

**The Formation of the Butler Pennsylvania  
Jewish Community**  
*An Anthropological Analysis from 1900 to 1911*

Adam C. Schure

18 November 1991  
Seminar in Comparative Social History (79-444)  
Professor David W. Miller

## INTRODUCTION:

The study that follows is a compilation of memories, thoughts and ideals of various members--present and past--of the Butler Jewish community. Personal accounts, documenting the life and times of various individuals within a community, yield the most appropriate data when tracking communal development. Nuances of solidarity are revealed through the letters, memoirs, and descriptions of those that lived in the past. The documentation of personal accounts within this study evokes the flavor of the Butler Jewish community's inception. I was fortunate to obtain a plethora of sources corresponding to this description; furthermore, as these were first hand accounts from individuals that actually assisted in founding the Butler Jewish community, one can truly view the development and integration of the Butler Jews into one cohesive unit.

## FOUNDATIONS OF THE GREATER BUTLER COMMUNITY:

Butler Pennsylvania, at the turn of the twentieth century, was a relatively prosperous area, holding a population of nearly 11,000 individuals.<sup>1</sup> During this era, Butler's vast resources were already being tapped-- oil and gas were currently being extracted, coal and limestone mining was a large scale operation and agriculture, on some of the most fertile lands in Pennsylvania, occupied most of the area's laborers.<sup>2</sup> Jewish frontiersmen, who arrived during the middle nineteenth century, came initially as peddlers; at the turn of the century, those who found any measure of success settled in Butler and opened up businesses of their own. At this time, there was a sparse settlement by German and Hungarian Jews; as one Max Nast (b. 1891) stated:

"In my early years Butler was a small town. There seemed always to be four or five Jewish families there. I can recall Julius Kaufmann, who lived on the west side of North McKean Street, in a house at the present site of the Butler Public Library, and who later built a house on west Jefferson Street; Max Schloss and Leon Schloss, brothers of Mrs. Julius Kaufman; Adolf Steel, who lived on west Cunningham Street in a house later occupied by the Blind Association; a family by the name of Rosenberg, who at the time my parents came to Butler lived

---

<sup>1</sup>Jacob S. Feldman, The Jewish Experience in Western Pennsylvania: A History 1755-1945 (Pittsburgh: Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1986), p.203

<sup>2</sup>Maurice Horwitz, Butler PA, oral interview, 29 Nov. 1987.

at the northwest corner of the intersection of North Washington Street and West Penn Street; they left Butler, but years later their son, Henry Rosenberg, had the men's clothing store at the site of Schaul and Nast."<sup>3</sup>

Although Butler presented many opportunities for early frontier settlers, one key event can obviously be noted as the spark of widespread settlement of central European immigrants, including the Jews that created the base for Butler's Jewish community. In 1902 to 1903, Standard Steel Car Company, financed by the enormously wealthy Mellons of Pittsburgh, built the largest railroad car manufacturing plant in the United States--and subsequently in the world--in Butler Pennsylvania.<sup>4</sup>

Standard Steel, to operate at its full potential, required more labor than Butler and all of its outlying areas could supply; moreover, although the inhabitants of small towns surrounding Butler must have viewed the new factory as a great opportunity, daily travel to the workplace was a virtual impossibility. Standard Steel, to supplement the area's labor inadequacies, personally imported its labor from Central Europe, as "boatloads of peasantry..from Hungary...Yugoslavia..from Poland" were brought over to Butler to work in the new factory.<sup>5</sup> After the railroad factory was established, immigrant workers doubled the population of Butler to

---

<sup>3</sup>Max Nast, Butler PA, letter, 18 Jan. 1988, to Walter Bonninger.

<sup>4</sup>Maurice Horwitz, Butler PA, oral interview, 29 Nov. 1987.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

over 20,000 individuals.<sup>6</sup>

The establishment in 1902 of the Standard Steel Car Company in Butler attracted the first considerable and lasting wave of Jewish migration to Butler. Indeed it was this group of predominantly Hungarian, Lithuanian, Rumanian, and American born Jews who formed the foundation for the Jewish community of Butler.<sup>7</sup> When the Standard Car Company came to Butler in 1902 and 1903, the town grew rapidly, including a large number of Jews: Approximately twenty-five Jewish families established residency in the towns of Butler and Lyndora, an extension of the larger town--now city--of Butler.<sup>8</sup> This small outlining area came into existence solely because of the new Standard Steel factory: New immigrant workers were packed into "row houses, three rows in depth, extending for a quarter of a mile, along Hansen Avenue," of Lyndora. These domiciles were collectively deemed 'red row' because of the red color of the buildings as well as the bloody fights that occurred during the weekends.<sup>9</sup>

The initial influx of central European immigrants to Butler, due to the opening of the Standard Steel Car Company factory, paved the road for the economic state containing those Jews settled in Butler as well as Jews migrating

---

<sup>6</sup>Jacob S. Feldman, The Jewish Experience in Western Pennsylvania: A History 1755-1945 (Pittsburgh: Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1986), p.203.

<sup>7</sup>Jack Zinman, "B'nai Abraham Dedication 1956" (unpublished essay, 1956), p.3.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Maurice Horwitz, Butler PA, oral interview, 29 Nov. 1987.

along with the other central Europeans. The Jew, unlike other actors in the Butler economy, enjoyed an entrepreneurial spirit that relied on the other immigrants for monetary profits and success; thus, the increase of the overall populous greatly assisted the rise of the Jewish economic actor in Butler.

## THE JEWISH ECONOMIC ACTOR IN BUTLER:

Standard Steel's Butler factory initiated the first and one of the largest waves of central European immigrants to the Butler area; however, the large Jewish component of this immigration did not accompany their central European counterparts into the factories, but continued to follow their Jewish frontiersmen predecessors as peddlers, small businessmen and entrepreneurs.

The Jewish men that immigrated in the wave of the Standard Steel factory opening were mostly small businessmen, ranging from butchers to cattle dealers-- basically entrepreneurs of every variety imaginable.<sup>10</sup> Because of the enormous influx of people into the small area of Butler, the Jews took advantage to open stores and peddle; furthermore, most of the Jewish entrepreneurs serviced the new immigrants that worked in the mills. One estimate indicates that by 1906, 50 to 60 percent of all businessmen in Butler were Jewish.<sup>11</sup> The majority of Jews were shopowners, storekeepers, and the like; furthermore, "most of the Jews that were not entrepreneurs worked for the Jews of the community."<sup>12</sup>

The Jews that migrated to Butler with the central European influx were opposed to heavy industrial labor that employed the vast majority of other

---

<sup>10</sup>Maurice Horwitz, Butler PA, oral interview, 29 Nov. 1987.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

immigrants at this time.<sup>13</sup> Scrap metal businesses, grocery stores, and clothing shops were popular among the Jews; moreover, as “most of these concerns grew to become lucrative businesses, promoting an economic mobility other immigrant groups did not have.”<sup>14</sup>

For instance, two integral forces behind the founding of the B’nai Abraham Congregation (also denoted as a *chevra*) were solid economic actors within the greater Butler community. Adolph Steele, the recording secretary for the first seven years of the *chevra*, was a chief engineer to Standard Steel.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Joseph Eskovitz, the first president of the *chevra*, owned a practice which combined a bank and a travel agency. Eskovitz’s shop also operated a service of sending money back to relatives in the central European homelands, as well as controlling the sale of ship passage; furthermore, the shop handled money to be remitted by the majority of the operators from the Standard Steel factory. Eskovitz was remembered as “the leading light in the building of the synagogue” due in part to his

“thriving business in Lyndora. He was the president most of the time the synagogue was being built. When the money for the building fund was not forthcoming, he would raffle off a cash register. This was a very desirable item because everyone

---

<sup>13</sup>Alice Leeds, “Butler Jewish History” (unpublished compilation, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>Helen Brier et al, Butler PA, oral interviews, c. 1989.



had a retail store.”<sup>16</sup>

The economic mindset of the Butler Jews presented a huge benefit in the formation of a stable Jewish community. Not only did these individuals control a viable economic surplus, they also held positions in the greater Butler community to utilize the resources in their possession. Furthermore, Eskovitz's shop, and other operations of this type, greatly assisted the newly immigrated, less economically stable Jews to come into contact with the more settled Jews of Butler. Thus, the initial integration of Jews from different areas of the world was more a process of necessity--for food, for banking or for ship passage--than a conscious process of creating a stable Jewish community.

---

<sup>16</sup>Helen Brier et al, Butler PA, oral interviews, c. 1989.

## THE BUTLER JEWISH COMMUNITY: 1900-1906

The early Jews that settled in Butler at the turn of the century gathered together for three main reasons: a common language (the large element of foreign-born Jews were "only moderately conversant [sic] in English: Yiddish was spoken at home"), for security, and their shared beliefs and religious mindsets. Butler Jews tended to be 'ghettoized', that is, banded together in one certain physical area due to "common values and it was the natural thing to do."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, this was a 'self-ghettoization' by the Jews due to the element of security found by grouping themselves as a unit, just as was done in their homelands of central Europe.

Butler, in the early twentieth century, was considered an above average area of Jewish population. Jews in smaller outlying towns--Grove City, Mars and Harmony--were affiliated with the activities of the Butler Jews, and ultimately, with the early Congregation.<sup>18</sup> Most towns with an equivalent Jewish population to Butler had both a Reformed and an Orthodox congregation; however, the Butler "Jews only wanted one", and initially, followed the Orthodox practice.<sup>19</sup> The early Jews that settled never maintained a solid, legally-chartered congregation, but nonetheless rented halls for the High Holy Days for those that wished to worship.

---

<sup>17</sup>Maurice Horwitz, Butler PA, oral interview, 29 Nov. 1987.

<sup>18</sup>Jacob S. Feldman, The Jewish Experience in Western Pennsylvania: A History 1755-1945 (Pittsburgh: Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1986), p.203.

<sup>19</sup>Helen Brier et al, Butler PA, oral interviews, c. 1989.

There

“were Jewish religious services in Butler for several years on Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur, held in second floor rooms at different locations on Main Street. I do not know whether there were any before 1903. I believe there were groups of 12 to 20, possibly more men...”<sup>20</sup>

It was “the power of Jewish tradition [that] reinforced the desire and the necessity for a place of worship and a religious school for the approximately twenty-five Jewish families” that resided in the Butler area in 1903.<sup>21</sup> During that same year, these Jews collectively elected one Mr. Abraham H. Goodman “to serve as teacher, shochet, and cantor” for the loosely connected, and not as yet titled, B’nai Abraham Congregation.<sup>22</sup> As in many small communities, the spiritual leader was also the shochet, the ritual slaughterer of chickens and beef.<sup>23</sup> Also in 1903, the first recorded Jewish High Holy Day Services were conducted on the “third floor of the then Knights of the Pythias Hall (now known as the Reiber Building).”<sup>24</sup>

The next major step for the creation of a solid, unified Jewish community

---

<sup>20</sup>Max Nast, Butler PA, letter, 18 Jan. 1988, to Walter Bonninger.

<sup>21</sup>Jack Zinman, “B’nai Abraham Dedication 1956” (unpublished essay, 1956), p.3.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Alice Leeds, “Butler Jewish History” (unpublished compilation, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>24</sup>Jack Zinman, “B’nai Abraham Dedication 1956” (unpublished essay, 1956), p.3.

was taken three years later by the Jewish citizens of Butler. On March twenty-second of 1906,

“thirteen Jewish residents of Butler in compliance with the laws of incorporation of the state of Pennsylvania, filed an application with the Hon. (Honorable [sic]) James M. Galbreath, Judge of the Court of Common Pleas of Butler County, for a Charter ‘for a Hebrew Congregation’, to be known as ‘B’nai Abraham of Butler, Pennsylvania’.”<sup>25</sup>

The purpose clause of the charter read:

“the purpose of the said Corporation is the support of the worship of Almighty GOD according to the faith, doctrine, discipline, rules and regulations and usages of a Hebrew Congregation.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, after legalizing the Congregation via the charter, the base was set for the building of one solid, coherent Jewish community. The Jews of Butler were now stable economically and spiritually: Goodman, the teacher, cantor and shochet, provided the Jews a spiritual guidance as well as a butcher for kosher meats, a very important ideal of the Jewish community. However, one key aspect was still absent from the Jewish life of Butler: A synagogue, denoted as *schule* in Yiddish.

---

<sup>25</sup>Jack Zinman, “B’nai Abraham Dedication 1956” (unpublished essay, 1956), p.3.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, p.4.

## THE BUTLER JEWISH COMMUNITY: 1906-1911

Jewish communities view "their synagogue as essentially the center of social life and their religious life and their cultural life."<sup>27</sup> Thus, the lack of the *schule* posed a problem for the Jews of Butler. The B'nai Abraham *chevra* was solid organization, strongly based economically, organizationally, and spiritually; however, there still was no defined gathering area, no accommodations for ritual activities, and no place for social events.

The accounts from the earliest B'nai Abraham *chevra* minutes, documenting between July 1906 to April 1912, do indicate that the new organization was blossoming into a defined, coherent congregation. Although an area for the living was not yet available, the *chevra* did own a cemetery for its members, a very important aspect of the Jewish community. The first account of the B'nai Abraham Cemetery was on January 19th, 1908 when the first child--Malie Friedman--was buried.<sup>28</sup> The purchase of the Cemetery was a difficult process, as

"there was a superstition and animosity and it was difficult to buy land for a Jewish cemetery, so they used a ruse and said someone was coming to Butler to build a factory. Thus the land was purchased. When I was young the cemetery contained few graves because the median age of the congregation was very

---

<sup>27</sup>Maurice Horwitz, Butler PA, oral interview, 29 Nov. 1987.

<sup>28</sup>Entry of 1 Jan. 1908, B'nai Abraham Minutes, B'nai Abraham Congregation of Butler PA.

young. Buried were mostly infants..."<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, the *chevra* began to donate monies to various charities: On December 7th 1907, the proceeds of nine tickets were given to the Literary-Zion Society, and during the following meeting, January 5th 1908, four dollars was donated to the Hebrew Immigration Society.<sup>30</sup> In a move that solidified the internal workings of the *chevra*, the Congregation's by-laws were printed and adopted on December 20th 1908, after the motion lost three meetings previously.<sup>31</sup> Also, the economic stability of the *chevra* was evident in the non-profit events and parties they held after special meetings. Following the installation of officers on May 6th 1908 a "hansom [sic] repast was served which was largely enjoyed by all who were present at the strains of the celebrated Italian Orchestra. Dancing was had until midnight."<sup>32</sup>

The *chevra* was obviously on stable ground, as noted in the Cemetery, donations, parties and printed by-laws; however, the *schule* continued to be absent. The first indication of a distinct trend within the member's attitudes concerning the building of a *schule* is noted by the second documented meeting, August 23rd of 1906. Money, at this time, was already being solicited for the *chevra* through the sale

---

<sup>29</sup>Helen Brier et al, Butler PA, oral interviews, c. 1989.

<sup>30</sup>Entries of 7 Dec. 1907 and 5 Jan. 1908, B'nai Abraham Minutes, B'nai Abraham Congregation of Butler PA.

<sup>31</sup>Entry of 20 Dec. 1908, B'nai Abraham Minutes, B'nai Abraham Congregation of Butler PA.

<sup>32</sup>Entry of 6 May 1908, B'nai Abraham Minutes, B'nai Abraham Congregation of Butler PA.

of tickets for High Holy Day Services; that is, each member was charged one dollar as an 'admission' of sorts for entry to the services. The next meeting pronounced the tickets as a success, as a good sum of money was obtained by the *chevra*.<sup>33</sup>

The November 11th 1907 meeting documented the initial contact of an architectural firm--Foster Architects--concerning the building of a *schule*. The following meeting on November 24th, 1907 the first building committee was assigned; furthermore, it was also decided in the same meeting that a ball was to held for the benefit of the *chevra*.<sup>34</sup> On March 22nd 1908, the Ladies of the Ladies of the Benevolent Society agreed to turn over \$600 to the *chevra* after the foundation was laid.<sup>35</sup>

Monetary resources seemed to be waning by the July 7th meeting of that same year as one Brother Rothman gave

"a very able speech advocating the building of a *schule* and *mikva* (the women's ritual bath) at once at once but not to build one of the original intended \$10,000 building but to put up a \$3,000 *schule*; his idea was very well taken--all the members

---

<sup>33</sup>Entries of 23 Aug. 1906 and 30 Sept. 1906, B'nai Abraham Minutes, B'nai Abraham Congregation of Butler PA.

<sup>34</sup>Entries of 11 Nov. 1907 and 24 Nov. 1907, B'nai Abraham Minutes, B'nai Abraham Congregation of Butler PA.

<sup>35</sup>Entry of 22 March 1908, B'nai Abraham Minutes, B'nai Abraham Congregation of Butler PA.

asked to give their opinion and every one agreed to build at once."<sup>36</sup>

A new building committee was selected the next meeting, and Mr. Foster (the original architect) was paid his \$75.00 fee for delivering the plans to the *chevra*.<sup>37</sup> The Congregation was engulfed by a new determined attitude to complete the *schule*.

By August 8th 1909, the cellar of the *schule* was completed and the building costs to date were \$7200; however, the financial committee suggested that the building of the *schule* be postponed until more funds were received by the *chevra*.<sup>38</sup> However, at the September 29th 1910 meeting,

"a prominent Butler attorney and founder of the Butler Eagle (the local newspaper), one Mr. Levi M. Wise, befriended the struggling congregation by offering his services to secure a Charter and float a bond issue of \$5,000 in one hundred dollar denominations and furthermore to help dispose of them."<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup>Entry of 7 June 1908, B'nai Abraham Minutes, B'nai Abraham Congregation of Butler PA.

<sup>37</sup>Entry of 21 June 1908, B'nai Abraham Minutes, B'nai Abraham Congregation of Butler PA.

<sup>38</sup>Entry of 8 Aug. 1909, B'nai Abraham Minutes, B'nai Abraham Congregation of Butler PA.

<sup>39</sup>Entry of 29 Sept. 1910, B'nai Abraham Minutes, B'nai Abraham Congregation of Butler PA; Jack Zinman, "B'nai Abraham Dedication 1956" (unpublished essay, 1956), p.4.



Thus, on March 11th of the following year, the new B'nai Abraham synagogue was completed. The dedication was attended by Rabbi J. Leonard Levy of the Pittsburgh Rodef Shalom Temple, Rabbi Zivitz, "the outstanding Orthodox Rabbi in Pittsburgh," and the Honorable James M. Galbreath.<sup>40</sup> The completion of the B'nai Abraham synagogue signaled the end of the search for the Butler Jewish community's missing link to solidification and solidarity.

---

<sup>40</sup> Jack Zinman, "B'nai Abraham Dedication 1956" (unpublished essay, 1956), p.4.

## CONCLUSION:

The formation of a stable, coherent Jewish community in Butler was signified by many key events. The influx of immigrants--of all ethnic varieties--during the opening of the Standard Steel factory in 1902 provided the economic foundation for the entrepreneurial Jews that were previously settled in Butler. The addition of Abe Goodman as a teacher, cantor and shochet in 1903 provided a spiritual base for the community; furthermore, the chartering of the B'nai Abraham Congregation symbolized the legal formation of a Jewish *chevra* in Butler. However, it was not until the construction of the *schule* that the Jewish community was, in essence, one solid unified actor. The *schule* commands a tremendous position in the Jewish community, both as a place of worship and as a gathering area for the members of the community. Without a *schule*, the spirituality and integration of the Butler Jews were two independent actors. A *schule* incorporates these aspects of communal life into one entity, as the Jews worshiped, mourned, celebrated and interacted in a single building and a unified atmosphere. A *schule* symbolizes the Jewish community's solidarity; thus, the dedication of the B'nai Abraham Congregation's *schule* in 1911 ended the process of communal development, as the Butler Jewish community was clearly one stable, cohesive actor.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bonninger, Walter, personal interview, Butler PA, 29 Sept. 1991, with the author.

B'nai Abraham Congregation 85th Reunion Tapes, Numbers 1 to 3, various oral interviews, Butler Pa, c. 1989.

Brier, Helen et al, oral interview, Butler PA, c. 1989, with Walter Bonninger.

Butler Hebrew Congregation B'nai Abraham, unpublished minutes from 22 July 1906 to 21 April 1912 meetings, various recording secretaries, 300pp.

Feldman, Jacob S., The Jewish Experience in Western Pennsylvania: A History 1755-1945. Pittsburgh: Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1986. vi, 331pp. Illus, ports.

Horwitz, Maurice, oral interview, Butler PA, 29 Nov 1987, Maurice Horwitz narrator.

Leeds, Alice, "Butler Jewish History." Unpublished compilation for the purposes of B'nai Abraham Congregation, 1987, 13pp.

McKee, James A., Twentieth Century History of Butler and Butler County. New York: Richmond and Arnold Publishing, 1909. vi, 1331pp. Illus, ports, maps.

Nast, Max S., one letter, 18 Jan. 1987, to Walter Bonninger.

Rosenblum, Marcus M., one letter, 1 Jan. 1988, to B'nai Abraham Congregation.

Zinman, Jack, "B'nai Abraham Dedication 1956." Published for the purposes of the B'nai Abraham Congregation Dedication Services, 18 Nov. 1956, 18pp. Illus, ports.