies' to meet the 'Gentlemen and Scholars' of the Institute in a "Battle of the Sexes--a six round bout. This was followed by the Field Supervisor Saul S. Spiro, who presented plans and projects for school celebrations of Chamisho Oso(sic) B'Shevat, Lincoln and Washington's Birthdays and Purim.

Dr. Spiro, building on the informal curricula used by previous supervisors, developed a comprehensive, copyrighted curriculum in 1941. It was supplemented by Mrs. Mildred Kreimer and Mr. Oscar Harter, field supervisors in the 40's and 50's and contains an introduction by Dr. Solomon

Freehof which is included here:

The problem of Jewish education in America is complex and difficult. It involves, first of all, a problem of philosophy. What are the principles, what are the fundamental intentions of our education in the changing world? Second, it is a question of curriculum. Which subjects shall we teach so as to carry out the intentions of our educational philosophy? Third, there is the problem of textbooks. We must write and publish books which will be the proper vehicles for education and will interpret the curriculum to the modern American Jewish child. Fourth, there is the problem of a faculty. Where can we find, or how shall we train teachers who will have not only the technical knowledge of professional educators, but sufficient acquaintance with the actual material which we desire to teach? All of these problems are serious ones and have been dealt with to an increasing degree of success by many organizations, nation and local, engaged in the great enterprise of Jewish education in America.

There is, however, a fifth problem which is not generally discussed and which is a vital one, namely, the problem of geography. Our system of education must be so organized as to cope with the geographical fact that Jews are not only concentrated in large masses in the great cities but are also scattered in small groups in small towns all over the United States. How can these scattered groups be reached? What opportunity can be provided to them and to their children for the Jewish education for which they often long more ardently than Jews in the great cities?

This problem is not a new one. Many serious attempts have been made to cope with it.....The Southwestern District of Pennsylvania...is the most practical solution of the problem so far proposed. By uniting the enthusiasm of the (National) Council of Jewish Women under whose auspices the District was founded, and the enthusiasm of the Sisterhood of Rodef Shalom Temple, and by directing this emotional and mental current into the channel of Jewish education, organizing over a score of schools around the Pittsburgh district into one group, this method is small enough in scope to be manageable and large enough in achievement to be encouraging. The Southwestern District may be looked upon as the example which eventually the entire country will follow., Some day great congregations in New York and Chicago and San Francisco and St. Louis will, in collaboration with the Council of Jewish Women, establish similar districts in the neighborhoods around their respective cities. If these new district swill achieve what our Southwestern District has already achieved the geographical problem of Jewish education in America will be largely solved.

Indeed, Dr. Freehof figured prominently in the life of the District. According to Helen Finkel Eger,

office secretary to Chester Bandman, Administrator of Rodef Shalom (and field supervisor of the District for a few months following Miriam Schonfield's death in 1934) and staff assistant to Saul Spiro, field supervisor from 1939 until 1942, the curriculum was developed jointly by Rabbi Freehof and Mr. Spiro.

It was modeled on the curriculum then in use at Rodef Shalom but was adapted for use in small communities with limited resources. More than once throughout the years, Mrs. Eger said, Rabbi Freehof urged the Southwestern District Committee to continue its good work even in the face of competing programs and changing demographics.

Many of the superintendents in the District also looked to Rabbi Freehof for assistance. Harold Soltman, z'l, Superintendent of the Swissvale Religious School and Secretary of the Superintendent's Round-Table in 1938, wrote a letter to Dr. Freehof which has been preserved by his son, Herbert, in which he states that the superintendents discussed the problem of effectively teaching the Bible:

One Superintendent stated that he had successfully used your recent publication on the Psalms as the basis for teaching appreciation and understanding of the Psalms in particular and of the Bible in general. Some of our Superintendents, however, indicated that neither they nor their respective communities could afford the purchase of your book. Mr. Spiro mentioned that he had had a conversation with you regarding the possibility of furnishing ..one copy... to each of the District ..schools..in order that all the schools might have the benefit of instruction from your highly valuable book. I, personally, have made excellent use of your book and have found it very inspirational, both to myself and to the students whom I have instructed from your writings. In these troubled days, it is increasingly important to us as Jews to be possessed of spiritual courage and hope to face the trouble that besets us, and there can be no doubt that the Psalms afford one of the greatest sources of inspiration to which we can turn and from which we, as teachers, can hope to impart to the youth under our care....and spiritual hope which will serve to carry Israel through the present crisis just as our forebears passed through crises in the past.

THE WAR YEARS AND BEYOND

The "trouble that besets us" of course became World War II. While the destruction of European Jewry was taking place and while thousands of young Jewish men (and some few women) were serving in the military, the District schools carried on. Mrs. Mildred Kreimer replaced Dr. Spiro as Field Supervisor and most of the male superintendents were replaced by women. No longer did the Pittsburgh Teachers Institute meet nor did the Superintendent's Roundtable. But the schools survived and in many cases thrived.

One such school, the Kiski Valley Religious School, provided this writer with an excellent, personalized education in what can only be called spartan surroundings. Operational from 1938 until 1959, the two people who served as Superintendents live in Pittsburgh now and were able to recall the highlights of that tiny school.

The first Superintendent, Sylvia Breman Braun, tells her story:

I married in 1936 and set up housekeeping in Leechburg. Noticing that Jewish children in the Kiski Valley (Leechburg and Apollo in Armstrong County and Vandergrift in Westmoreland County) were devoid of the opportunity of obtaining a Jewish education I called Milton Sussman, a Pittsburgh attorney, and asked for his advice. Mr. Sussman came out on a cold, wintry night and got so lost he ended up in Saltsburg before proceeding to Vandergrift. We met with him in the B'nai B'rith headquarters which consisted of an apartment on the second story of a car dealership building. This space ultimately became the space for the Religious School as well as the B'nai B'rith.

I was Superintendent from 1938 until 1950. I also played the piano for the assemblies which included the worship service. There was an atmosphere of cooperation throughout my years of service. For the first few years the parents taught all the classes, but after that we hired teachers through the District. They came out from Pittsburgh and taught a variety of subjects including Hebrew. The District took care of sending materials for the students and teachers. We only had to pay for the teachers. The District made all plans for confirmation and even arranged for the female confirmands to carry bouquets of flowers in the processional. (Note: It was Mrs. Helen Finkel Eger who made these arrangements in the first years)

There is another aspect of which I am proud. We had a Jewish family in Leechburg consisting of a mother, father and three sons. The father was what would be considered today legally blind. His only livelihood was collecting scrap iron for resale. The mother had T.B. and was in a sanitarium. The boys were sent to our religious school but were poor students and quite disruptive in class.

I decided these boys needed love and attention so I got them to come to my home every Wednesday afternoon for years so I could tutor them. We would study in our breakfast room and on the table were sandwiches, cookies and chocolate milk. In time they mellowed and all of them were confirmed at our school. One boy went to work for a Jewish merchant in our town and in time opened his own store in another town. The second son became president of a small college in Ohio while the third son became a teacher in one of our local schools. I felt very rewarded by their

achievements.

The classes at that tiny school were conducted in one room. At no time were there more than 12 students in the entire school but that did not diminish the quality of instruction. This writer remembers having homework assignments in the higher grades that took most of a Saturday afternoon to complete.

And how could one face one's teacher, Jack Rubin, if the work was not done to his satisfaction? Or one's Mother, the Chair of the Mothers Committee, who worked tirelessly for the school even as her family was being destroyed in the Holocaust. This monograph is inspired by her devotion to the future of Judaism which occurred even as her personal world was crashing. Anne Schiff Cooper, z'l, worked tirelessly to keep the school going.

The lessons learned in that tiny school seem even more significant as time has passed. And the most outstanding teacher of my religious school life was able to recall some of these moments in an interview on May 1 of this year.

Jack Rubin has lived in Squirrel Hill since 1959. Prior to that for over 25 years he lived in Vandergrift where he and his brothers operated clothing stores in the three valley communities. Known as the Kiski Valley because they are situated on the banks of the Kiskiminetas River, the towns had small Jewish populations beginning in the 20's. Jack, born in Russia, came to this country as a small boy, lived with relatives in Brooklyn and received a thorough Jewish education. He is fluent in and knowledgeable about Jewish texts. He taught in the Religious School almost from its inception, becoming principal in 1950. He served until the school was closed in 1959. At the time the school closed there were only 8 children in the religious school. He made arrangements for them to go to schools in neighboring towns which by now were more accessible due to improved roads.

The primary reason for establishing the school and for my long commitment to it was to insure Jewish continuity. In the late 30's statistics showed that about 4% of Jews nationally and in Pittsburgh were involved in interfaith marriages. At that time the intermarriage rate for the Kiski Valley was 45%. Young Jewish people were growing up without a Jewish education and with very little prospect of meeting young people their own age. The school was a major effort by some of the parents to insure Jewish survival. I am very proud of these accomplishments because the goal of reducing the rate of intermarriage was met. The vast majority of the graduates married Jewish people and are maintaining Jewish homes. However there is no more Jewish community in the Kiski Valley. There are only two families in the entire valley who identify themselves as Jewish.

But those he reached were touched forever. He had numerous challenges. By the time Jack became superintendent he had to use his own resources to find teachers. Sometimes there was a

problem. Some of the teachers he was able to recruit from Pittsburgh were Orthodox and they began to instill a view of Jewish observance that was inconsistent with the practices of most of the students' parents. These parents complained to Jack.

Even through Jack himself was comfortable with traditional observance he realized he had to accommodate the diverse views and practices of the local community. So he lectured the young teachers about how to instruct the students regarding customs and practices. They were told to devote equal time to a discussion of the three movements in Judaism and to present the information in a non-judgmental manner that no movement was favored over another. At first he worried that the teachers would be unable to fulfill his instructions but to Jack's knowledge they complied with his wishes.

Jack tells an amusing story that highlights the prevailing practice of the District to hire very young people as teachers and superintendents. One Sunday he and a fellow teacher traveled in snowy weather from Vandergrift to Pittsburgh with the intention of attending a Teachers Institute, a first-time experience for these men, both of whom were in their thirties. After a difficult two hour trip over icy roads they arrived at Rodef Shalom where the Institute was already in session. They walked down the hall to the room where it was being held and peered through the glass portion of the door. They saw a room full of young people of college age. Immediately they felt very uncomfortable; in fact Jack's friend refused to enter the room. What to do? They had traveled so far and were reluctant to turn back immediately. So they indulged themselves and went to a Turkish bath!

Jack Rubin and his counterparts in the various schools in the District were following the curriculum prepared by Rabbi Freehof and Dr. Spiro. In his preface to the first edition of the Curriculum in 1941, Dr. Spiro said:

We have charted out a course of action which is offered to Jewish youth of all complexions: Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. The present form of the curriculum is no longer in the experimental stage. If certain subjects have not been outlined to the satisfaction of the Supervisor, it is due to the fact that the Jewish book market especially the juvenile is still wanting many adequate textbooks. Great emphasis has been laid upon the teaching of history. It correlates the present and the past, it arouses in the child the pride of its source and heritage, and it stimulates the student to solve present day problems in the light of past experiences.

There followed instructions to teachers as to their responsibilities, directions for class procedures and a guide to teaching Jewish history, including an extensive bibliography. The teaching guide was age specific with weekly lessons plans for each grade. There were suggestions for extra-curricular activities excerpted from materials prepared by Rabbi Abraham N. Franzblau of Hebrew Union College.

This curriculum and the education that resulted from it impressed many graduates of the District schools. Several graduates have told this writer that their education was superior to that received by their own children, many of whom have attended large, well staffed religious schools in Reform and Conservative congregations.

One person who remembers her religious school experiences of the late 40's and early 50's is Marian Neustadt Hershman. Marian attended the East Hills School from the time she was three or four, because she accompanied her mother, Reva Levenson Neustadt, z'l, who was chairman of the Youth Committee of the Sisterhood and Superintendent of the School. Mothers taught many of the classes, a somewhat different model from other schools.

One of her teachers was Fredda Levy Stang, a past present of Temple Sinai. Marian also taught in the East Hills School for three years. She remembers attending Teachers Institutes but by now they were held three or four times a year, mainly to give out materials and discuss plans for upcoming events.

Others who remember the 40's with great affection include Howard Suffrin and Cecil Bruder Grodner. Howard and Cecil attended Beth El Congregation which at that time was in Beechview. Howard's mother was the superintendent for a while. Classes were held in the balcony of the synagogue. Cecil has lived away from Pittsburgh for 40 years but keeps in close contact with people and subscribes to the **Jewish Chronicle**. She was confirmed at Beth El, organized a post-confirmation class, and taught at the school. She remembers teachers Zelda Rubinstein Limsi and her brothers, Sidney z'l and Isadore ,z'l.

By the end of the 40's many changes had taken place. One traumatic event was the closing of the Center Avenue School in 1944. From an enrollment high of 700 in 1919, attendance dropped to 150 in the mid 30's and to 100 by 1940. The population, of course, had moved from the "Hill" and new communities were forming. Likewise many of the small schools and congregations in the City closed as other population shifts occurred. After the late 1940's there were no schools in the West End, North Side, Homewood and Hilltop. As more people began to drive and as roads were improved people could send their children to schools that were farther away.

By 1961 there were only 11 schools and in 1963, 8: Mt. Pleasant, Latrobe, Punxsutawney, Indiana, Clearfield, Charleoi, Donora and Jeanette. Mr. Maurice Levy, Field Supervisor from 1961 until the program was discontinued in 1966, recalls these last years:

The schools were dropping off because the Jewish communities they served were disintegrating. Fewer and fewer Jews remained in these communities. There were a handful of students in each community with most schools having no more than 10 or 12 students.

In 1962 National Council of Jewish Women withdrew their support. I talked to Rabbi Freehof and he implored the Rodef Shalom Sisterhood to continue their support which they did for a few years. At this point my position was a part-time one. I came in once a week. My secretary worked a few hours a week. My salary was underwritten by the SWD Committee.

At this juncture the District did not get involved in hiring teachers or superintendents. That was left to the individual communities. I organized a Teachers Institute which met once a year for a whole day. I held it at Rodef Shalom and I brought in speakers on topics such as teaching methods, crafts, music. One of my first projects after becoming Field Supervisor was to rewrite the curriculum, which had not been revised to any great degree since it was written by Dr. Spiro in 1941. The curriculum was primarily historically based.

I tried to supplement it by doing research on innovative ways to celebrate the holidays in these tiny schools. I would prepare guides based on my research and send it out to the schools. While I would send out the curriculum the actual textbooks were the responsibility of the individual community.

Another duty which I enjoyed was visiting the schools. There wasn't enough money in the budget to visit them as often as I would have liked but I did manage to visit each school at least once a year. On a typical morning when I would visit a school, I would first talk with the superintendent of the school. Then I would observe the classes.

Then I would participate in the assembly or service. Many times I would ask the children how they felt about being Jewish. Most of them professed not to think about it very much. They knew they were in the minority. They were enthusiastic students because they realized their parents cared so much about the schools and about their education. I tried to teach them more than history.

I used a book by Lillian Freehof on ethics entitled, *The Right Way*. The parents were very dedicated and far more involved than in the larger congregations or communities. The success of the schools was in very large part dependent on the commitment of the parents. I particularly remember the dedication of the Clearfield superintendent, Mrs. Silverblatt, who never missed a Teachers Institute in Pittsburgh even though the trip from her community to Pittsburgh was over three hours at that time.

I also officiated at the confirmation services which at this time were held in the constituent schools. Sometimes I did two services in one day, one in the morning and

one in the evening.

In my opinion, the end of the Southwestern program coincided with the end of an era in family cultural values. What was possible to achieve in those years in those small towns may not have been possible in the 70's and 80's. The effort of the District and, by definition, of the Rodef Shalom Sisterhood and the National Council of Jewish Women, was a noble one. They reached out to small communities and helped them to educate their children. They felt a responsibility to help to ensure the survival of Judaism in those small communities.

I tried to do as much as possible with the modest budget that was available. As a professional educator who taught the Pittsburgh Public School system for 33 years, I feel that I was able to offer a professional approach to the position. I thoroughly enjoyed my tenure with the District. To say that the services provided by the District were commendable doesn't begin to describe how important it was.

The Southwestern District program was a classic example of Jews who had more opportunities wanting to share what they had with Jews who had fewer resources because of their geographic isolation. It was a noble experiment.

The Committee disbanded after the close of the school year in 1966. A few of the schools survived. In most cases students were transported to the closest town which had a Religious School. Yet thirty years after the last Confirmation these little schools live on in the memory of hundreds of people in the Tri State area.

They and their classmates who may have moved to all parts of the country remember with great fondness their unique experiences in those tiny isolated schools. This noble experiment contributed greatly to the survival of Jewish people in Western Pennsylvania.

APPENDIX

Schools enrolled by the District at one time or another: City of Pittsburgh: Adath Israel (Oakland); Adath Jeshurun (East End); Beth Hamdedrosh Hagadol (Washington Street, Hill District); Beth El (Beechview); Beth Israel (North Side--Woods Run); Beth Jehuda (North Side--Manchester); B'nai Emunoh (Squirrel Hill/Greenfield); Center Ave. (Irene Kaufmann Settlement, Hill District); Hazelwood; Hilltop (Beltzhoover, Arlington area); B'nai Zion (Homewood); Kehilath Jeshurun (Schenley Heights); Penn Ave; Lawrenceville; Ohev Zedeck (Oakland); Poale Zedeck (Squirrel Hill); South Side Talmud Torah; Torath Chaim (East End); West End.

Outside the City of Pittsburgh: Aliquippa, Ambridge, Barnesboro, Beaver Valley, Bentleyville, Braddock, Brownsville, Butler, California, Canonsburg, Carnegie, Charleroi, Clearfield, Connellsville, Coraopolis, Donora, Dubois, Duquesne, East Pittsburgh; East Liverpool, Ohio; Edgewood (Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf); Ellwood City; Etna; Ford City; Glassport, Greensburg, Homestead, Huntington, West Virginia; Indiana, Irwin, Jeannette, Johnstown; Kiski Valley (Leechburg, Vandergrift, Apollo); Kittanning, Latrobe, Mc Donald, Masontown, McKeesport, McKees Rocks, McKees Rocks Progressive; Midland, Monongahela, Morganza Correctional School, Mount Pleasant, Nanty Glo, New Castle, New Kensington, Portage, Punxsutawney. Rankin,, Scottdale, South Fork, Steubenville, Ohio; Swissvale, Tarentum, Thornhill Correctional School, Uniontown, Washington, Weirton, West Virginia; Wilkesburg, Woodlawn

FIELD SUPERVISORS

Miriam Schonfield,(1907--1934); Chester R. Bandman (1934--4 months); Abe R. Cohen (1934-1937); Saul S. Spiro (1937-1942); Mildred Kreimer (1942-1946); Oscar I. Harter, (1946-1961); Maurice Levy (1961-1966)

COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSONS

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PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

Maurice Levy, Herbert Soltman, Sarah Mishelevich, Allen Goppman, Genevieve Rubenstein Bliwa, Cecil Bruder Grodner, Zelda Rubenstein Limsi, Howard Suffrin, Bernard Steinberg, Bea Lichter, Marian Neustadt Hershman, Sherman Hershman, Barbara Berns, Harry Seltzer, Leonard Schneider, Estelle Belkin, Ruth Gross, Jack Rubin, Sylvia Braun, Helen Finkel Eger, Paul Forman.

THANKS TO

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Special thanks to Dr. Walter Jacob, Rabbi, Rodef Shalom Congregation, who suggested the undertaking of this project and who offered advice and assistance.

NOTES

1. Volumes of the Jewish Criterion from 1915 to 1959 were reviewed. These volumes, housed at Rodef Shalom Temple, provide a rich source of history of the District and its forerunner organization.
2. The Jewish Archival Survey Collection, 1912-1990, Library and Archives Division of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania was reviewed. The only relevant material was in the file of the former Ohav Shalom congregation in Donora which contained the complete curriculum of the Southwestern District prepared by Dr. Saul S. Spiro, published in 1941 and updated until 1953.
3. Historic files of the National Council of Jewish Women are located in the Archives of Industrial Society, Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh. The files on Religious Education are contained in Box 17, files 1 through 14. They are divided into two parts: A. Historic correspondence on religious education, 1894-190? and B. Southwestern District Of Pennsylvania Jewish Religious Schools Committee. This part has 8 sections one of which contains the annual report by Miriam Schonfield for 1928, the most extensive report in the collection.
4. Background material on the period was derived from **The Jewish Experience in Western Pennsylvania: A History:1755/1945**, by Jacob Feldman, published by the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.
5. Personal and telephone interviews were conducted with people who responded to articles in the Rodef Shalom newsletter and Jewish Chronicle. Additional information not cited in the report includes the following:
Grace Fivars provided a list of the founding families of the Hilltop Religious School. **Bea Lichter** noted that she was born on Dinwiddie Street and then lived on the South Side. Her mother was instrumental in establishing the South Side school; however, Bea was taken to Rodef Shalom Temple at an early age and received her religious education there. She coached plays in Homestead, South Side, Carnegie and other towns for Purim and Chanukah. She remembers Miriam Schonfield as a strict disciplinarian who moved teachers and superintendents around frequently so that they wouldn't become stale in one setting. She remembers Miss Schonfield not permitting teachers to date superintendents. After her stints as drama director she served on the Southwestern Committee for several years. **Harry Seltzer**, a member of Temple Emanuel, attended the South Side school. His confirmation, in the early 30's was held at the Tree of Life Synagogue. He remembers paying a nickel a week for donation to

the religious school. **Leonard Schneider** is a member of Rodef Shalom. He attended a religious school in Beltzhoover (Hilltop) in the early 30's. He particularly remembers the plays they put on at Purim. **Barbara Berns** is a member of Rodef Shalom from which she was confirmed in the early 50's. Her family then transferred their membership to Temple Sinai so that her brother could become a Bar Mitzvah. She wanted to teach religious school at Sinai and talked to her rabbi who suggested she contact Oscar Harter, at that time Field supervisor of the Southwestern District. He assigned her to the Homestead religious school. All classes met in the sanctuary of the synagogue. The children sat in pews and each group of students was scattered so as not to disrupt the teaching and learning of a nearby class. Homestead had a vibrant Jewish community at that time and the parents were quite involved in the synagogue's activities and were extremely supportive and appreciative of their children's teachers. She taught there for two years before going on to teach at Temple Sinai.

Estelle Begler Belkin was confirmed from the Beth Jehuda school on the North Side as was her sister. She has saved confirmation certificates and programs from 1945 (her own) and 1947 (her sister's). **Herb Soltman**, a member of Temple Emanuel, has saved extensive materials from his father's files, including voluminous study guides and examinations which he prepared in connection with his service as superintendent of the Swissvale Religious School. The material includes a program for the closing services of the school year; confirmation program of the Southwestern District for 1938; sample of a confirmation exam, copy of directions given to confirmands instructing them to memorize several pages of material, a paper prepared by Mr. Soltman, Various Methods in Jewish Education, class notes for the year 1937-1938, a paper by Dr. Freehof: the Synagogue and the Disintegrated Jew" a program entitled, "Conference on Jewish Education" under the auspices of the Rodef Shalom Faculty Association in 1937 to which teachers in the Southwestern District were invited. Also in these files is a letter from one of his students, dated June 23, 1938, which says: "This is just a little note to express thanks to you from your confirmation class. It has been a real privilege and pleasure to have you as our teacher. Your unflinching patience, never ending stream of knowledge, and supreme willingness to help us in every way is deeply appreciated. We sincerely wish that we may become worthy of all your efforts. You will always stand in our hearts as someone who brought out the finest, purist, highest ideals from within us, someone who has added a beautiful touch to our lives by instilling within us the sacred sweetness and beauty of religion. May God bless you and good luck be with you always. Please accept most sincere thanks from your confirmation class including your pupil, Jean Silberman."

Ruth Gross grew up in Brownsville and was confirmed from the Orthodox synagogue in that town. She has fond memories of her school years. She also remembers Rabbi Lichter, z'l, of B'nai Israel officiating at her confirmation service.

Helen Finkel Eger came to Rodef Shalom in 1939 after graduating from Margaret Morrison Carnegie College of the Carnegie Institute of Technology, now Carnegie Mellon University. Mrs. Edgar H. Hirsh was the chairperson of the Southwestern Committee while she worked there and she considered her outstanding. At the time she worked there the fee for a community to be affiliated with the District was calculated at \$2.00 per student. She planned the confirmation program and took care of all arrangements for the service. She attended the meetings for the teachers and superintendents that were held every few months. These meetings provided a good opportunity for teachers to socialize and a few romances occurred as a result of these meetings. Mr. Spiro would attend the meetings of the Southwestern District Committee. Sometimes these meetings were quite tense. Some of the ladies wanted Mr. Spiro to raise the fees charged to the schools because they did not begin to cover the costs of operation, but Mr. Spiro knew that these communities were strapped financially and couldn't pay more. **Allen Goppman** remembers helping the field supervisor, Mr. Spiro, after he was confirmed in 1941, by mimeographing materials at the District office at Rodef Shalom. His wife, Ethel, was confirmed in 1942 from the South Side Talmud Torah which was part of the District. Shalom. One of the "benefits" she received upon being confirmed was a year's membership in the Y in Oakland. **Genevieve Rubenstein Bliwa** attended school in Allentown (Hilltop). Her sister, Tillie, taught at Beth El in Beechview.