שְׁאַל אָבִיךָ וְיַגֶּדְךָ
זְקֵנֶיךָ וְיֹאמְרוּ לָךְ

Ask thy father and he will tell thee,
Thine elders and they will say unto thee ~

The beginnings of the McKeesport Jewish Community

by Sarah Landesman

A Centennial Year Project

Gemilas Chesed Synagogue
McKeesport, Pennsylvania

5746 תשמ"ו 1986

שְׁאַל אָבִיךָ וְיַגֶּדְךָ
זְקֵנֶיךָ וְיֹאמְרוּ לָךְ

Ask thy father and he will tell thee,
Thine elders and they will say unto thee ~

The beginnings of the McKeesport Jewish Community

by Sarah Landesman

A Centennial Year Project

5746 תשמ"ו 1986

Gemilas Chesed Synagogue
McKeesport, Pennsylvania

Revised & Corrected Nissan, 5747

Residence
1545 OHIO AVENUE
White Oak, PA 15131
412/678-2725

בע"ה

Rabbi Irvin I. Chinn
Congregation Gemilas Chesed
412/678-8859

1400 Summitt & Center Streets, McKeesport-White Oak, PA 15131

I am deeply indebted to Sarah Landesman for graciously allowing us to print her overview of the McKeesport Jewish Community. Written for the 200th anniversary of the American Jewish Community in 1954, it is an important introduction to our 100th anniversary. I felt that our 100th anniversary must include a serious review of our beginnings. We need this memory now, because it is important to recall the difficult beginnings and obstacles our ancestors faced in creating the "Reb McKeesport" which Sarah depicts. They faced an impossible mission.

We too today, in 1986-7 are faced with pessimism and a bleak outlook for the future. The mills which brought our fathers here are closed. The bustle of the railroad is stilled. The air is clean and the streets of downtown all but deserted.

There can develop a spirit of defeat, G-d forbid, and nothing defeats like defeatism.

Our forefathers came to a foreign land, strange language, alien culture. They survived and they built. On the threshold of our Century Two, we pray that we may preserve and extend the history, institutions and heritage they brought to McKeesport. We pray that all who have a love for this community will work to preserve its unique, friendly and reverent spirit.

My thanks to Seymour Greenfield for typing and printing the manuscript; to Jacob Gordon, whose talent has graced every 100th anniversary publication, for the cover.

With thanksgiving to HaShem for allowing me to share so much of my life with Gemilas Chesed.

Shalom,

Rabbi Irvin I. Chinn

Kislev, 5747, Dec. 1986

To Sarah Landesman 6-10-87 Rev

'O give thanks unto the LORD,
for He is good,
For His mercy endureth for ever.'

So let the redeemed of the LORD
say,
Whom He hath redeemed from
the hand of the adversary;

And gathered them out of the
lands,
From the east and from the west,
From the north and from the sea.

They wandered in the wilderness
in a desert way;
They found no city of habitation.

Hungry and thirsty,
Their soul fainted in them.

Then they cried unto the LORD
in their trouble,
And He delivered them out of
their distresses.

And He led them by a straight way,
That they might go to a city of
habitation.

Let them give thanks unto the
LORD for His mercy,
And for His wonderful works to
the children of men!

From Psalm CVII

הֹדוּ לַיהוָה כִּי־טוֹב
כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ׃
יֹאמְרוּ גְּאוּלֵי יְהוָה
אֲשֶׁר גְּאָלָם מִיַּד־צָר׃
וּמֵאֲרָצוֹת קִבְּצָם
מִמִּזְרָח וּמִמַּעֲרָב
מִצָּפוֹן וּמִיָּם׃

תָּעוּ בַמִּדְבָּר בִּישִׁימוֹן דָּרֶךְ
עִיר מוֹשָׁב לֹא מָצָאוּ׃
רְעֵבִים גַּם־צְמֵאִים
נַפְשָׁם בָּהֶם תִּתְעַטָּף׃
וַיִּצְעֲקוּ אֶל־יְהוָה בַּצַּר לָהֶם
מִמְּצוּקוֹתֵיהֶם יַצִּילֵם׃
וַיַּדְרִיכֵם בְּדֶרֶךְ יְשָׁרָה
לָלֶכֶת אֶל־עִיר מוֹשָׁב׃
יוֹדוּ לַיהוָה חַסְדּוֹ
וְנִפְלְאוֹתָיו לִבְנֵי אָדָם׃

FOREWORD

Back in 1954 when American Jewry made ready to observe the bicentennial of the first Jewish settlement in this country, there were stirrings in many cities to record the beginnings of the individual Kehillot. New York City made much of being the first and so much was made of the rather undistinguised arrival of the first ship load from Curacao that we liked to refer to them as "the 23 nudniks". Ever since coming here in 1925, I was fascinated by the story of the early years of the Jews here and with the coming bicentennial as impetus, I set about gathering data for a local history. This paper, an extract of the more massive material, was first read at the festive celebration which was convoked by the United Jewish Federation of our town.

The U.J.F. then offered to print the history and suggested that beside amplification I add footnotes containing the necessary documentation. But by then I had lost interest in "who cooked the first Matzah-ball here" and felt that the paper contained too much trivia. Also, I was sensitive to some murmured criticism about my evident bias and of value judgments subjectively arrived at. The ciriticism was valid for mine was not objective history. I was much more captivated by the world of the simple, uneducated immigrants, with their sense of self-worth, their stubborn loyalty to the religious values-however imperfectly understood-they had brought with them, than by the miraculous rapidity of their childrens' acculturation to small-town America.

A few copies had originally been typed. One of these found its way to the Hillman Library where, I understand, it has repeatedly served as source material for some graduate studies on the ethnic story of the Monongahela Valley. One copy, at the insistence of one of its professors who had read it, reposes at the Library of the Hebrew Union College. Rabbi Chinn had borrowed the third copy. Although he did obtain my permission to print it, I could not bring myself to reread the text. I left it to the copy-readers to correct the errors in grammar, spelling and typing; if any are still present I lay the blame at their door.

A bit later, Rabbi Chinn asked that I write an introduction. Although he is a very persuasive man, I wish I had had the courage to refuse. This, because I consider this entire paper as only an introduction to the larger subject of the McKeesport Jewish community and more especially to that of Gemilat Chesed. The story deserves to be recorded - it has the makings of a richly textured novel - and it gnaws at my conscience that I did not try. Most of you have a vivid recall of the events of the last four decades, years that surely are the most dramatic, most momentuous since the beginning of the Diaspora 2000 years ago. But only a few recall the era between the two World Wars, years heavy with portent. Within, assimilation was gaining the day; Judaism was losing its hold on the youth who found other gods to serve. Outside, on the political horizon the storm clouds in their darkness presaged the doom of European Jewry. The manner in which little Gemilat Chesed, with its unique religious dynamism, battled these forces has earned her the appellation "Reb McKeesport" and more formally "A Mother-city in Israel". In those days Hebrew School in McKeesport meant four hours per day and six days a week. Market Street was dark with throngs as fathers and sons emerged from Shool on Friday evenings. The Great Depression was hard on our town and it was hardest on the little merchants who made up most of the congregation. At the same time an endless procession of visitors from the beggarized communities of Eastern Europe kept coming for funds. None were turned away empty-handed. The clash of ideologies, the age-old struggle between old and young, between the guardians of tradition and the agitation for change, raged at its height. It invaded the peace of many a fine Jewish home and it left scars. And still, there are quite a few men, leaders of communities in metropolitan, even national context, whose sense of Judaism, their inspiration and loyalty was gained in the local cheder and the authentic shtetl type services at Gemilat Chesed. The throngs are gone but between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh the only daily Minyan can still be found only at Gemilat Chesed. Not one but two Minyanim. The "Miracle of Union Avenue" deserves a book that is more captivating than the current best-selling study about a congregation in the South Bronx entitled "Miracle of Millvale Ave.".

In closing, I want to paraphrase the words of the prophet Haggai who at a low ebb of our history foretold that "the glory of the second Sanctuary will surpass that of the first." May, in spite of all portents to the contrary, the glory of the Second Century surpass that of the first.

Sarah Landesman

Kislev, 5747, Dec. 1986

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE McKEESPORT JEWISH COMMUNITY

****

INTRODUCTION

This is not a story in the sense of the term with documentation for every 'first' in name, date, or event. What this study does attempt is to trace the historic, social and religious cultural forces which went into the making of our Jewish community.

It follows the efforts of the diverse Jewish groups in transplanting their lives and their traditions into this soil while, at the same time, struggling to integrate themselves into the lives of the community at large. Our town is unique in that it reproduced here, on the banks of the Monongahela for a time, at least, the East-European shtetl with its folk ways and its religious overtones. Although the pattern established by these immigrants is largely gone, its influence is still felt in the community both directly and indirectly; it is to capture the essence and flavor of life here in the early days that this study is undertaken. The German-Jewish era which preceded the coming of the East-Europeans is also given a somewhat detailed coverage being unknown to most of us. The developments after the second decade of this century are not covered here. The conflicts and stresses of the immediate past are still with us and our treatment of them could not help but be subjective. The reader will find, however, at the close of this essay a short description of our present community with a list of our institutions, organizations, and relevant statistics.

Our immigrant community was too intent on its future and too busy with its present to put any importance on its own short past and so no effort was made to preserve records. Nor did they have the desire to see themselves in the looking glass of newspaper coverage and only occasionally were notices inserted in the newspapers. Although, we had three daily and one weekly newspaper when the nucleus of the new community was formed, there are no files extant of these and the only source of information we have is from the Daily News, the oldest volumes dating from 1885. We are indebted to the Daily News Publishing Company for making their files available for this research. Much of our information was gained from personal statements of early immigrants and their children, an unscientific way of going about the writing of history. The results, though sketchy and incomplete, are carefully corroborated with other information obtained elsewhere and make an authentic if composite picture. Special acknowledgement is here made of the help received from a paper by Attorney A. M. Simon on the history of Temple B'nai Israel; a pamphlet on the history of Gemilas (Gemilath) Chesed on the occasion of its Fiftieth Anniversary, the document submitted by Attorney DeWitt Haber and the vivid recollections he imparted on the early days of the German-Jewish era and letters in answer to questions addressed to them by Attorney F. R. Kaplan, A. M. Amper, Jacob Roth, and many others. Thanks are hereby given to the many people who opened up the storehouse of their memories and shared its treasures.

It will not be possible to name any but a few of the men and women who people this story although many contributed to the shaping of this community. Even if they remain anonymous, this is their story....the story of your father and mother, grandfather and grandmother. It is the saga of their pioneering on these frontiers of American-Jewish life.

GENERAL HISTORY OF McKEESPORT

By the middle of the 18th century settlers from the eastern seaboard began crossing the Appalachians to clear the wilderness of the Ohio Valley. Whether they travelled by way of the Forbes Road or the National Pike, they reached the Monongahela from where they continued their journey by flatboat or keelboat which were made right at Elizabeth and up river. David McKee, a North of Ireland immigrant settled in the swampy wilderness at the confluence of the Monongahela and Youghiogheny in 1755 and from 1760 on operated a ferry across the Monongahela...a service that contributed to the developement of the Northwest Territory and also gave our town its name "McKeesport." The Charter for the town itself was obtained by McKee in 1795 and lots costing $20.00 each were sold at lottery and were so advertised in the Pittsburgh Gazette. Laid out along the two rivers and bounded by Walnut and Rose Streets, the settlement was slow in growing and travellers passing on the boats recorded seeing no more than a dozen houses here as late as 1820. The oldest house of the town, by the way, was on Second and Market Streets, of log construction, marked by masonry, and was owned by Joseph Goldberg. It served for a time as meeting house for divine services for the pioneer Jews of the community. In contrast to the slow pace of the town, there was soaring life along the river front at the taverns where kegs of rye whiskey and Old Monongahely were distilled only a little ways up the Youghiogheny. It was here that the Whiskey Rebellion was actually hatched. The invention of the steamboat and later the railroad, guided the river traffic here. By the middle of the 19th century rich deposits of coal were discovered in the Monongahela Valley, and the industrial expansion which preceded the Civil War brought a planing mill, a foundry, the Wood steel mill to McKeesport. The growing demand for labor attracted the Irish and the Germans who during this era came to the United States in large numbers. Our town began expanding.

THE GERMAN-JEWISH CHAPTER

Along with the Germans came the Jews attracted here by the growing business opportunities. As a rule, they arrived here from metropolitan centers such as New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Chicago set up here in business by a relative or former employer, who with the characteristic Jewish sense of family responsibility, wished to insure a future for them. Accordingly, they opened up business establishments and prospered selling ready made clothes, haberdashery, crockery, groceries, and meat. Several of them were drovers selling cattle to the Forks of the Ohio as well as the Monongahela. The Bachmans, Habers, Gershons, Meyers, and Kants were among these early families. Joseph Kant, who arrived here around 1858, was, according to family traditions, the first Jew to live in McKeesport. The family had five children and Gus Kant, a son, born here in 1872, is the oldest now living native Jew of our city. Joseph Kant was a drover and the slaughterhouse and packing firm founded by the Kants has developed into the present Peters Packing Company. These early and isolated Jewish families acclimated easily, they learned to speak a correct English, and before long developed into prosperous merchants and public spirited citizens as well.

The lawyer, Magnus Pflaum, active in politics, was also instrumental in the establishment of the "Free Reading Room" which later blossomed into the Carnegie Library. It was Pflaum who obtained the charter for this institution. Later he was one of the originators of the plans for the McKeesport Hospital and was chairman of its first fund-raising group. (He subsequently moved to Pittsburgh where all along he had maintained a law office.) (See files of City News in the Daily News, 1886-1888.) It is interesting to note that while many of the older residents of our town remember the person of Magnus Pflaum they did not realize that he was of the Jewish faith and were surprised to learn of it.

Joseph Haber, who arrived here with his young wife in 1866, operated a prosperous clothing store and interested in community affairs, became a councilman from the First Ward. At his untimely death in 1883, the Council of the Borough of McKeesport issued a resolution expressing its deep sorrow and voted to attend the funeral in a body. The McKeesport Record described the funeral in its issue of April 17th of that year and comments that 'the coffin was both crowned and flanked with magnificent clusters of pure white flowers in chaste and beautiful designs...the immense procession reached the depot...and thus passed away from McKeesport and from her people forevermore he who had entered her borders seventeen years ago, almost penniless and unknown, and who had by strict integrity of character and a practice of all the admirable qualities of manhood, risen to respect, to affluence and to all that is embodied and signified in the words, a good citizen.' The children of the Habers were born and grew up in McKeesport and were active members of the community at large. Louis Haber was the youngest student to have graduated from McKeesport High School when he received his diploma in 1884 at the age of 15. DeWitt Haber is responsible for much of the information and insight on this part of our history.

Back in Germany, their erstwhile home, the price for social or academic advancement had to be paid at the baptismal fount; In this blessed land of liberty and in this growing little town with its liberal upper-class, its veneration of the Bible which included the people of the Bible, the German Jews had a tranquil, almost idyllic life. The youth went to school, fished and rowed on the river in the summer, skated on it in the winter, went to socials, dances with the rest of the gilded youth. They were wholly American, identifying themselves fully with both the past and the future of this country. The parents, too, were part of the town's life and, culturally, were part of the life of the German community as well which was numerous in McKeesport. The German Evangelical Church was established in 1846. Several coreligionists, hungry for the sound of a German word,joined the Frauenverein, attended its 'coffee' socials, the men sang in the 'Liederkranz' Society and some at one time or another even attended the Sunday Sermon at church. The liberal, mild doctrines expounded from its pulpit did not seem to be contrary to the equally mild dogmaless Judaism of the post-Mendelsohnian era of which these Jews were a product. Isolated as they were from all the mainstream and stimuli of Jewish life, they neglected most observances even such as they would have preferred to keep had opportunity offered. Sabbaths were not marked in any way nor were any of the lesser festivals. They did, however, take the trouble to procure matzohs for Passover and they arranged for services for high holidays either in a hall or in each other's homes. They also managed to round up a minyan when the filial piety of any of them so demanded on the occasion of a Yahrzeit. In later years when German-Jewish community life was in a flourishing state in Pittsburgh, most of them joined either the Rodef Shalom or the Etz Chaim; several McKeesport children attended the Rodef Shalom Sunday School, using the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad for commuting. Interments, too, took place in the cemeteries of these Pittsburgh congregations. Almost no religious training was provided for the younger children and they did not learn to read Hebrew. According to the recollection of DeWitt Haber, there was an exception to this during one season when an old, poor Jew, shipwrecked by life, happened to come to McKeesport. His name was Stern. He lived in a shack which he put up on the Diamond. To save him from being a public charge and the onus of charity, his fellow Jews arranged for him to teach their children the rudiments of Hebrew. It goes without saying that the experiment was not successful and it did not help to endear Judaism and Jewish learning to the children. It does indicate, however, that the lack of religious institutions and organizations among our German Jews was probably not so much due to indifference as to the lack of opportunity.

Although not actively emphasized, their desire for the retention of their religious and racial identity worked against intermarriage among them and even the socially most gregarious of the young people married within their group. In the middle of the eighties, when the German-Jewish group was at its peak here, there were around 25 families. An item in the Daily News, October 6, 1886, entitled 'Brilliant Social Reception' gives many of the names and sheds light, too, on the social usage of the day. To quote: "Over the glossy surface of Coates Parlor sixty pairs of feet tripped merrily...guests of the Hebrew social at its first reception. The Hebrew Society is composed of well-known young Hebrew gentlemen and it is their intention to hold quite a number of such receptions this season...Dancing was till a late hour when all the guests adjourned to the residence of the misses Applebaum on Fifth Avenue where an elegant supper was prepared, each lady attending having contributed a share in making the banquet a bounteous one and it was done full justice. Among those present..." Here follow the names from which we can establish the "Who is Who" of this exclusive social set. A look at the Hebrew calendar would show that the party was held on the Feast of Tabernacles, probably prompted by the holiday mood. By this time, there were quite a handful of the Hungarian and Russian Jews settled here and these were celebrating the Feast in the little booths which traditional Jews build on Succoth in symbol of man's earthly wandering..but there was no intercourse, no social fraternization between the newcomers and the "Deutshe Yehudim". The difference in outlook, in social status, in religious practice, manners, and mode of life erected a barrier which 3,000 years of common suffering and shared history could not scale. The older settlers were quilty of the usual snobbery of those who having 'arrived' lose that empathy, that sense of solidarity which binds Jews, the world over, into one brotherhood. It took several years before the barrier was broken down and by that time all but a few of the German-Jewish families left McKeesport for the greater opportunities of large cities where their talents could find expression. They left behind no Jewish institutions of either religious or cultural or of charitable nature, yet their contributions should not be minimized for they did bequeath a climate of opinion here which was favorable to the reception of the large number of East European immigrants who, beginning with the eighties, came flocking to our city.

THE IMMIGRATION OF THE JEWS FROM EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

The configuration of natural resources made this district the center for steel production, steel being the prime requisite for the great expansion and development of America after the Civil War.

The National Tube Works opened its gates here in 1871 and stamped upon our city its mill-town character. The mill needed cheap if inexperienced labor and the need of the mill coincided with the need of the impoverished, landless peasantry of the Carpathian slopes who were only one generation removed from serfdom. The low wages could not attract the native laborer with higher standards of living and before long the mills were actively encouraging the immigration of the nationals of the Austro-Hungarian empire and even advertised in the little provincial newspapers of north east Hungary, telling of the opportunities awaiting the worker in Homestead, Braddock, McKeesport, and Star Junction, Pennsylvania, the latter being headquarters for railroad contractors and their regimented crews. Thus began the trek of groups of Slovaks, Croats, Ruthenians and chiefly Hungarians to the North-European seaports. They did not just come to America but the specific destination was "Meekeshport" as they pronounced it. So great was the extent of this immigration that even as late as 1930 fully half of McKeesport's population was foreign born. Along with the peasantry of the hamlets of north east Hungary came its Jews...fathers with many little mouths to feed or with marriageable daughters for whom dowry had to be prepared, young boys of brains and energy but no education or the chance for one in a land where schooling cost money. Young women arrived from families so poor that they could not look forward to chances for a decent marriage. These were the "huddled masses" who thronged into the holds of ships. This was the time when the steamship lines, in a struggle for supremacy of the Atlantic sealanes, were conducting a price-war and reduced their rates till the cost of passage came within the reach of even the poorest. It often happened just the same that the little prepared sums gave out before they got here and many a man walked all the way from the Port of New York to McKeesport...a foot journey of 400 miles which took about three weeks...arriving bedraggled and weary but ready to work in the mill. Practically all the Hungarian Jews began their life here by working at the National Tube. Their number reached about 200 families by 1890 (according to congregational membership, newspaper reference, and assessment books of the City of McKeesport). All of life was dominated by the mill. Even the landscape and atmosphere took on the unique character lent it by the manufacture of steel and use of soft coal. The eternal din of rolling sheets of steel and shifting of overhead cranes furnished the orchestration. The sulphurous smoke belched out by the giant furnaces hung a pall over the sun by day and the night sky was lit up by the glow of molten metal scooped in the huge ladles at the Open Hearth. The falling graphite besmirched houses, curtains and vegetaion but it was "pay dirt" and the people did not fare well when things were clean. The mill, too, was a Moloch that demanded frequent human sacrifices. Several of the Jewish community gave their lives to it. The earliest files of the Daily News...dating from 1885...have an item about a poor millworker being crushed to death in the Yard. The officials collected $15.00 to pay for funeral expenses, the body being shipped to Pittsburgh as there was no Jewish cemetery here. The family of the deceased was reported living in very poor circumstances on Fifth Avenue under the bridge. There was no Workmen's Compensation, no industrial insurance, nor safeguards to protect the worker in those days. In 1888 Joseph Friedman aged 23, and father of three children, was killed in the same manner. There were others to follow. The work consisted of a 12 hour day and brought an average wage of $1.20. It took Spartan living to get along on it. To escape the back-breaking and spirit-crushing drudgery the men often took on parallel jobs in order to save enough money to enable them to go into business for themselves. If the men worked hard, the women worked even harder. For most of the men, unable to stand the loneliness, sent for their families to join them here; the young men got married..either sending for the cherished girl from back home or the young lady from among the 'landsleit' who worked either in New York in some sweatshop or in Pittsburgh rolling tobies or as domestic help with a "better-off" Jewish family. To have been "in place" as domestic employment was referred to, was a frequent, logical, and honorable occupation for the lonely girls. It gave them shelter, cooking experience, and certainly a more understanding heart. It was remembered sneeringly in later years by other women of the community only if the subsequent economic or social success of the one-time maid went to her head causing her to forget 'the priceless gift of humility'.

To supplement the family income the women kept boarders. It was an almost universal practice which beside its economic use was also kindness to some stranded friend who needed a home and folks. The women cooked, washed, and cleaned, taking care of a number of boarders as well as their own families. "They had six rooms, six children, six boarders and the couple itself slept on the table-bed in the kitchen". Thus was described the economic beginning of one of our distinguished families. Or, "My mother would scrub the floor and by a string attached to her foot would, at the same time, rock the cradle in the other room. The boarder was sleeping and after all he paid for quiet lodgings." So goes a typical reminiscence. Life was altogether very rough, very difficult in the primitive community, especially for poorer people.

The immigrants who came with dreams of a "Golden Land" had a rude awakening when faced with the realities of existence here. Water had to be drawn from an outside well and bathrooms were non-existent in the little frame houses and tenements of the First Ward where most of the immigrants found their first homes; Bedstraw filled the mattresses and carpetless, unpainted boards of the floor had to be scrubbed continually to clean them of the dirt tracked in from muddy streets, yet innocent of paving. Milk was brought off the wagon of the dairy farmer and had to be boiled or was at times obtained from the cow that was kept in the shed of one's own back yard. To assure proper yet economical feeding of the family, fruits and vegetables were busily canned in the summer months. Clothes, often even men's clothes, were homemade. "My brother went to medical school and when his red pants had to be patched my mother had only a piece of purple patch to go with it. He developed the technique of walking sideways along the wall", is an honest account of the radical economies practiced by some in order to achieve the educating of their young.

The hygienic state of the place was appalling and almost unbelievable by modern standards. Typhoid fever, diphtheria, consumption and "summer complaint" took a terrifying toll. (See Obituaries, Daily News, 1885-90) The climate, too, evidently underwent a great change for the milder in these 80 years. The published records indicate that it was not uncommon for the river to be frozen by mid-November and sub-zero weather was the rule throughout the winter. Thaw, on the other hand, brought mud six inches deep on the unpaved streets. (Yes, Fifth Avenue did have planks for sidewalks.)

Just the same, large families were the rule and accepted as the blessing of God. Midwives were in constant demand and the little children of the First Ward did not believe in the stork. They knew that Mrs. Auslander brought the babies in her black satchel. Mrs. Rosenbleet was another midwife. The Bible devotes a passage to the valiant midwives of Egypt so it is not amiss to mention the late Mrs. Auslander whose swiftly gliding bent figure brought kind and efficient assistance to the women, and who has helped to the light of day a goodly percentage of our population, both Jewish and Gentile.

Often, to help with the mountainous chores, girl-children had to be kept out of school, and the girl who did graduate from the eighth grade was a testimony to her mother's iron determination to give her daughter an education. Yet, to have a school teacher for a daughter was the prayer of all young mothers and was actually a form of felicitation in greeting the parents of new-born girl-children. "May she grow up to be a teacher".

The majority of the pioneering Jewish population was made up of the millworkers from Hungary, but the coming, in lesser numbers, of the Russian and Polish Jews took place at the same time. This was the era when the rulers of Holy Russia were trying to legislate the Jews out of existence and relegated them to the Pale of Settlement, limiting their economic opportunities in such a measure that they were reduced to "taking in each other's washing". Emigration was the only way out and a majority of these Jews, especially from the province of Lithuania, came to the United States. They were an urban element and naturally gravitated to cities with commercial opportunities. They began on the lowest rung of the economic ladder, usually as peddlers. Attracted by the opportunities of the thriving community, several came to McKeesport in the middle eighties. Much has been written about the contribution of the peddler to the economic, and through it to the cultural-social development of our communities. It is a fact that Jewish peddlers plugging their wares on their backs made frontier-existence here near the "Forks of the Ohio" possible for many pioneer-folk in the early years of the 19th century. The first of the Kaufmann clan is supposed to have made McKeesport his early headquarters. From time to time he had a room at the foot of Market Street, (so reminscences (unchecked) go, where he received his goods by packet ships and then peddled them by wagon to the communities of southwest Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Little was said of the humiliations, hardships, and loneliness of the peddler's life. Such is indicated by a little-known occurrence taking place in McKeesport as late as 1904. (See Daily News, September-December, 1904) A woman named Margaret Douglas, living alone on a farm in the East End, was found murdered. The culprit could not be found but as a Jewish peddler, a stranger in town, was last seen on the premises, he was suspected and was apprehended in Altoona. He was so bewildered and confused, gave such a scared account of his movements as to call down real suspicion on himself. He was held in custody here for several months in spite of the vouching for him of the President of the Russian Jewish Congregation, Nathan Levy, until the real murderer was found and indicted.

The Russian Jews, somewhat better educated, at least in Jewish learning, whipped by the persecutions in Russia to a keener ambition to make good and to educate their children, progressed faster economically. Before many years passed they established business places in Mckeesport in the clothing, cleaning, crockery, tailoring, and jewelry lines. But the Hungarian Jews, too, began to leave the mill and gravitated into the butcher shop-grocery business. Several operated bakeries and by 1900 there were four Jewish dairy farmers on the outskirts.

The third group, the Jews of Poland, chiefly from the Austrian-held province of Galicia, arrived in sizable numbers only at the turn of the century. The economic necessity drove them to leave their tightly-knit little Jewish communities in Europe with their established social hierachy, for the uncertainties and heartbreak of starting from scratch in the new land. Having come late, poor and untrained, it took them longest to establish themselves on a sound economic basis. Little grocery stores and confectioneries as well as peddling served as a basis for making their living.

It is difficult to establish beyond a doubt who were the earliest settlers of these groups in McKeesport. To have arrived first, has a "Mayflower" connotation and several families of Hungarian and Russian extraction claim having come almost simultaneously. In the absence of documents, it is not possible to certify either claim but according to most accounts, the Hungarian Jew, Joseph Roth, and the Russian, Morris Simon, both arrived here in the early seventies, most likely 1872. If there is any contention as to who was first, it will remain a family quarrel as the son of Morris Simon married the granddaughter of Joseph Roth. Both these pioneers came with their families and integrated themselves brilliantly into the life of the town. Joseph Roth, who came to America in 1860 and arrived with his family and their household goods from Pittsburgh by boat on the Monongahela, was a custom shoemaker and operated a grocery-butchershop on Fourth Street across from the mill entrance. His wife ran a boarding house for millhands. The Roths were simple but energetic, shrewd and responsible people who did much for the foreigners with whom they dealt by managing their correspondence, passports, the purchase of steamship tickets for their families, and currency exchange. Out of this work grew the banking establishment of "Joseph Roth and Sons" which business facilitated the coming here of many more immigrants. A son-in-law of Joseph Roth, Henry Friedman, joined the enterprise and contributed much by philanthropy, as well as personal effort, to the development and shaping of the Jewish community. Jacob Roth, a son, was the founder of the Copperweld Steel Company. Morris Simon, the first Russo-Jewish immigrant, operated a jewelry store on Fifth Avenue and did such lively, chatty advertising on the front pages of the Daily News as could be the envy of any copywriter of today. An enterprising individual, he built a public bath on Jerome Street in 1889 and, calling it "National Health Sanitarium", arranged a tie-up with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad for passes for patrons from Pittsburgh. The enterprise went broke just the same. Managed later by his widow, the place also served as ritual bath for the pious Jewish women of the community. A. M. Simon, a son, was one of our first attorneys and a daughter, the late Sophie Irene Loeb, was one of the first school teachers the Jewish community gave the town and one of the most illustrious of our natives. Leaving McKeesport after 1910, she became a syndicated columnist, a social reformer responsible for the Mother's Pension legislation of the state of New York, and the author of a book on Zionism called "Palestine Awake" in which a warm feeling for the cause is joined with a penetrating analysis of the movement. Her statue stands in Central Park and she has a full-length biography published.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

A little group of mill workers, remembering the fervent religious spirit and strict practice of the parental home, decided to band together for worship and to form a congregation. Under the leadership of Joshua Reiter, they applied for a Charter which was granted on October 22, 1886, and thus represents the date for the first organized Jewish endeavor in our city. The congregation was named Gemilas (Gemilath) Chesed Anshe Ungarn. (Men of Hungary.) Such was the attraction of the idea and the rapid concentration of Jews that by the time it opened its doors the congregation numbered thirty. A cemetery tract was immediately purchased from the Sykes family, who had a large farm at Elrod, the original name of Versailles. It was named for Colonel Elrod, a forebear of the Sykes. We do not know who was first laid to his eternal rest here. The ravages of time and weather have washed all inscriptions from the first few stones. On the earliest decipherable date on a stone..1889..the name is B. Feldman.

The first Sefer Torah was purchased here on March 8, 1887, and a Shochet was elected in the same year. The Reverend Brodney has the distinction of being the first of a long list of frequently changing names of communal employes of the congregation. Services were conducted in rented rooms during weekdays and Sabbaths and in halls during the high holidays, such as Blue Ribbon Aristo, Coursin Street. A permanent building on Third and Market Streets was purchased in 1891 from the pioneer Firestone family, remodeled with the addition of a balcony it served as synagogue until 1904 when the new imposing structure was dedicated. This congregation, numbering 225 members by the turn of the century, was the largest Jewish group and so assumed the initiative in the Jewish life of the town and set the pace for the course of its religious education and direction

for the next several decades. The charter members list is as follows:

H. Shermer
Moses D. Newman
David Stern
Sh. Ulman
Judah Kaufman
Israel Kronowitz
M. Lichtenstein
Max Krause
Judah Kornweiss
Joshua Solomon
H. Reiter
Bernard Firestone
Abraham Feldman
Emanuel Janowitz
David Rosenberg
Samuel Kronowitz
Isaac Klein
Benish Horr
H. Weiss
Abraham Itzkoitz
Judah Itskoitz
Abraham Weissman
Jacob Weisberger
Joel Katz
Samuel Stark
I. Firestone
M. Zalmonowitz
Sh. Levin
Myer Weiss

The name given the congregation "Men of Hungary" did not go down well with the Russian and the one or two German Jews who joined the enterprise. The difference in ethnic make-up and religious usage asserted itself at once and within a few months, the Russians seceded and formed their own congregation which they named the B'nai Israel. Somewhat untactfully, the announcement of this move was published in the newspaper in a notice by which the new group referred to itself as "twelve of the leading members" and in which they pointed to "irregularities in the way in which monies were collected". Morris Simon was elected first president, Stargartner, secretary, and Unger, treasurer. The new group met on Sabbaths and for holidays in Coursin Hall, where Samuel's shoe store is now located, and set about erecting an imposing synagogue on Seventh Street. They succeeded in opening its doors by 1894. Internal bickerings, lack of harmony, and the ethnic differences which asserted themselves even within the Lithuanian-Russo-Ukranian amalgam, caused such disruption that payment on the mortgage could not be met. After little more than a year's existence, the congregation broke up. The synagogue was sold at sheriff's sale. The present Slavic Catholic church incorporated the building within its edifice. This fiasco shamed and humiliated the Jews of the city. It had, too, a more serious and proglonged effect, for from this time on the elements in every congregation who put solvency above growth had always this failure to point to when they wished their group to be frugal in their outlay of money. Many a fond dream for obtaining rabbis, bettering educational facilities, or assuring better pay for existing personnel was defeated because of fear of insolvency. Purged of the disruptive elements and chastened by the experience, the Russian Jews reorganized at once and after continuing to worship in halls for a few years, dedicated a more modest synagogue on Sixth Street in 1897. This congregation was named Etz Chaim and led from this time on a peaceful existence although it did not show much initiative in religious endeavors. Its membership remained between 50 and 60 and one that did not set itself lofty goals of congregational achievement. A great majority of the founders' children left but in 1947 the congregation was reorganized and revitalized. The synagogue on Sixth Street was sold (to the AMVETS) and the membership moved to its present building on Bailey and Coursin Streets where it is now known by the translated title "Tree of LIfe". The original founding fathers include the names: Louis Raden, Abraham Kaplan, David Kaplan, Nathan Levy, G. Gelman, Newman, Teplitz, and Greenberger.

The Jews of Galician origin, too, preferred to worship as a group although, having several highly individualistic members, these frequently 'took a walk' to join the Gemilas (Gemilath) Chesed. The congregation was founded in 1897 but met in private homes or in rented rooms on High Holidays at Amity and other available halls until 1908 when the lovely synagogue on Seventh Street was erected. It was named Congregation S'fard Anshe Galicia. It is needless to say that the "S'fard" refers not to any Spanish origin of the founders but to the ritual of prayer which the Hassidic Jews of Poland adopted via the S'fard mystics who in turn had it from the Kabbalists of Spain. Speaking of Hassidim, besides the ritual of prayer, the concept of "Tikun" (restoration or correction) was also practiced and the serving of liquid refreshments every morning after services is still a feature. Although the Gemilas Chesed conducts services according to the Ashenazi ritual, the "Tikun" is a feature with them too, and "restoration" via Old Overholt takes place in the mornings after prayers.

Founders of the S'fard include Myer Buck, first president, and his brothers, Morris and Louis, and the names of Krell, Shragai, and Boruskin. Within three years after the erection of this synagogue there occurred a secession from among the ranks. Clashing personalties and rivalries led to a break in which a considerable faction left to form a new congregation. The Kesher Israel, as it was called, immediately erected a new place of worship. It was a large wooden barracks-like building now remodeled into apartments which still stand. J. L. Diamond was its first president and long-time moving spirit. In 1935 this group reunited with the mother congregation and its cemetery at Elrod was sold to Temple B'nai Israel. An earlier, abondoned cemetery of the group, in Port Vue near St. Joseph's has a few graves and is being cared for by the S'fard. As part of the deal of

returning to the mother congregation, the Kesher Israel took along the Rev. J. A. Weinberg, earlier with the Hungarian congregation, to minister to them along with the S'fard Rev. Walfish. Another, now forgotten early secession took place in approximately 1892 when a group of disgruntled members, wishing in the main to be taxed more leniently, left Gemilas Chesed to form a new congregation which they named Ahavas Achim (Brotherly Love). It met in rented rooms on lower Market Street, then in Paw-Paw Alley. A. M. Amper, newly arrived from Galicia as a young boy was their official reader for a while. After a short existence apart, the majority of the membership returned to the Gemilas Chesed. Their cemetery at Elrod, about two miles below the cemeteries in use today, was deeded to the mother congregation. It is not in use.

SOCIAL LIFE

In spite of the fragmentization into several congregations, there was a certain sense of unity and solidarity among the immigrants. "I was attracted to this town and decided to settle here" an old, educated Jew said, "by the brotherliness, the traditional Jewish spirit, the classlessness of it all, the helping hand that all offered to each other". The community, living in its self-imposed ghetto of the First Ward and environs, was the nearest thing to the "Shtetl" that could exist on American soil. Life centered around the struggle to make ends meet and was regulated by religious rules. Although economic salvation practically precluded Sabbath observance, the day still retained much of its hold on the life of the people. F. M. Bowers, the venerable publicist and historian for the Daily News, remembers being "Shabbos-Goy" for several Jewish families. On Friday nights Market Street was dark with men coming from the various synagogues, and businessmen made it a habit to stop in at services on Saturday mornings. Sabbath was a real day of rest for the tired women. In the afternoon they relaxed on chairs placed in front of the house or went visiting. The children, free from school and chores, played in the street or went exploring the unknown world which lay beyong the tracks. High Holidays were solemn times. A rabbi would be imported to preach and often a cantor with a choir. There was a large influx of Jews from the little "country" places roundabout. The shopkeepers of the mining communities of Fayette and Washington Counties came to be among their own and considered McKeesport as a sort of little Jerusalem. Several people remember how Judah Kornweiss, the first sexton, would knock with his wooden knocker at doors, early September mornings, with the traditional call of "yiden, shteht auf fur S'lichos". (Jews, it is time to arise for the Penitential Prayers). Purim and Simchas Torah were days of public rejoicing when men danced on the street and then, in one group, visited home after home. They invaded the kitchens, and happy was the woman who could then brag that the men, led by the jolly and popular David Rosenberg, ate up all her "gefilte kraut".

Weddings and circumcisions were the chief occasions for celebration and it was the unwritten law that everyone was invited. "The poor because they are not to be humiliated; the rich because they daren't be insulted" was the maxim which summed up their sound social philosophy. They frequently employed the gypsy band for music. The memorable "Guszti" and his fiddlers with their bassoon were standard for every wedding and dance. It got so that Guszti learned to play "Szol a kakas mar", a Hungarian song which had certain Messianic connotations, having been thus interpreted by a revered rabbi back home in Hungary.

People being what they are, the instinct for social expression and the prinicple of natural selection, asserted themselves and the women organized a society for the purpose of charity. It was begun around 1890 and by 1896 a Charter was obtained under the name of "Hebrew Ladies Beneficial Society". Admission into the group meant social acceptance and 'blackballing' amounted to social ostracism. For the next two decades the women who constituted the official family were considered 'creme de la creme'. They were the 'Bessere Leit' and besides a certain distinction in manners, the status also indicated an ability to read and write.

Whether Hungarian Chauvinism or Litvak exclusiveness was to blame is not determined here but before long, certainly by 1898, there was another women's organization in the city. It was named the "Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society" and its membership was from Russian ranks. Both organizations did creditable work, distributing money to the poor, a service which in those days, when organized social service agencies were nonexistent, was a very necessary one. Secrecy in giving was observed. Funds were raised through social functions such as dances, box socials, picnics and boat excursions. These also served another useful purpose in that they provided the only formal recreation open for young people. The 'box socials' were especially popular and often repeated. They involved lunches for two which the girls attending brought with them. The young blades bought the lunch of a girl they wished to distinguish and the road to a man's heart leading through the stomach, the box social became a frequently travelled road to marriage. The community consisted overwhelmingly of young people and so there were many weddings. When parents prepared a wedding for a

ill-prepared are still legendary. Mr. A. Aliskowitz, the scholar from Wolozhyn, taught the children of Etz Chaim off and on since 1910 when he came to our town. Cantor Egon Pessen arrived in McKeesport in 1923 and so his era is not within scope of this study. We mention him because he molded a whole generation of Temple men and women in their appreciation of Judiasm. His contributions are glowingly referred to in Temple annals.

INTEGRATION INTO THE GENERAL COMMUNITY

As soon as the urgent business of assuring a livelihood was attended to, the immigrants began to reach out and become interested in the larger issues of the general community and country. In this they were helped by the sympathetic and friendly treatment accorded them by their fellow townsmen. They enjoyed what can be called "a good press" and had assurance that they were considered a valuable addition to the town's population. The Daily News, being the only organ of expression of which we now have a record, shows a genuine interest and even fascination in its treatment of topics relating to Jews. Holidays are commented on, their meaning and significance being discussed in a few informed and well chosen sentences. The descriptions on the customs and practices of the Jewish immigrants made good copy. On the occasion, for example, that kosher meat was first butchered here in 1888, the News brought a detailed and amazingly learned account of the laws that govern ritual slaughter. The same article informed us in passing that "There are now 300 Jews in McKeesport". It also registered the observaton that "many of the Hebrew customs and traditions are disregarded by American Israelites." In describing the crowded high holiday services of the immigrants at Blue Ribbon Hall in 1887 the report is "Many more would have attended were it not that they reported for work at the mill, fearing dismissal". Things must have eased up a bit for the workers for in the following year the News informs us, "The Hebrew New Year on September 5th will be more strictly observed this year than last".

The cordial atmosphere encouraged the Jews in their enjoyment of the liberties accorded them and they quickly became interested in politics. Among signatories of a petition nominating W. Wampler to Congress in 1888, we find the names of Joseph Roth and S. Firestein. David Rosenberg, father of Councilman Rosenberg, figures greatly in this chapter of the story, being the first political figure to emerge from among the Jews. He came here from Hungary as a boy of 15 and was one of those who walked all the way from New York. After working for a few years in the mill by night and at peddling by day, he went into business, operating a grocery-butcher shop. Through a genuine love of people, a gift for languages, and political astuteness, he became a force to be reckoned with in the Republican party machine of Allegheny County as well as in city government. He had a great following among all foreigners and his influence with his coreligionists had much to do with the quick development of civic responsibility and interest they manifested. The Good Government Club founded by him was an active instrument of political education while the Lodge he organized encouraged and widened their general interests as well as helped them economically by assuring certain insurance benefits for members. Known as the "Independent Sons of David" some chapters still exist in certain cities. His life was intimately bound up with that of his fellow Jews and when he became select man an member of the City Council from the First Ward in 1901, his influence and mentorship helped quite a number of friends and proteges find a place on the city's detective and police force. Conscious of the debt they owed America, large groups of Jews from the First Ward made the trip to the Court House in Pittsburgh, from time to time, to take out first papers and later their certificates of citizenship. A Mr. Benjamin Fetterman, also on the city payroll, often served as sponsor on these occasions.

The public school system achieved magical speed in the Americanisation of the children and through them of the parents. The exclamation so frequently heard of "Amerikane Kinder!" may have covered a variety of emotions but the chief of these was admiration for their accomplishments. By the early days of our century, we produced a "first-crop" of graduates from universities and teacher's training schools. Among the "firsts" were A. M. Simon and Dewitt Haber in law, Dr. Noah Sunstein in medicine, and Sophie Irene Simon, Eva Adler Goldberg, and Maude Rosen in teaching. Harry Farkas was the first to wear the uniform of the armed forces of our country, having been a Soldier in the Spanish-American War. One of the Firestones, younger brother of the popular pioneers Samuel and Henry, whose names bob up in connection with every constructive activity of the Jewish community, was an early pharmacist and the first professio[illegible]oldier, having joined MacArthur to fight under him in the Philippines. William Birnkrant, son of early settler [illegible]die Birnkrant, the city detective, was the first Jew elected to the School Board. With idealism, the children of the immigrants rushed for the challenges and opportunities of American life and completed the process of Americanization within one generation.

daughter, it was not uncommon for them to give away in marriage another girl as well, one who had no folks of her own here. It made a double wedding and a lifelong friendship. Immigrants kept arriving and there were always kindly "landsleit" who made a family welcome in their house for a while, until the newcomers could be set up on their own. The Nissan Amper family, overflowing with kindness and hospitality, is often mentioned as a one-man "Service for New Americans".

While immigration was the rule, it also happened that a more sensitive or exacting individual was unable to strike roots here and, longing for the dignity and stability of the Kehilla life in the Old Country, returned there as soon as he had a little money saved. The "Unclaimed Letters" column was a standard feature of the Daily News and the Jewish names frequently appearing in it attest to this trend. Still the population grew; in 1904 the births were double the deaths here. In 1910 the newspaper published a list of children appearing in the customary school play before Christmas. The names of 210 Jewish children were included in the Market Street school alone.

JEWISH EDUCATION

Not many of the immigrants had a thorough Jewish education but most of them possessed an intense religious loyalty and wished their children to be brought up in the same spirit. A Hebrew teacher was employed the year after the Congregation Gemilas Chesed was founded. He was Elimelech Zelkowitz, latter of Aliquippa, PA. In the interests of economy the office of teacher was often combined with that of sexton or cantor, a practice which was common to the other congregations as well. Kornweiss, Klein, Friedland, Levendorf, and Fetterman are the names of some of these early teachers. Few of them remained long enough to make any impression on the children. As the population grew more rapidly than the official educational facilities, little private Cheders sprang up. Several such ventures existed in McKeesport with some of the teachers reported to have been scholars and others with no more than a nodding acquaintance with Jewish learning. "He taught me all he knew which was not much," is the oft-repeated comment of some of the "graduates". Responsible leaders from all factions recognized the need for a controlled system and a Talmud Torah on a city-wide basis was actually organized at the turn of the century. No official records or references exist on this important move but, as can best be reconstructed from personal statements, the initiative was with the Gemilas Chesed although contributions were obtained from individuals of other congregations as well. Jacob Moskowitz was the moving spirit of the organization. The school was housed on Jenny Lind Street and School Alley in a building deeded to the Gemilas Chesed by Katherine Roth, widow of the pioneer Joseph Roth. Differences arose very soon on matters of curriculum, pronunciation, and selection of teachers. The members of Etz Chaim took to having their children tutored privately and by 1907 the Gemilas Chesed removed the school to a house on Third Street next to its synagogue. It has never been made clear whether the Talmud Torah remained a community institution or the congregation's own school, but no one took very much of an interest, and the Gemilas Chesed acted on its own. By 1913 there were three full-time teachers employed with classes for girls as well as boys. Proving too small, the Third Street house was abandoned in favor of a building on Market and Ninth Streets from where in 1927 the school was finally transferred to the Hebrew Institute now known as the Jewish Center.

The curriculum varied with times. The usual goal was attainment of fluency in reading the Hebrew text of prayers, acquaintance with liturgy, ability to chant the Haftara, and, chiefly to be able to translate the Sidra of the week along with the commentary of Rashi. Instruction was, as a rule, in the Yiddish language. Bar Mitzvahs usually brought to an end this ambitious program for the boys, as no facilities existed to retain their interest past the age of thirteen.

The Sunday School idea was a popular one and, at the turn of the century, it captivated the minds of those in the community who wished to move with spirit of the times. One of the earliest projects of the B'nai B'rith after its inception here in 1904 was the establishment of a Sunday School. David Manist, educated in Germany and of reform persuasion, was superintendent and F. R. S. Kaplan, young son of the pioneer Russian Jew Abraham Kaplan, was principal. Classes were held in the Talmud Torah. When ideological differences caused friction there, the school moved to Etz Chaim. It functioned for a time in the Hungarian Social Hall on Market Street and it was absorbed by the Temple B'nai Israel when the latter was organized in 1912. It is appropriate to mention here the name of the men who devoted most of their lives to teaching there. Samuel Landesman taught in the Talmud Torah from 1912 to 1944 and a very large percentage of Jews in our town owe their knowledge of Judaism to him. A devoted teacher, he insisted on results and his Thursday evening "pay-days" for the

The community began to lose the "shtetl" look; the people began to move out of the First Ward and spread out into the city. The Lodge meetings on Sunday afternoons were beginning to draw larger crowds than the congregational ones, and the group in front of Siskind's restaurant, or rather the one in the rooms where heroic poker games were going on, were larger than the ones at prayer across the street. There was the Progress Club, a precursor of the country club which, located on Ringold Street and later on Fifth Avenue, served as social center for those who sought such outlets. Energies were chiefly directed toward integration into the American mainstream. The problem of survival as a group and the necessity for internal organization and effort did not yet appear in all of its importance. Nor did the organized community, the congregation leadership, see its role as anything but that of serving the religious need of their affiliates. Pittsburgh already had built a Y.M.H.A. and the young boys of McKeesport actually tried to copy it in a modest way. Around 1910 some of them banded together and succeeded in interesting a few of the civic-minded of the men to make a meeting place available to them where they would meet to play games, hear an occasional talk by one of their elders, and plan social and athletic events. Having no real direction or support of the adult community, the venture petered out. Yet, there were now new forces at work which were subtely changing the composition and outlook of the community

B'nai B'rith was one of the strongest of these influences invading the local scene. Sparked by outside leaders, as well as the local Berry Adler, the McKeesport chapter was instituted in 1904 and soon had membership of about 85. L. J. Haber was first president and other officers included A. Kaplan, Eugene Krow, and Lewis Brown. A list of charter members shows that they were drawn from all the groups. They are:

W. I. Klein
A. M. Amper
Gus Kant
A. Kaplan
Max Berger
C. H. Rosenbleet
Isaac Sunstein
Abraham Brown
Louis Engleman
David Feldman
Henry Friedman
Abraham Goldberg
S. H. Greenfield
Louis Raden
Solomon Grinberg
Edward Haber
Louis Haber
Nathan Levy
Reuben Moritz
M. S. Neiman

Early activities included the sponsorship of the Sunday School, the furnishing of an entire cottage for the Erie Orphan Asylum and the general aim of the promotion of harmony and dignity within the Jewish community. A women's auxiliary to the B'nai B'rith existed for a few years. It was organized a decade after the chapter itself but disintegrated after a short existence.

A major cultural project, undertaken by the Jews of America, was the publication in 1901 of the "JEWISH ENCYCLOPEDIA". Moneys for the monumental enterprise were raised by subscription and it is worthwhile to note that there are no less than 15 subscribers from the young McKeesport community. The list contains these:

I. S. Blattner
L. Brown
A. Brown
Henry Firestone
Samuel Firestone
S. Grinberg
K. Israelite
A. Kaplan
N. Levy
M. S. Neiman
L. Raden
D. Rosenberg
I. Sunstein
S. P. Stern
A. Teplitz

A dynamic new force, Zionism, having newly arisen in Jewish life, evoked deep response in many hearts here. Almost as soon as the Basel Congress was over, there were Zionist stirrings here, especially among the Jews of Russian extraction who knew through first-hand experience the bitterness of persecution and the tragedy of homelessness. By 1903 we find that a District Conference of Zionists taking place in McKeesport with delegates from Pittsbugh attending. A mass meeting for the town's Jews took place on the same evening. F. R. S. Kaplan was a young delegate to the National Convention which was held in Cleveland the following year.

We are not in possession of a definite date on the story of organized Zionism here but a letterhead printed in Hebrew characters indicates that there was one and its name was "Dorshe Zion" (Seekers of Zion) and that it met bi-weekly. It had probably been functioning, with interruptions, during the first two decades of our century. The Cause was kept alive by frequent visits of the Pittsburgh Zionist leaders who pumped new enthusiasm into the members and pumped money out of their pockets. Funds for purchase of land, for the Golden Book, for the Bank and for administration were always forthcoming. Sam Atran, who died early in life during the flu epidemic, was the soul here of the movement recruiting members and making converts. The young people, too, became

infected with Zionist zeal and around 1904-06 had a group functioning which met at Columbia Hall for the study of Jewish history as well as Zionist literature. Sarah Kaplan, school teacher daughter of the unforgettable David and Elkeh Kaplan, (and who, herself, became an honored civic leaver in Williamsport, Pennsylvania), was the leader and moving spirit. The frequent disappointment of the World Zionist Organization, suffered at the hands of the Great Powers, put a damper on the activities and it was only after the Balfour Declaration that serious work was again done. At this time, in 1920, the religious Zionists, too, organized a Mizrachi chapter here but it had a short existence. Reform, winning friends all over America, reached McKeesport officially in 1923. Lacking in leadership, the traditional community was unable to retain the loyalty of many who were looking for decorum in services and a liberal interpretation of Judaism in all its phases. When, therefore, a visiting preacher, in search of a pulpit, diagnosed the need for a Reform Congregation here, he found quite a nucleus to agree with him. The prospective founders met in Ruben's store on Fifth Avenue and at once agreed to launch the new congregation. A. M. Simon was designated by A. M. Amper. The following men agreed to guarantee the expenses of the first year:

F. R. S. Kaplan
A. M. Simon
Eugene Krow
S. Firestone
A. M. Amper
Morris Krow
L. Engelman
F. Broder
Eugene Goldberg
Myer Kant
Joseph Kant
Julius Degner
Max Hirshberg
Mark Abel
R. Moritz
J. R. Ruben
O. Jubelier
Robert Rubenstein
A. Kimmelman
Max Miller
Gus Kant
M. S. Neiman
J. Pollevoi
Lee Hirshberg
S. Kalkstone
Joseph Unger
Hyman Kaminsky
I. Jubelier
I. S. Blattner
Frank Feldman

With the strong traditional forces at work within the community asserting themselves in the meantime, the new venture, because of its extremist tendencies, found itself under fire and in some difficulties within the year. The new congregation soon found it necessary to redefine its stand along more conservative lines. The new president was F. R. S. Kaplan. Music and a mixed choir during services was retained but a rabbi was invited from among the graduates of the conservative Jewish Theological Seminary. He was Louis Brav and remained only one year to be succeeded by Murray A. Alstet who remained unti 1924. For a number of years the new congregation used the facilities of the building on Jenny Lind Street which at one time housed the city Talmud Torah. In 1917 the congregation purchased the property on Shaw Avenue and, removing the house from the front to the back of the lot, used it until the present Temple was erected in 1922.

Our final concern is the cause of Zedakah or charities in McKeesport, Although the greatest chapter in its story was written in our times, in the thirties and forties when the Federation was organized, much money left here to reach a great variety of causes and individuals. The little pushkes which lined the wall of so many kitchens always contained money even in poor households. Collectors for the Hias, the Denver Hospital, the Babies' Home, for the Chalukah Institutions in Jerusalem, and for Yeshivahs from Europe came. Then came the scholars who needed funds which with which to print a book or the "Yid" who needed money for his Mishpacha. All were welcomed. The late Rev. S. D. Walfish and his frail wife were unhappy unless they had two or three"guests" around the Sabbath table in their modest home.

Mike Siskind, that colorful and beloved fixture of the First Ward, never let a man leave town without funds. The merchants of Fifth Avenue could not say,"no" to their friend. He had as many friends among the powerful as he did among the poor and derelict whose protector he was.

The massive immigration and resulting cross-country travel of poor people made it desirable to provide accommodations for itinerants and, accordingly, the Hachnosath Orchim or House of Shelter was established in McKeesport. Chief donors are remembered to be Abraham Kaplan, Isaac Sunstein, and Mrs. M. Simon, although there were other contributors as well. The institution had a slight connection with the Etz Chaim, as its sexton was also caretaker for the shelter. At first, kitchen facilities were provided but when immigration dwindled only meal tickets were handed out to those requesting same. The House of Shelter is still in existence, although in a somewhat somnambulant state, and funds for its upkeep are provided by the children of the late A. Kaplan.

There is so much more to the story of the McKeesport Jewish Community; Some of the most dramatic chapters were yet to take place in the twenties, the thirties, and so on. The struggles between old and new, between the growing secularization of Jewish life and the forces of tradition, seeking to reverse the process; the battles fought in the home, tragic for the parents and tragic for the children, and the resulting scars to the spirit. There are bright chapters dealing with resurgent Jewish consciousness and valiant identification with the cause of Hitler's victims. But, all of these will some day be recorded with a better pen by a more thorough student.

This was the story of the immigrants and their McKeesport. As it is, the spectacles through which I observed them may have been a bit too rosy. In truth, there was much about them that was not beautiful, especially as expressed in their congregational life; Democratic privileges went to the head of some. Being a members"In goot shtanding" and having paid one's dues (they called it "dueses") qualified everyone to help steer the course of Judaism and often stilled the small still voice of good judgment. Pent-up frustrations were often vented at the semi-monthly meetings and were expressed in meanness of spirit.

Discouraging, too, was the inability of even the best elements within each group to rise above the barriers of ethnic differences. The Lithuanian shuddered at the Hungarian Jew's "uncouth" Hebrew pronunciation; the latter watched with a raised eyebrow, the Litvaks "cold" religion; and together they frowned on the informality and impetuosity of the Galicianers. It was a tragic, comic, though perhaps inevitable sequence in frustration, and precluded all common effort. They had their unattractive side; Still, they were unforgettable, unselfconscious, strong, loyal, purposeful. Some of the most colorful, some of the best, fail of being mentioned here but the omission is not wilful but inherent in the limitations of the study. The First Ward is about to be razed. The houses in which they lived, the places where they first prayed, will soon be gone. The memory lingers on and can perhaps best be summed up in a vignette. Evoke the image, if you please, of old man Simcha Orth, may he rest in peace, a sad-gay, quizzical, cynical Talmudic-scholar of a Jew. Imagine him...guiding his model-T-Ford through the intricacies of Fifth Avenue traffic...his Shavian beard draped over the wheel. In order to go on making a living, he had accomplished the painful transition and instead of a horse and buggy, he has a driver's license. His Ford is loaded with tobies which he both manufactures and delivers. Officer Heimlich, may he, too, rest in peace, that dour, Scott-handsome looking Jew stands like a citadel at the B & O intersection directing traffic his hands white gloved. He orders Orth to a halt; stopping does not come so easily to him and the old man decides to stretch a point and tries to still slip through anyway. Mr. Heimlich disapproves and emphatically motions him back but old Simcha has always had trouble with the cussedness of the "reverse" and now cries out with all the sorrow and pain of the persecuted Jew, "Di Roshe, Di Antisemit, di weist das ich ken nish! (You know I can't) He couldn't. We, on the other hand, could and did cross and are on the right side of the tracks more or less. We have some measure of security, even some wealth and education. We have produced physicians, lawyers, teachers and engineers, even a Rhodes Scholar and a Fullbright one. Have we also brought across those values which stood us in such good stead in the past and have made the Jew "born civilized"?.

(Written in 1954)