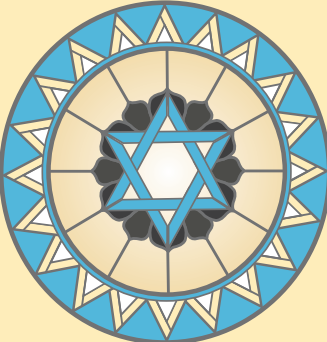


Michigan Jewish History



JHSM

JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MICHIGAN

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Tammuz 5783



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Michigan Jewish History is dedicated to the memory of **Sarah and Ralph Davidson** and **Bessie and Joseph Wetsman**, the parents and grandparents of **William Davidson** and **Dorothy Davidson Gerson**, both of blessed memory.



Figures 1-4: (clockwise from top left) Sarah Wetsman Davidson, Ralph Davidson, Joseph Wetsman, and Bessie Handler Wetsman. (Courtesy of Gretchen and Ethan Davidson.)

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MICHIGAN JEWISH HISTORY

The Journal of Jewish Historical Society of Michigan

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE	3
MANAGING EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION	5
FEATURE ARTICLES	
Detroit's Kosher-Meat Wars, 1903-1927 <i>By Catherine Cangany, PhD</i>	8
Littman's People's Theater: A Stage in the Wilderness <i>By Nadav Pais-Greenapple</i>	35
BOOK REVIEW	
<i>Impossible Takes Longer: 75 Years After Its Creation, Has Israel Fulfilled Its Founders' Dreams?</i> by Daniel Gordis <i>Reviewed by Martin B. Shichtman, PhD</i>	60
ESSAYS AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS	
Remembering Detroit's Celebration of the Establishment of Israel, May 14-16, 1948 <i>By Robert A. Rockaway, PhD</i>	63
The Day I Met a Hero, Yitzhak Rabin <i>By Jeannie Weiner</i>	67
Israel at 75: Celebrating the Non-Miracle of the Jewish State <i>By Rabbi Yoni Dablen</i>	71
NOTABLE JEWISH MICHIGANDERS IN HISTORY	
MWWMD Biography—Emma Lazaroff Schaver: A Philanthropist, Zionist, and Musician Who Brought the Gift of Song to Holocaust Survivors	73
CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS	
Editor's Message	76
When I Think of Israel <i>by Deborah Hochberg</i>	78
From Apricots to Air Raids <i>by Sue Ross</i>	80



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS <i>(continued)</i>	
Ode to the <i>Hatzar</i> by Beverly Kent Goldenberg	85
USY Pilgrimage, 1971 by Joy Gaines-Friedler	88
Aubade at Masada, 1973 by Claire Weiner	90
You Are Our Second Army by F. Linda Cohen	92
A Promise by Linda Laderman	96
Forever Changed by Israel by Mike O. Smith	97
CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS: 2024 RABBI EMANUEL APPLEBAUM AWARD	103
IN MEMORIAM	
Judith Levin Cantor	104
Eugene Driker	112

Message from Our President

Jeannie Weiner



(Courtesy of Elayne Gross Photography.)

This issue of *Michigan Jewish History* is filled with stories celebrating the 75th anniversary of the free and democratic State of Israel. As you open these pages, you will learn about the links between the land of Israel and the Jews of Michigan. It is the mission of JHSM to capture milestones in Michigan Jewish history.

This spring, I was grateful to be invited to the second “Motown Seder.” The event, held at the Detroit Opera House, was an evening of breaking bread and sharing cultures and stories. Storytelling was used for important messaging through the model of a seder—recounting the story of leaving Egypt and traveling to the land that would become modern Israel. We all enjoy stories and good storytellers. But all stories are not historic. Well-researched, interpretive history tells a story that includes the “Why?” and the “So what?” *MJH* concentrates on the interconnected history of Michigan’s Jewish people, the places they settled, and the ethics and morals that influenced them.

As a history lover, being a part of JHSM is tremendously satisfying. At times in 2023, finding the state of the world challenging, frustrating, and even disappointing, I worried that previously won battles were being reversed. Issues such as women’s rights and human rights, gun violence, and even the banning of books, which once seemed to have disappeared, or, at least, to have been moving in a positive direction, made headlines again.



But, looking back does not have to be disturbing. In fact, examining Michigan's Jewish "story" is uplifting and hopeful. History allows us to recall accomplishments and celebrate. Imparting our history to young people and the community at large can change anti-Semitic attitudes. Learning from the past gives us strategies for improving the future. History plays a crucial role in our education.

And, our story feels good.

The leaders and members of JHSM felt joy and gratitude for the opportunity to honor the legacy of our past president and mentor, Judith Levin Cantor, by attending and contributing to an extraordinary musical event on September 10, 2023. This event initiated the Judith Levin Cantor Legacy Fund to further JHSM's commitment to high-quality, mission-driven programs. It was Judy Cantor who helped JHSM in our early years to produce exhibits, develop historic markers, arrange tours, and write about our history (see related article on page 104).

Additionally, this past year, through the diligent research of our executive director, Dr. Catherine Cangany, JHSM accessed a series of events in Detroit's Jewish history. This research led to newly discovered, detailed information about Detroit's 1903 and 1910 Kosher-meat riots (see related article on page 8). Dr. Cangany not only has preserved history, she has *unearthed* it.

We will have the opportunity to discover more about this story and other happenings in Detroit's first Jewish neighborhood, 1880-1930, at the Detroit Historical Museum during our original exhibit, "IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD: EVERYDAY LIFE ON HASTINGS STREET," to be held from April 20 to July 14, 2024.

Visitors will be immersed in the issues of the day, including the reasons immigrants settled in Detroit, their struggles to survive, the social-services network that developed to assist them and that still exists today, women's roles, and the conflicts of living a religious life in an increasingly secular world. In light of the anti-Semitism in our current environment, this exhibit is particularly relevant.

Storytelling is an exciting collaboration opportunity. We are working with Black-history scholars on exhibit panels examining the times when Hastings Street became known as Black Bottom. Visitors will learn about the tensions and harmony between the community's Black and Jewish residents at our Detroit Historical Museum exhibit.

Through these and other programs, JHSM is making a place across Michigan and beyond for Jewish history. We preserve and celebrate history, but we also bring it alive in many forms. Our stories answer the "Why?" and the "So what?" Our history is fresh, important, interesting, and meaningful. I urge you to join us in all we do.



Introduction from the Managing Editor

Tracy Weissman, JD



(Courtesy of Paul Stoloff Photography.)

The year 2023 marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel. As is evident in the pages of this journal, the Jewish state provides a "home"—a home where religion can be practiced freely, a home filled with Jewish culture and traditions, a home absent of the difficulties of living Jewishly in a secular world, a home filled with extended family, a home for all Jewish people. Although the type of home may differ, Israel's draw is strong and enduring. In celebration of the Jewish homeland's milestone, the articles, essays, and poems in this issue explore how connections to Israel have impacted Michigan's Jewish history.

MJH's two feature articles both highlight a motivating factor for the establishment of the modern State of Israel—the challenges of maintaining a Jewish home in a secular world. In "Detroit's Kosher-Meat Wars, 1903-1927," JHSM Executive Director Catherine Cangany, PhD, explores the community unrest that erupted in the city in 1903 and 1910 over soaring Kosher-beef prices. Unaware in each case that underhanded tactics of the US meatpacking-industry monopoly were fueling the skyrocketing prices, members of Detroit's Jewish community focused their fury on each other. In 1903, the dispute devolved into bitter factions over rabbinical authority. In 1910, armed with their food knowledge, the immigrant Orthodox women of Detroit's Hastings Street, such as the woman



pictured on this issue's cover, instituted public demonstrations and rioting. Led by twenty-year-old Rebecka Possner, the women left their homes to take to the streets, where they organized boycotts and resolved the dispute by raising funds to open co-operative meat markets selling at fixed prices. Detroit's Jewish women won the battle, but could not win the war until the meatpacking-industry monopoly was dismantled by the US Supreme Court in 1912.

In "Littman's People's Theater: A Stage in the Wilderness," JHSM Board member Nadav Pais-Greenapple chronicles the history of Abraham Littman's Yiddish theater, from its beginnings at the Yiddish Playhouse on Hastings Street in 1924 to its longer residence in Detroit's Jewish Twelfth Street community in 1927 to its closure in 1944, and the cultural legacy it left behind. During its heyday, Littman's theater served as a "home," connecting Jewish Detroiters across socio-economic lines and levels of religious observance to the global world of Yiddish culture. Beginning in the 1930s, a combination of external and internal forces caused the theater's demise. Over time Littman's patrons acculturated more fully into American linguistic and economic life, migrating northwest, away from the theater's location. They began to place less importance on Yiddish as the communal glue. Additionally, well-intentioned, but restrictive, employment policies developed by the Hebrew Actors' Union—the trade union representing Yiddish actors, management, and crew—hindered efforts by Littman and the Detroit Jewish community to save the theater from closure.

This issue also includes a review by Eastern Michigan University's Professor Emeritus of English and Jewish Studies Martin B. Shichtman, PhD, of Daniel Gordis's *Impossible Takes Longer: 75 Years After Its Creation, Has Israel Fulfilled Its Founders' Dreams?* (Ecco/HarperCollins: New York, 2023). Shichtman provides insight into Gordis's consideration of Israel's successes and shortfalls since its establishment in 1948. Gordis's nuanced analysis recognizes the complexity of the challenges facing the Jewish state: while the country has had significant achievements in its 75 years, including providing a home for Jewish people, much more work must be done to meet its founders' perhaps impossible aspirations for that home.

In celebration of Israel's anniversary, the three contributions to *MJH*'s "Essays and Personal Reflections" section explore Michigan Jews' connections to the Jewish state during different periods in its modern history. In "Remembering Detroit's Celebration of the Establishment of Israel, May 14-16, 1948," Robert A. Rockaway, PhD, recalls the elated reactions of his family and the Detroit Jewish community to news of Israeli statehood. During what would later be described as the largest demonstration by Jews in the history of Detroit, nine-year-old Rockaway and more than twenty thousand other exuberant revelers mobbed



Central High School's athletic field to celebrate and feel connected to the Jewish homeland.

In "The Day I Met a Hero, Yitzhak Rabin," JHSM President Jeannie Weiner shares her experience meeting with the prime minister during a trip to Israel organized by the Jewish Community Relations Council in June 1994, and the lifelong impact it has had on her. Despite being involved in intense negotiations with Syria, Rabin spent 40 minutes with Weiner, Congressman Dale E. Kildee, and Congressman Joe Knollenberg, discussing Israel's challenges and the importance of the US-Israeli bond. Rabin would demonstrate the same courtesy and humility at a peace rally, moments before he was assassinated on November 4, 1995.

In "Israel at 75: Celebrating the Non-Miracle of the Jewish State," Rabbi Yoni Dahlen of Congregation Shaarey Zedek in Southfield, Michigan, reflects on Israel's milestone. While recognizing the monumental challenges Israel faces, Dahlen views the Jewish state as the remarkable fulfillment of a promise kept for millennia. Israel is a home for the Jewish people who never forgot it.

This issue's "Notable Jewish Michiganders in History" section features one of the remarkable individuals from our Michigan Women Who Made a Difference online archive. In "MWWMD Biography—Emma Lazaroff Schaver: A Philanthropist, Zionist, and Musician Who Brought the Gift of Song to Holocaust Survivors," *MJH* highlights the professional soprano soloist's commitment to helping the global Jewish community. It was only fitting that she received the Eleanor Roosevelt Humanities Award from the State of Israel Bonds for outstanding service to humanity in the spirit and ideals of the former first lady in 1967. Additionally, although Lazaroff Schaver lived much of her life in Michigan, she was a lifelong Zionist who worked tirelessly to support her "home," Israel, both financially and through music.

The moving essays and poems in the "Creative Expressions" section under the guest editorship of Zieva Dauber Konvisser, PhD, recount the authors' experiences coming "home" to Israel. From childhood memories to marrying into an Israeli family to life-changing visits, Michiganders have developed enduring bonds with the Jewish state. Together with the other contributions, these pieces mark Israel's milestone with just a few examples of the country's remarkable impact on Michigan's Jewish community.

Yom huledet sameach, Yisrael! Happy Birthday, Israel!



FEATURE ARTICLE

Detroit's Kosher-Meat Wars, 1903-1927

Catherine Cangany, PhD

On Sunday night, May 8, 1910, hostilities erupted along Hastings Street, the thoroughfare of Detroit's Jewish quarter. Part of the "ghetto" where poor and recent immigrants lived, the neighborhood was home to most of the city's fourteen thousand Jews. Now, it was unrecognizable. According to one astonished eyewitness:

Detroit's Ghetto is in the throes of a meat strike—a real, bitter, fighting meat strike, and the nondescript kosher butcher shops along Hastings-st. are practically closed up, while shifting throngs of excited, shawl-covered, belligerent women are doing picket duty, and occasionally making a raid on some luckless purchaser of meat, . . . effectively putting it out of commission as an article of diet. Following a regular riot, Sunday evening, with real policemen struggling with a real mob, Hastings-st., between Montcalm and Division-sts., presents a spectacle of a warlike camp.¹

As the community's food shoppers and preparers, Detroit's Orthodox women took to the streets over the soaring cost of Kosher beef. They would soon discover that beef prices—Kosher and non—had skyrocketed across the United States due to the underhanded tactics of the meatpacking-industry monopoly known as the "Beef Trust."

The Detroit Jewish community was as unaware of the Beef Trust's manipulation in 1910 as it had been in 1903, when similar fury over Kosher-beef prices broke out, but devolved into bitter factions over rabbinical authority. Impelled by prominent Socialist advisors, the disgruntled women invoked the strategies of New York's successful 1902 Kosher-meat riot, organizing boycotts and public disturbances and raising funds to open co-operative meat markets selling at fixed prices. Although Detroit's Jewish women won the battle, they could not win the war. It would rage until the Beef Trust was dismantled by President Theodore Roosevelt and the US Supreme Court in 1912.

Systematizing Detroit's Kosher-Meat Supply

Although Detroit's Jewry dates back to the 1760s, a community-wide, formal system for certifying and distributing Kosher meat locally does not seem to have

Catherine Cangany, PhD, is executive director of JHSM. She received her doctorate in early American history from the University of Michigan. She is the author of *Frontier Seaport: Detroit's Transformation into an Atlantic Entrepot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Prior to joining JHSM, she was a tenured associate professor of history at the University of Notre Dame.

¹"Ghetto is Torn by Fierce War over Meat Prices," *Detroit Evening Times*, May 9, 1910, 3; *The American Jewish Year Book*, ed. Herbert Friedenwald, vol. 12, 1910-1911 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society for America, 1910), 279.



been developed until large numbers of Jews from Eastern Europe began to arrive in the late nineteenth century. The Kosher system's architect was Judah Leib Levin, joint rabbi of Shaarey Zedek, B'nai Israel, and Beth Jacob. Born near Vilna in 1862, Levin completed his rabbinical and postgraduate studies at the Volozhin Yeshiva in what is now Belarus.

For fifteen years following his studies, he moved back and forth between rabbinical posts in Russia and the United States, before settling permanently in Detroit in 1897. He was "[r]eputedly among the most Orthodox of rabbis in America, [but at] the same time quite worldly." Arriving alongside so many other Jews from the Russian Empire, Levin was instrumental in developing community infrastructure to support Jewish life, including religious schools, social services, cemeteries, and suppliers of Kosher meat.²



Figure 1: Born near Vilna in 1862, Rabbi Judah Leib Levin arrived in Detroit in 1897 and served as the joint rabbi of Shaarey Zedek, B'nai Israel, and Beth Jacob. He also was instrumental in developing Detroit's Jewish infrastructure, including religious schools, social services, and cemeteries. Levin was the architect of Detroit's system for certifying and distributing Kosher meat. He survived a rabbinical power struggle during a Kosher-meat war in 1903 over rising prices. He continued to be a powerful and influential figure in Detroit, surviving the city's next fight over Kosher-meat prices in 1910, and later presiding over at least six bimot. (Courtesy of the family of Judith Levin Cantor, z"l.)

²The first rabbi for Temple Beth El (Detroit's first congregation), Samuel Marcus, came to Detroit from New York in 1850 to serve as rabbi, *shochet* (ritual slaughterer), and *mohel* (circumciser). His successor, Liebman Adler, arrived in 1854 and also served as *shochet* for the congregation. See Irving I. Katz, *The Beth El Story: With a History of the Jews of Michigan before 1850* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1955), 66, 70. Rabbi Judah Leyb Levin Papers 1862-1926 finding aid, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Research Center), Ann Arbor, <https://findingaids.lib.umich.edu/catalog/umich-scl-levin>; George B. Catlin, ed., *Local History of Detroit and Wayne County* (Dayton: National Historical Association, 1928), 339-40; Sidney Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance: Voices of Jewish Identity in Detroit, 1914-1967* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 29-30.



To facilitate building infrastructure, Levin helped create an organizing body designed to promote unity: the United Orthodox Hebrew Congregations of Detroit. The coalition was meant to include all of Detroit's half-dozen Orthodox synagogues, although Congregation Beth David would dispute its own inclusion. In 1903 Levin was appointed the coalition's chief rabbi and spokesperson. In this capacity he was responsible, among other tasks, for ensuring sufficient and proficient *schlachters* or *shochetim* (ritual slaughterers) and Kosher butchers to supply the community. The process was rooted in Levin's singular authority to vet and endorse individuals, connect them with approved vendors, and oversee the system. However intimidating the process might seem, William Saulson, president of the coalition in 1903, assured its accessibility:

All that is required is that the [Kosher] butcher desirous to embark in business, go before the rabbi [Judah Levin], and, if the butcher can satisfy the rabbi as to his good character, the rabbi will recommend him, and the committee [of other coalition members] will see that the butcher is supplied with competent [schlachters].

Saulson noted that the committee "never refused" Levin's endorsements and the "schlachters must kill for those whom the committee designates."³

The year the coalition was founded, twelve shochetim provided the Kosher-meat supply to Detroit's Orthodox community. One was Herman Marx, who worked as a butcher as early as 1880, with a storefront at his house at 256 Hastings Street. By 1895 he was employed at Union Market, one of the city's principal meat marketplaces, likely selling *treylfe* (non-Kosher) cuts. By 1906 he also worked as a shochet, his abattoir in a residential area. After the slaughterhouse burned and was rebuilt that year, neighbors petitioned the health board and city council to have it shut down. Charlotte Werner, whose property was separated from it by a narrow alley, complained, "It smells awfully. . . . It brings the flies, and is terrible in the summer time."⁴

Despite the malodorous work, shochetim like Marx trained extensively and in accordance with *Halakhic* law, using razor-sharp, twenty-inch knives free of nicks and other imperfections to kill approved animals, including cattle.

³ "Deny There is Any Trust," *Detroit Free Press*, October 23, 1903, 3; "Busting a Trust," *Detroit News-Tribune*, October 25, 1903, 5; "Kosher Meat Agreement," *Detroit Free Press*, October 29, 1903, 5; Robert A. Rockaway, *The Jews of Detroit: From the Beginning, 1762-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 80-81.

⁴ *Detroit City Directory for 1880* (Detroit: J. W. Weeks & Co.), 586; *Directory and Hand-Book of the Meat and Provision Trades* (New York City: National Provisioner Publishing Co., 1895), 76; *Detroit City Directory for 1906* (Detroit: R. L. Polk & Co.), 1491; "Slaughter House Ready," *Detroit Free Press*, July 3, 1906, 12; "Kosher Meat Was Cornered," *Detroit News*, October 22, 1903, 1.



Ritual slaughterers must use a single killing stroke, slicing cleanly through the trachea and esophagus. Positioned head downward, the animal bleeds out, losing consciousness in two or three seconds. During a 1903 citywide crackdown on inhumane slaughtering techniques, Rabbi Judah Leib Levin described and defended the shochetim's technique in the secular press:

Our method is still more humane than that of gentiles. The men who do the killing are scientifically trained for that purpose. Even the knife is sacred and must have the keenest possible edge. The medical fraternity agrees with us that the slow bleeding to death is the most painless [method]. . . . It is against our belief to stun the animal.⁵

If slaughter conforms to *Halakha*, the animal's muscles and organs (particularly the lungs) undergo inspection for injuries and abnormalities. In the early twentieth century, only 65 percent of ritually slaughtered cattle passed inspection. Given the difficulty of removing blood vessels and nerves in the hindquarters, generally only the forequarters were used for Kosher purposes, reducing the certifiable meat to about a third of each carcass. Following certification, a seal bearing the signature of the shochet and the date of the slaughter was affixed to the meat. Then it was prepared for sale to one of Detroit's roughly two dozen Kosher butchers.⁶

Butchers would visit the slaughterhouses in the afternoons to select and transport their purchases, chop them into various cuts, remove the bones, sinews, forbidden fats, and most of the blood, and then sell the meat the following morning. Working around Shabbat, Saturday nights, Tuesdays, and Fridays were the Detroit Jewish community's biggest meat-shopping days. The Kosher butchers did much of the food-prep work that could not easily be done by the consumer at home. The butchers' work reduced a carcass's Kosher meat by another 15 percent. Even after perfect ritual slaughtering of a healthy cow or steer, nearly 80 percent of the meat is unfit for observant Jews.⁷

Today, Kosher meat is sold fully processed. In the early twentieth century, however, the final stage of the protocol (*kashering*, fully draining the blood by soaking and salting the meat) happened at home after sale. That labor and expertise belonged to women. They had only 72 hours from slaughter to complete

⁵ Scott D. Seligman, *The Great Kosher Meat War of 1902: Immigrant Housewives and the Riots that Shook New York City* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2020), 30-31; "Kosher Meat Was Cornered," *Detroit Times*, October 22, 1903, 1; "Law Forbids Kosher Meat," *Detroit Times*, October 14, 1903, 3.

⁶ Seligman, *Great Kosher Meat War of 1902*, 31-32. Detroit had just five Kosher butchers in 1882: "Priestly Butchers," *Detroit Evening News*, May 1, 1882, 1. The city was home to "about 700 meat retailers," Kosher and non in 1907: "At Its Cheapest," *Detroit News-Tribune*, November 1, 1903, 1; *Detroit City Directory for the Year 1910* (Detroit: R. L. Polk & Co.), 3141-45.

⁷ Seligman, *Great Kosher Meat War of 1902*, 31.



the kashering, after which time the blood becomes too congealed to extract—a rule that would reduce drastically the Jewish community's access to the national cattle supply.⁸

Detroit's 1903 Kosher-Meat Trust Bust

However well organized and managed Detroit's formal Kosher-meat system was in the years after Rabbi Judah Leib Levin's 1897 arrival, by October 1903 the community had lost confidence in it. That year Kosher-beef prices jumped half as high as they would in 1910, hitting 10 to 14 cents per pound. Locals blamed Levin for setting up what they claimed was a "combine" or "trust" among the Kosher butchers, who were "pledging themselves to maintain the prices and posting money to bind the agreement." Disgruntled members of Congregation Beth David and the Peddlers' Protective Union confronted Levin, asking him to force a price reduction. When he declined (with the full backing of the shochetim and the butchers), the faction "began to plot the downfall of the butchers"—and Levin too.⁹

The "antitrust" contingent of peddlers and Beth David members persuaded Kosher butchers Henry Applebaum and Max Bolchover, whose shop was at 353 Hastings Street, to cap their prices at 8 to 12 cents per pound. Applebaum probably needed little convincing, having returned recently to Detroit following a two-year absence. When he had attempted to reopen his Kosher butchery, the coalition committee had refused to supply him with a shochet, effectively forcing him out of business. Now, with Applebaum and Bolchover in place as the synagogue's official butchers, Beth David leaders hired their own shochet, one Mr. Reuben from Louisville, Kentucky, to supply the new butchers. Most boldly, Beth David insisted its newly hired rabbi, Jacob H. Scheinman, possessed the authority to supervise Kosher meat, just as Rabbi Judah Leib Levin did.¹⁰

Beth David's actions sent shock waves through the community. The butchers, shochetim, and Rabbi Levin condemned the events, threatening a Kosher-meat strike unless Levin's authority was upheld. In response, Applebaum and Bolchover's attorney threatened to hold Levin personally responsible for any damage to the

⁸ Seligman, *Great Kosher Meat War of 1902*, 36.

⁹ "Ghetto in Distress," *Detroit Free Press*, October 22, 1903, 1; "Kosher Meat Corner a Myth, Says Levin," *Detroit News*, October 23, 1910, 3; *Official Journal: Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America* (Syracuse: International Office Monthly, November 1903), 11.

¹⁰ "Ghetto in Distress" con't, *Detroit Free Press*, October 22, 1903, 5; "Bust Trust in Kosher Meat" *Detroit News*, October 22, 1903, 9; "Kosher Troubles Ended," *Detroit News*, October 29, 1903, 5; "Still Fighting," *Detroit News-Tribune*, November 15, 1903, 5; Irwin J. Cohen, *Echoes of Detroit's Jewish Communities: A History* (Laingsburg, MI: City Vision Publishing, 2003), 41.



shop or its business. Rallying to Levin's aid, the shochetim temporarily dropped their prices, to encourage customers away from Applebaum and Bolchover's cut-rate meat shop. To settle the religious power struggle, Levin sent for an out-of-state senior rabbi to mediate.¹¹

As the factions seethed, Orthodox community representatives came out swinging in the secular press. William Saulson, president of the United Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, condemned the combine and trust claims, reaffirmed Rabbi Levin's exclusive authority to oversee Detroit's Kosher-meat system, and skewered Applebaum and Bolchover for failing to seek Levin and the coalition committee's approval to sell Kosher meat. (Applebaum and Bolchover, for their part, moved up a block to 469 Hastings Street.)¹²

Julius H. Levinson, president of Beth David, took aim at Detroit's senior rabbi: "The whole trouble is Rabbi Levin wants to be the only rabbi in Detroit. He claims that everything in the orthodox [shuls] should belong to him, and wants to run [them all]. But [he] can't do that. This is a big city and can support several rabbis." Levinson added that shochet Reuben was an "expert 'schlacher,' and that Rabbi Scheinman [sic] had passed him," determining he was fit for service.¹³

Levin's second opinion, chief rabbi Gerson Ravinson from Cleveland, arrived on Saturday, October 25, 1903, the seriousness of the situation perhaps accounting for his travel during Shabbat. A tenth-generation rabbi and a leading Talmudic authority, Ravinson addressed the community gathered at Congregation Beth Jacob that night. In no uncertain terms, the mediator "favored Levin and the committee." Absent proper religious sanction, Ravinson concluded, "the meat which is killed by [Mr.] Reuben, the independent 'schlacher' [sic] is not 'kosher' and should not be eaten." Levinson railed, "I will have Rabbi Rav[i]nson . . . arrested for coming to this town to throw slurs upon the life of . . . Reuben from Louisville, who has come here to bust the trust. . . . This gentleman [Reuben] . . . has diplomas from all over Europe and is also authorized to kill for Detroit markets."¹⁴

¹¹ "Ghetto in Distress" con't, *Detroit Free Press*, October 22, 1903, 5; "Bust Trust in Kosher Meat," *Detroit News*, October 22, 1903, 9; "Kosher Troubles Ended," *Detroit News*, October 29, 1903, 5; "Still Fighting," *Detroit News-Tribune*, November 15, 1903, 5; Cohen, *Echoes of Detroit's Jewish Communities*, 41.

¹² "Deny There is Any Trust," *Detroit Free Press*, October 23, 1903, 3.

¹³ "Split Wider than Ever," *Detroit Free Press*, October 25, 1903, 12; "Chicago Rabbi to Be Here Today," *Detroit Free Press*, October 24, 1903, 5.

¹⁴ "Split Wider than Ever," *Detroit Free Press*, October 25, 1903, 12; "Busting a Trust," *Detroit News-Tribune*, October 25, 1903, 5; Jim Dubelko, "Fir Street Cemetery," *Cleveland Historical*, accessed May 21, 2023, <https://clevelandhistorical.org/items/show/800>.



Across the street from Beth Jacob stood Applebaum and Bolchover's Kosher-meat shop, ready to open after Shabbat. As the sun set, "[e]xcited crowds came and went and groups of peddlers lined the curbs of the vicinity of the meat market, gesticulating and flinging anathemas at the congregation in session across the street. The sales of the new shop were, however, never allowed to rest." As Applebaum told a reporter, he sold more meat after Ravinson's condemnation. Soon the Peddlers' Protective Union bound its members to trade there.¹⁵

Rabbi Ravinson's judgment did not pacify the antitrust faction. To encourage the two sides to reach an agreement, additional out-of-state rabbis were summoned. Three rabbis from Ohio, including Cincinnati's chief rabbi, Avraham Yaakov Gershon Lesser, hopped trains to Detroit. The panel ruled that Judah Leib Levin was "the only authorized rabbi of the united orthodox churches of the city, including Beth David," and that Levin's position was "defined to the exclusion of Rabbi Scheinman." Scheinman was free to remain "at Beth David as a lecturer, but he must not attempt to officiate as a rabbi." Congregation Beth David members decried the agreement. President Julius Levinson refused to sign it. Congregants reaffirmed their commitment to Scheinman, voting unanimously to award him an additional \$50 in salary per year and adopting "resolutions" specifying that he had "full power in this city as a rabbi."¹⁶

Levinson spun the agreement's failure into Beth David's victory. "We have broken the trust," he crowed. "With but one exception, the prices at all of the butcher shops [now] are uniform, and this particular one will join the rest in a few days." The *Detroit Free Press* noted that Scheinman had approved a new shochet, Rabbi Max Gershuny of Ohio, who would commence work for Beth David immediately. His appointment threatened to tear the congregation assunder. When Levinson allowed a Levin sympathizer to speak against Gershuny's appointment, Vice President Aaron Ackerman called Levinson a "pig and a humbug" for allowing the dissent. In response a "burly blacksmith named [Abe] Atlavaick seized Ackerman by the middle and threw him into a seat, where he stayed, silenced, for the rest of the evening."¹⁷

¹⁵ "Busting a Trust," *Detroit News-Tribune*, October 25, 1903, 5; "Settlement is in Sight," *Detroit Free Press*, October 26, 1903, 5; "It is Agreed that the Kosher Meat Fight," *Detroit News*, October 26, 1903, 3.

¹⁶ "Settled the Trouble over Kosher Meatt," *Detroit News*, October 20, 1903, 3; "The Kosher Meat Question," *Detroit Free Press*, October 31, 1903, 3; "Kosher Meat Agreement," *Detroit Free Press*, October 29, 1903, 5; "Kosher' Split Not Yet Ended," *Detroit Free Press*, November 2, 1903, 5; "Rabbi Avraham Yaakov Gershon Lesser," *Kevarim of Tzadikim in North America*, accessed May 21, 2023, <https://kevarim.com/rabbi-avraham-yaakov-gershon-lesser/>.

¹⁷ "Kosher' Split Not Yet Ended," *Detroit Free Press*, November 2, 1903, 5; "Kosher Meat Trust 'Busted,'" *Detroit News*, November 13, 1903, 6; "Scheinman is Now a Full Rabbi," *Detroit Free Press*, November 14, 1903, 5; "Meat is Cheaper," *Detroit Evening News*, November 14, 1903, 12; "Kosher Meat Row Resumed," *Detroit Times*, November 16, 1903, 3; "Kosher-meat Row," *Detroit Evening News*, November 16, 1903, 10.



After Gershuny "disappeared" from Detroit, Scheinman expanded his reach, hiring three additional shochetim (from New York, Chicago, and Canada), due to arrive November 23. Kosher butcher Julius Jacobson at 462 Hastings Street opined, "[T]hat won't settle the trouble by any means. . . . Each side will have two or three 'schlachters' and, if there is any 'buying up' to be done, I guess it will be Rabbi Levin's side that will suffer." A wiseacre at the *Detroit News* concluded, "It was inevitable that a row between the kosher butchers should be a war to the knife."¹⁸

It is unclear how the war to the knife ended. Secular press coverage cut off abruptly in mid-November 1903. According to the 1904 city directory, Henry Applebaum remained in business—without Max Bolchover, perhaps a sign that the cut-rate meat shop had met its demise. Although Rabbi Jacob Scheinman succeeded in wresting away some of Rabbi Judah Leib Levin's territory and authority, the victory was short lived. The following year Scheinman left Beth David, replaced by Rabbi Ezekiel Aishiskin. Levin continued to be a towering and trusted figure in Detroit, surviving the city's next Kosher-meat war in 1910. This second period of community unrest would take a very different form: Kosher-meat boycotts and riots instead of a rabbinical power struggle. Unbeknownst to those who lived through both, the underlying cause—which lay far outside the community—remained the same: the machinations of a Chicago-based meat monopoly that manipulated beef prices coast to coast.¹⁹

The Short-Sighted Fight for Fair Prices

Just as in 1903, when Hastings Street erupted in anger on Sunday, May 8, 1910, at issue was the price of Kosher beef. Like seven years earlier, the customary upcharge for the expertise of the slaughterer and the quality of the meat and its certification was not the concern. The cheapest cuts (flank and chuck) typically cost 4 to 8 cents per pound non-Kosher, and 6 to 8 cents per pound Kosher.

¹⁸ "Kosher' War to Break Out Again," *Detroit Free Press*, November 23, 1903, 5; "The Congregation of Beth David Have," *Detroit Free Press*, November 23, 1903, 3; "A New Schlachter Has Been," *Detroit Free Press*, November 26, 1903, 5; No title, *Detroit News*, November 5, 1903, 2. Congregation Beth David would also be at the forefront of a 1919 boycott of poultry shochetim for raising their fees from 3 to as high as 15 cents per chicken: "War Starts in Ghetto When Chicken Slayers Boost Charges from 3 to 15 Cents," *Detroit Times*, September 20, 1919, 3.

¹⁹ Detroit's Yiddish-language newspapers have not survived. The English-language *Detroit Jewish Chronicle* did not begin publishing until 1916, <https://digital.bentley.umich.edu/djnews>. *Detroit City Directory for 1904* (Detroit: R. L. Polk & Co.), 3260-61; "Congregation B'nai David," *Jewish Historical Society of Michigan*, <https://www.jhsmichigan.org/gallery/2017/06/congregation-b%E2%80%99nai-david.html>; Sidney Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 91; "Biographical Sketches of Rabbis and Cantors Officiating in the United States (Additions)," in *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 6, 1904-1905 (American Jewish Committee), 223.



Suddenly, those same Kosher cuts cost 14 to 18 cents per pound—almost 2½ times the norm. Orthodox Jews living on the margins found it impossible to keep pace with the inflation. Attorney Sidney Alexander made an impassioned statement to the press on their behalf: “With their small income and hand-to-mouth existence, they cannot afford to pay the market prices of stores located in the best districts of the city.” For most of them, buying non-Kosher meat was “unthinkable.”²⁰

Those who noticed this sudden price increase first and who were the most upset about it were the Jewish women of Hastings Street. When a befuddled newspaper reporter asked a Jewish man why the women—who had no voting rights in 1910 and were not recognized by American society as legitimate political actors—were agitating and not the men, the interviewee responded, “Because that’s their business. . . . They buy the meat. . . . Do you think I would go into a butcher shop? I should say not. Maybe the butcher would sell me a lung for a flank steak, how do I know?”²¹

Because they did the shopping and cooking, the women had the food knowledge. They knew what to buy and where, how to prepare it, and how much it should cost. As recent immigrants, they were also new enough to American gender and social conventions to feel perfectly free to express their outrage publicly.

Because of their actions and the biases of the recorders, the names of the women involved in 1910 were not recorded—with one exception: “Mrs. Harry Possner.” Rebecka Possner (Becka, as she was called in the 1910 census) was just twenty years old in 1910. She could not read or write, but was fluent in at least two languages and probably more. Born in Russia, she had immigrated to the United States in 1905, settling first in Philadelphia. Incredibly, there she had “successfully led 300 girls from the American Cigar Co[mpany]’s factory” in a walkout. According to the *Detroit News*, she “thought the [factory’s] superintendent imposed on the [workers], [and] in three days she had ‘th boss’ beaten to a standstill. He was fired and the girls returned to work.” “‘She’s a wonder,’ whispered the husband by her side [in 1910]. ‘I marr[jied] her three years ago in Philadelphia. She is a wonder. She make[s] everybody toe . . . the mark.’” Harry Possner was 23 and working as a tinsmith at the Detroit Stove Works.²²

²⁰ “Ghetto is Torn by Fierce War over Meat Prices,” *Detroit Evening Times*, May 9, 1910, 3; “Kosher’ Strike Seems Settled,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 14, 1910, 2; “At Its Cheapest,” *Detroit News-Tribune*, November 1, 1903, 9; Seligman, *Great Kosher Meat War of 1902*, xxxi.

²¹ “Ghetto is Torn by Fierce War over Meat Prices,” *Detroit Evening Times*, May 9, 1910, 3; 1910 US Census, Wayne County, Michigan, population schedule, Detroit, ward 3, p. 128 (stamped), enumeration district 319, sheet 6a, dwelling 512 (St. Antoine Street), family 113, Harry Possner, NARA microfilm publication T624, roll 681, FHL microfilm 1374694, accessed May 21, 2023, <https://www.ancestry.com>.

²² “Young Woman in Complete Charge of Meat Strike,” *Detroit News*, May 12, 1910, 1-2; “Suit to Dissolve the Tobacco Trust,” *Wilkes-Barre Times*, July 10, 1907, 1.



Figure 2: An immigrant woman and child in Detroit, circa 1909. The Yiddish words on the building behind them read, “Kosher meat.” With their food knowledge, the Jewish women of Hastings Street were the first to notice unacceptable price increases for Kosher beef in Detroit in the early twentieth century. (Courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, <https://digital.library.wayne.edu/item/wane:vmc75861>.)

When a *Detroit News* reporter asked Rebecka Possner to confirm her role in the unrest, she replied, “Yes, I am the leader of the strikers and I am going to keep the fight up until we can get living prices.” Her characterization of the unrest was more suited to Philadelphia. What transpired in Detroit patently was not a strike. No laborers walked off the job to protest their working conditions. Rather, Possner helped institute a boycott, which soon turned into a riot. The reporter was dazzled by Possner, asking for her picture to print. She retorted that she was “too busy,” handed her house key to her husband, and sent him to retrieve her photograph.²³

Rebecka Possner and other angry women soon formed a committee, which called for a community-wide meeting set for Sunday, May 1, a week before the riot. The high-profile headliner was New Yorker Baruch Charney Vladeck. Vladeck was a recent Russian émigré, a labor leader, and, at age 24, a representative of the Jewish Agitation Bureau, a clearinghouse for Yiddish-language branches of the Socialist party. In time, it would become the Jewish Socialist Federation with a

²³ “Young Woman in Complete Charge of Meat Strike,” *Detroit News*, May 12, 1910, 1-2.



presence in 30 states. In 1910 it was known for furnishing prominent, Yiddish-speaking Socialists to help locals organize around issues of labor and economy.²⁴



Figure 3: At only twenty years of age, Rebecka Possner was the face of Detroit's Kosher-meat boycott, and subsequent riot, in 1910. (Mrs. Harry Possner photo, "She Leads a Meat Strike," Detroit News, May 12, 1910, 1. Courtesy of Archives of Michigan.)

The New York connection is logical. In 1910 New York City had the largest concentration of Jews in the United States. Many of Detroit's Jewish residents came to America through New York, whether living there or simply passing through. Many had friends and family there. Each week, Detroit received copies of New York's Yiddish-language newspapers, including the *Forverts*, which Vladeck would go on to edit and manage beginning in 1916.²⁵

Vladeck's speech to Detroit's Jewish community has not survived. It seems certain that he would have linked Detroit events with those of other Jewish communities across the United States. Everyone was experiencing rapid inflation on Kosher meat. In Indianapolis that January, Jewish families boycotted four Kosher butcher shops after the meat jumped to 14 cents per pound. Two months

²⁴ "A Big Mass Meeting of Detroit Hebrews Was Held Sunday Night," *Detroit Evening Times*, May 2, 1910, 3; "Guide to the Baruch Charney Vladeck Papers and Photographs," Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive, New York University, http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/tamwag/tam_037/bioghist.html; Tony Michels, "Socialism with a Jewish Face: The Origins of the Yiddish-Speaking Communist Movement in the United States, 1907-1923," in *Yiddish and the Left: Papers of the Third Mendel Friedman International Conference on Yiddish*, eds. Gennady Estrakh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford, UK: Legenda, University Humanities Research Centre, 2001), 24-55.

²⁵ "Guide to the Baruch Charney Vladeck Papers and Photographs," Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive, New York University, http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/tamwag/tam_037/bioghist.html.



later, a woman in Baltimore was arrested for seizing a package of Kosher meat from a local delivery boy and throwing it in the street. In St. Louis in late March, 42 of 46 Kosher-meat shops closed, unable to meet the boycotters' demands to return to 12-cent beef. In New York and New Jersey in April, just before Pesach, 100,000 families banned Kosher meat, after threatening butchers with clubs and hat pins. In the weeks ahead, Cincinnati and Providence, Rhode Island, would also experience boycotts and riots. Because they subscribed to the New York newspapers, Jewish Detroiters would have seen this pattern themselves. But having their own predicament linked with those of so many other communities, manifested in the presence of Vladeck himself, would have been powerful and persuasive, legitimizing their anger and fomenting their desire to strike back.²⁶

New York's 1902 Kosher-Meat War

Striking back was the real purpose of Baruch Charney Vladeck's presence in Detroit on May 1, 1910. Undoubtedly he would have talked about what had happened eight years earlier: New York's 1902 Kosher-meat war. This was the first, largest, and most violent of the Kosher-meat boycotts and riots that rocked American Jewish communities in the early twentieth century—a response to Kosher meat's coordinated jump from 12 cents to 18 cents per pound. Although it would prove a more modest rate hike than in Detroit eight years later, Detroit's Kosher prices would match New York's in 1910. Just like Detroit's later troubles, New York's 1902 meat war was a direct result of the actions of the Gilded Age "robber barons," the wealthy American businessmen who dominated various sectors of the American economy, including railroads, oil, and steel. Despite the illegality of monopolies and trusts, the US Congress generally did not regulate them. This allowed the robber barons to manipulate prices across their industries. Because these industries were linked, it was virtually impossible for competitors to break into the markets or for consumers to find cheaper alternatives.²⁷

²⁶ "Jews to Cheapen Meat," *Indianapolis Star*, January 16, 1910, 50; "Boycott on Kosher Meat," *Baltimore Sun*, March 25, 1910, 5; "Kosher Meat Shops Stormed: St. Louis Eager to Get the Meat," *Baltimore Sun*, March 29, 1910, 13; "Meat Shops Closed by Women Raiders," *New York Times*, April 10, 1910, 1; "Kosher Butchers Greatly Worried by Women's War," *Newark Star-Eagle*, April 12, 1910, 1; "Five Are Arrested in Kosher Meat Strike," *Cincinnati Post*, May 16, 1910, 7; Kimberly Susan Nusco, "The South Providence Kosher Meat Boycott of 1910: A Study of Jewish Women's Consumer Activism" (master's thesis, University of Rhode Island, 2003), <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/theses/1771/>.

²⁷ Labor lawyer Meyer London, a New York representative of Workmen's Circle, was expected to arrive in Detroit on Thursday, May 19, 1910. The secular press noted that "London took part in the kosher meat strike in New York." It is unclear if the reference concerns the 1902 or 1910 boycott. See "Independent Shop Puts Kosher Men Out of Business," *Detroit News-Tribune*, May 15, 1910, 14. For local speculation about the role of trusts in beef prices in Detroit's non-Kosher meat market, see "At Its Cheapest," *Detroit News-Tribune*, November 1, 1903, 1, 9.



In 1902 a coterie of five robber barons created a conglomerate of five of the nation's largest meat-packing firms, called the National Packing Company. Informally known as the "Beef Trust," it operated out of Chicago. With the 1875 invention of refrigerated railcars, now it was possible to slaughter in one state and sell in another. In 1902 the Beef Trust had a monopoly on many American markets, including New York. As for many eastern cities, two-thirds of New York's beef came from cattle raised in the American southwest and far west, but sold and slaughtered in Chicago. Chicago's Union Stockyards "processed more meat than any other place on earth."²⁸

As Scott Seligman has shown, "Behind closed doors, [Beef Trust members] cooperated to depress the prices they paid for cattle, pressure the railroads for kickbacks in shipping fees, [and] manipulate the nation's supply of beef and other commodities." That meant that beef butchered in Chicago could be sold more cheaply in Manhattan than locally slaughtered cattle. The Chicago meat was cheaper, but not fresher. "Western-dressed meat" might sit in a Chicago slaughterhouse cooler for three or four days before transport. It took two or three more days to reach the East Coast, where it might age in a New Jersey storage locker for a week or more before being taken across the Hudson River for final sale. Sometimes, the meat was treated with boric acid, a preservative, to prolong its shelf-life.²⁹

The alternative to western-dressed beef was "city-dressed beef," the other third of New York's meat market. It was slaughtered locally, but (because of the Beef Trust's price manipulation) cost 2 to 4 cents a pound more. Fine hotels demanded this fresher variety. Because of dietary law's 72-hour rule, so too did those who kept Kosher. At best, observant Jews in New York had access to one-third of the meat market. Chicago meat was off the table.³⁰

Anxious to increase its profits, in 1902 the Beef Trust raised its wholesale rates by 50 percent, with beef-carass prices climbing from 7 to 10½ cents per pound. The Kosher butchers passed on the rate hike to the consumers. The consumers blamed the butchers. The butchers blamed the Beef Trust. The Beef Trust blamed a cattle shortage, but there was plenty of cattle: the Beef Trust simply controlled cattle prices too. President Theodore Roosevelt, known as the "trust buster," went after the National Packing Company in 1902, directing the filing of simultaneous lawsuits against each of the conglomerate's individual firms. The court battle unfolded slowly, and prices remained extremely high.³¹

²⁸ Seligman, *Great Kosher Meat War of 1902*, 15-36, quote: 21.

²⁹ Seligman, *Great Kosher Meat War of 1902*, x, 25-26.

³⁰ Seligman, *Great Kosher Meatt War of 1902*, 25-36

³¹ Seligman, *Great Kosher Meat War of 1902*, 51-62, 179-84, 221-38.



In response to the inflation, New York consumers switched protein sources, turning to "poultry, veal, mutton, lamb, [and] eggs." Detroit would try this strategy in 1910. (See Figure 5 on page 24.) But the Beef Trust owned many of the slaughterhouses and refrigerated railcars for those industries too. When it did not, it deliberately stockpiled the food, to dry up the supply. The prices on all protein sources soared. Many non-Kosher butchers who had used the western-dressed beef now turned to city-dressed beef, putting extra pressure on a limited (and already more expensive) supply.³²

In response to the new competition at a higher price point, New York's Jewish women first demanded a return to the usual prices. When that failed, they implemented boycotts of Kosher beef at butcher shops and restaurants. To call attention to the shop-stoppage, street-corner orators railed against the rate hike and the butchers' greed and shamed boycott breakers, drawing crowds and newspaper coverage. The women threatened and physically assaulted customers, butchers, and butchers' wives with fists, clubs, and hat pins. They forced butcher shops to close and smashed the windows of those still doing business. They and their compatriots destroyed or otherwise made inedible any meat they found, ripping it out of purchasers' hands and dousing it in kerosene, overturning delivery wagons, and flinging meat in the mud or stringing it up on telegraph wires. Despite the sensational confrontations, the short-term resolution to the high prices was co-op Kosher-meat markets that were contract-bound to sell beef at approved prices. After three weeks of unrest, the battle was over. The women won.³³

Despite New York's 1902 victory, the national war against the Beef Trust would rage for another ten years, until the antitrust lawsuits were settled and the monopoly was dismantled by the federal government in 1912. In the interim, unrest over beef prices—much of it in Jewish communities across the country—continued. Cleveland experienced Kosher-meat riots in 1906, Baltimore in 1907, and Detroit in both 1903 and 1910.³⁴

1910 Unrest over Kosher Meat

If the 1903 unrest over Kosher meat held any lessons for the community in 1910, they were not obvious to those living through this second chapter in Detroit's Kosher-meat wars. The Beef Trust's power continued to rise, strangely disconnected from local context. Detroit's Orthodox population continued to

³² Seligman, *Great Kosher Meat War of 1902*, 58.

³³ Seligman, *Great Kosher Meat War of 1902*, xxxii, 85-104.

³⁴ Gerald Sorin, *Tradition Transformed: The Jewish Experience in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 79; "Ghetto Sees a Truce in Kosher Butcher's Strike," *Baltimore Sun*, March 31, 1907, 12.



expand, jumping from 3,000 to 12,000 individuals, most of whom had not been present for that earlier unrest. Although Rabbi Judah Leib Levin remained a prominent and influential figure in town in 1910 and beyond, he seems to have been largely absent from this later turmoil, unless he was working privately behind the scenes. Indeed, everyone seemed to have forgotten the 1903 episode—even the secular press.

When the Jewish community gathered on May 1, 1910, to hear Socialist Baruch Charney Vladeck and activist Rebecka Possner urge it to action, the crowd was handed a playbook straight from 1902 New York. A week later, the price demands and meat boycotts had progressed to public disorder. Following a mass meeting on Sunday afternoon, May 8, individuals descended on Hastings Street at about 7:30 pm—a busy shopping time. The *Detroit Free Press* unwittingly captured the similarities between 1902 New York and 1910 Detroit in its coverage:

More than 1,000 irate Jewish housewives, some armed with cans of kerosene, raided the butcher shops of the neighborhood at sundown. . . . They advanced upon the butchers, scattered the precious meats upon the floor, and harassed the proprietors until every shop on Hastings street, between Montcalm and Adelaide streets, was closed tight. . . . Women rushed into [the butcher shop of Joseph Lansky at 388 Hastings Street], dragged the meat from the counter, and some even pushed their ways to the blocks where the clerks were at work [and] ultimately [the employees] were forced to retreat. . . . Kerosene flew in the place, and meat, which last week was advanced to 16 cents a pound, was ruthlessly ruined.³⁵

By this time, the mob had swelled to fill four blocks on Hastings Street. Once Lansky's store was decimated, it turned its efforts to smaller butcher shops, defiling meat and breaking windows. Soon police officers from several stations were on the scene, trying to disperse rioters and force them further up Hastings Street. For more than an hour the scuffling continued, although no arrests were made. Even after "comparative peace had been restored, some of the more bitter men gathered in front of . . . meat stores and resumed their efforts to incite the crowd by making speeches" about freedom and "planning co-operative meat shops."³⁶

³⁵ "Meat Price Makes Riot," *Detroit Free Press*, May 9, 1910, 1; "Ghetto is Torn by Fierce War over Meat Prices," *Detroit Evening Times*, May 9, 1910, 3; "Scene at Kosher Meat Shops during Riots of Women Angered by High Prices," *Detroit News*, May 9, 1910, 2.

³⁶ "Ghetto is Torn by Fierce War over Meat Prices," *Detroit Evening Times*, May 9, 1910, 3; "Meat Price Makes Riot," *Detroit Free Press*, May 9, 1910, 1.



*Figure 4: Invoking the strategies of New York's successful 1902 Kosher-meat war, rioters in Detroit broke windows of butcher shops and ruined meat to protest high prices in May 1910. (Strikers photo, "Scene at Kosher Meat Shops during Riot," *Detroit News*, May 9, 1910, 2. Courtesy of Archives of Michigan.)*

On Monday morning, May 9, the rioting and public demonstrations resumed. Abraham Hendin's butcher shop at 474 Hastings Street—still doing business—was targeted. The purchases of two boycott breakers were given "the kerosene treatment." Hendin's wife made the mistake of laughing out loud at "the ravings of some of the more fanatical women." One of the targets heard her and cried, "Ah! She laughs while our blood is being spilled on the streets." The charged crowd rushed at Dora Hendin, who sought refuge in her husband's shop. Only the "prompt interference of the police prevented [her husband] from punching the head of a . . . young man who tried to 'sic' the fighting women" on his wife. Then the mob descended on Harris Goldberg's restaurant at 393 Hastings Street, where it confronted him for continuing to list Kosher beef on the menu. Under pressure, Goldberg agreed to buy no more after running through his stock.³⁷

³⁷ "Meat Boycott in the Ghetto May End Tonight" con't, *Detroit Times*, May 10, 1910, 9; Dora Hendin's name: 1910 US Census, Wayne County, Michigan, population schedule, Detroit, ward 5, p. 6940, enumeration district 69, sheet 10b, dwelling 474 (Hastings Street), family 176, Abraham Hendin, NARA microfilm publication T624, roll 682, FHL microfilm 1374695, accessed May 24, 2023, <https://www.ancestry.com>; "Ghetto is Torn by Fierce War over Meat Prices," *Detroit Evening Times*, May 9, 1910, 3; Harris Goldberg's name: 1910 US Census, Wayne County, Michigan, population schedule, Detroit, ward 5, p. 7633, enumeration district 69, sheet 17b, dwelling 338, family 265, Harris Goldberg, NARA microfilm publication T624, roll 682, FHL microfilm 1374695, accessed May 24, 2023, <https://www.ancestry.com>.





Figure 5: A shochet pantomimes killing a chicken as children look on. Members of Detroit's Orthodox community switched from red meat to poultry and other protein sources during the Kosher-meat riot of 1910. (Courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, https://digital.library.wayne.edu/item/wane:vmc21715_5.)

Similar targetings continued on Tuesday morning, May 10. A *Detroit Times* journalist reported on a “spectacle” he witnessed: “[T]hree of the [boycotting] women . . . each with a babe held in her left arm, attack[ed] a man whom they accused of purchasing meat.” The man was Abraham Cohen, who ran a shoe-repair shop at 450 Hastings Street. The women descended on his store, carefully transforming their shawls into baby carriers before starting with Cohen what the reporter called a “hot argument, in Yiddish.” Cohen “ordered them out, and they suddenly attacked him, forcing him out of his own shop, to the sidewalk and showering blows on his face and head. He made no attempt to fight back.”³⁸

As simple protests devolved into battery and property damage, Detroit's wealthier German American Jews, who generally lived beyond Hastings Street and were less observant, made sure the secular press knew they were not involved

³⁸ “Meat Boycott in the Ghetto May End Tonight,” *Detroit Times*, May 10, 1910, 1; “State News Notes,” *Midland Republican*, May 13, 1910, 2.



in anything unseemly. “You’ll not find an American Jew mixed up in any of these brawls,” said one man to a *Detroit Free Press* reporter:

Some of the [German] American Jews are boycotting the meat markets, but they are not fighting about it. These Russian Jews come over here, and three months after they arrive, they want to run the country. If they don’t want to pay the prices for meat, they insist that nobody else will be allowed to. These women who are leading these fights live in homes that are filthy, but instead of doing their housework they are here on the streets causing trouble for others.³⁹

In decrying the agitators for failing to conform to gender and social norms, the unnamed interviewee might have had Rebecka Possner in mind. The *Detroit News* reporter interviewing Possner on Thursday, May 12, made a show of inspecting her residence, the lower floor of 512 St. Antoine Street, affirming, “The house was in a disorderly condition.”⁴⁰

The unnamed interviewee’s more damning charge against the agitators was not poor housekeeping, but socialism. Another unnamed source agreed that “wealthy Jews” (a euphemism for German American Jews who participated somewhat in the boycotts, but were absent from the riots) “attribute the disturbance to the workings of Jewish Socialists, who came to this country recently from Russia.” Whatever their personal affiliations, most boycotters were quick to distance themselves from an economic system at total odds with the United States’ entrenchment in capitalism. Although capitalist greed was at the root of the beef crisis, an association with socialism brought hazards galore, especially to recent and vulnerable immigrants. Rebecka Possner undoubtedly was aware of that danger. She insisted to a journalist, “Socialists? I do not know what they are. We are not socialists. We are simply trying to get decent prices, so that we can live. I am not an agitator, but I am going to help win this strike.”⁴¹

Within the neighborhood, the orators were unafraid to identify themselves as Socialists, insisting that “the people didn’t know how to get their rights and [we were] there [o] help them.” Although the secular press was disdainful of the “Socialist” public speakers, dismissing one H. Malino as “shifty-eyed” and “in the thick of every argument and mix-up,” the orators were the only ones speaking publicly about the role of trusts in keeping prices high.⁴²

³⁹ “Meat Price Makes Riot,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 9, 1910, 1.

⁴⁰ “Young Woman in Complete Charge of Meat Strike” con’t, *Detroit News*, May 12, 1910, 2.

⁴¹ “Young Woman in Complete Charge of Meat Strike” con’t, *Detroit News*, May 12, 1910, 2.

⁴² “Meat Boycott in the Ghetto May End Tonight” con’t, *Detroit Times*, May 10, 1910, 9.



In reality, Socialist organizations made community demonstration possible. The Jewish Agitation Bureau privately picked up all the assembly and printing costs incurred for the several mass meetings held in the community to try to make peace. On Tuesday, May 10, flyers paid for by the bureau were distributed to announce a gathering that night. In the interest of fairness, the format was designed to allow each side to have its say. The eight hundred attendees were hopeful that compromise might be at hand, particularly when Rabbi Judah Leib Levin was rumored to chair the meeting. When he did not appear, the gathering sank to “a near riot.”⁴³

According to an eyewitness, at the meeting were ten Kosher butchers, “hissed and hooted down” each time they tried to talk, “while avowed Socialist exhorters harangued the crowd.” At meeting’s end, the angry spectators “surged over chairs, into the aisles, and right up to the speakers’ stand, pressing in on those who attempted to address them, while the whole crowd hissed and groaned and shouted.” The women, “shouting at the top of their voices, were restrained with difficulty by the police.” The officers saved the butchers from harm—but not for long.⁴⁴

In the wee hours of Wednesday morning, May 11, a band of unidentified men attacked a Kosher-meat wagon owned by butcher Benjamin Krakowsky. Krakowsky was known for being first in his line of work to offer home delivery. According to the local press, he “had been warned not to deliver any meat to the ghetto district. [His driver, Morris Finkelstein,] was attempting it in the early hours of the morning and was caught.” The assailants stopped the wagon, threw a bag over Finkelstein’s head, and began tossing \$24 worth of beef into the street, where it was trampled or strung up on telegraph wires. When the dust cleared, everybody pointed the finger at someone else: The Kosher butchers blamed the rioters, even though most were women and the assailants were clearly men. Krakowsky’s son blamed the other Kosher butchers, who he felt were envious of his father’s wealthier clientele, which lived outside of Hastings Street and was not participating in the unrest. In retaliation, Krakowsky’s son and a couple of friends attacked Max Ball (the driver for Kosher butcher Jacob Goos), who was on his way to a slaughterhouse to pick up some calves. Now the butchers were turning on themselves.⁴⁵

⁴³ “They Tried to Explain,” *Grand Rapids Press*, May 11, 1910, 5; “Police Save Meat Dealers,” *Saginaw News*, May 11, 1910, 3; “Kosher Butchers to Seek Cops’ Aid” con’t, *Detroit Times*, May 11, 1910, 2.

⁴⁴ “Kosher Butchers to Seek Cops’ Aid” con’t, *Detroit Times*, May 11, 1910, 2; “Police Save Meat Dealers,” *Saginaw News*, May 11, 1910, 3.

⁴⁵ “Where We Came From” (Krakowsky/Krause family history, n.d.), 1 (received from Judy Wax Goldwasser, a great-granddaughter of Benjamin Krakowsky); “Kosher Butcher Seeks Warrant for Rioters,” *Detroit News*, May 12, 1910, 2; “Kosher Butchers to Seek Cops’ Aid” con’t, *Detroit Times*, May 11, 1910, 2; “Butcher Asks Warrant,” *Detroit Times*, May 12, 1910, 10.



Later that day, Benjamin Krakowsky found himself in police court, making a formal complaint about his ruined Kosher meat. The court’s justice was Edward J. Jeffries, a left-leaning official known for his clemency and fairness, especially to the city’s immigrant poor. In a twist of fate, in 1944 Jeffries’ son, Detroit Mayor Edward J. Jeffries, Jr., would propose tearing down the Hastings Street neighborhood, after it had become a predominantly Black space. Five years after his proposal, in 1949, the demolition began, displacing 100,000 Black Detroiters. Jeffries Freeway (I-96) was named in the mayor’s honor.⁴⁶

Back in 1910, the elder Jeffries talked with butcher Benjamin Krakowsky. He was curious about the soiled meat. “Why don’t you wash it off?” the judge asked. “It’s no good anymore,” Krakowsky replied. “It has come into contact with mud and it can’t be used.” It is easy to imagine many justices mocking the complaint out of court. But Jeffries carefully considered on what grounds he could issue a warrant for the perpetrators’ arrest. He dismissed the idea of larceny, because “the meat was left where it was thrown.” After consulting with a prosecuting attorney, he settled on malicious injury to property.⁴⁷

Unfortunately for Krakowsky, boycotters stormed the courtroom, assuring Jeffries that the uprising would be settled within two days, by which time they expected the boycott to have done the trick. If a warrant were issued now, they warned, it “would only serve to stir up all the bitterness and ill-feeling again.” Justice Jeffries decided to hold the matter in abeyance until Friday, to see how events played out.⁴⁸

Outside the court, Rebecka Possner traveled “house to house in the district and made a systematic campaign to continue the present embarrassment between the strikers and the butchers. Several women accompanied her on her tour.” Possner brushed off the secular press’s painting of her as a “Hebraic ‘Joan of Arc.’” “When a Jew takes it into his mind to do something,” she told a reporter, “he does it. When he goes on a strike[,] he means no foolishness and intends to win.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “Kosher Butcher Seeks Warrant for Rioters,” *Detroit News*, May 12, 1910, 2; Michael Jackman, “The Law is a Crazy Business: The Story of Detroit’s ‘Greatest Fighting Judge,’” *Detroit Metro Times*, October 12, 2015, <https://www.metrotimes.com/arts/the-law-is-a-crazy-business-the-story-of-detroit-s-greatest-fighting-judge-2375196>; Malcolm W. Bingay, *Detroit Is My Own Home Town* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1946), 244-50.

⁴⁷ “Kosher Butcher Seeks Warrant for Rioters,” *Detroit News*, May 12, 1910, 2.

⁴⁸ “Kosher Butcher Seeks Warrant for Rioters,” *Detroit News*, May 12, 1910, 2; “Kosher’ Strike Seems Settled,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 14, 1910, 1.

⁴⁹ “Kosher’ Strike Seems Settled,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 14, 1910, 1.



All along, Detroit's Kosher butchers had remarked on the absurdity of the fight. They insisted they were not making money, even at beef's higher prices. After days of being prevented from explaining Detroit's fluctuating meat market, on Wednesday afternoon, May 11, at least six butchers gathered in Joe Ratkovsky's shop at 462 Hastings Street. For the benefit of the press, Ratkovsky offered a graphic demonstration. He produced his bills from the Sullivan Beef Company, a local slaughterhouse, to prove he was paying 11½ cents per pound on whole carcasses of beef. Up to his butcher's block he hauled a 16-pound shoulder of beef that had cost him \$1.92. He then divvied it up to "illustrate the butcher's profit and loss." When the cutting was done, he was left with 4½ pounds of 18-cent meat, almost 3 pounds of 15-cent meat, 2½ pounds of 13-cent meat, and 6 pounds of bone. The different grades of meat would bring in only \$1.55—leaving him with a shortfall of 37 cents. "That's an honest, wide-open illustration of our claims," Ratkovsky insisted. "We tell them we're losing money. They jeer and say, 'Why don't you close your shops, then?' But we have our investment here, and we have to take spells of high wholesale prices, and figure on making up [the difference] later, when the prices fall."⁵⁰

Kosher butcher Charlie Pragg preferred a more aggressive approach:

We're going to hold a meeting, but we are going to discuss vastly different things than surrender to the Socialistic mob that is stirring up all of this trouble. We are going to consult with Mayor [Philip] Breitmeyer and Police Commissioner [Frank] Croul, and ask, as taxpayers, that we be allowed to operate our shops without interference from these Socialists. We're going to ask that those who want to buy meat from us will also receive protection, and if the city won't furnish protection, we will take the law into our own hands. We are about 30 strong, and if we can't get police protection, we will carry the war into the camp of these Socialist disturbers. And we will clean them out.⁵¹

With or without police protection, by Wednesday night, a compromise was in the works. Workmen's Circle, a Jewish mutual-aid organization that became influential in the labor movement, called for another mass meeting. In an interview with the press, boycott committee spokesman Harry Sodos explained the Workmen's Circle mission, hastening to add that it was "Socialistic, but is not the regular Socialist body." Eight hundred community members turned out for the meeting.⁵²

⁵⁰ "Kosher Butchers to Seek Cops' Aid," *Detroit Times*, May 11, 1910, 1-2.

⁵¹ "Kosher Butchers to Seek Cops' Aid," *Detroit Times*, May 11, 1910, 1, 2.

⁵² "Independent Shop Puts Kosher Men Out of Business," *Detroit News-Tribune*, May 15, 1910, 14; "Kosher Butchers to Seek Cops' Aid" con't, *Detroit Times*, May 11, 1910, 2.



Figure 6: Hastings Street, circa 1922. Joe Ratkovsky's butcher shop at 5320 Hastings Street, considerably north of its 1910 location at 462 Hastings Street. (The shop's name appears on the window to the right of the "Tailor" sign.) While his shop was boycotted during the 1910 Kosher-meat riot, Ratkovsky publicly carved up a sixteen-pound shoulder of beef to demonstrate that the city's Kosher butchers were actually losing money despite the higher beef prices. (Courtesy of Manning Brothers Historical Photograph Collection.)

The Great Compromise of 1910

Out of the Workmen's Circle meeting came the solution that would end the boycott and riots—just as Baruch Vladeck would have predicted and advised: co-operative Kosher-meat markets. According to the press, the announcement came from a "group of men who lent their energies to applauding the spirit of the fighting Hebrew women," including Harry Possner (Rebecka Possner's husband), Harry Sodos, Harry Bleifield, David Slominsky, Samuel Calkins, and Sidney Alexander, the committee's attorney. Two fathers and two sons already had collectively raised \$20,000 to finance ten co-op shops.⁵³

⁵³ The co-op plan was revealed after negotiations between the boycotters and the butchers (held at the butcher shop of Harris Silberman at 452 Hastings Street) broke down. The journalist covering the meeting noted that "the [boycott] committee was composed of young, clean-looking Hebrews, while the [butchers] were mostly older men." "Independent Shop Puts Kosher Men Out of Business," *Detroit News-Tribune*, May 15, 1910, 14; "Meat Strike in Ghetto to End," *Detroit Times*, May 12, 1910, 1; "Strike to End Today," *Detroit Free Press*, May 12, 1910, 1. For Silberman's first name, see *Detroit City Directory for 1910* (Detroit: R. L. Polk & Co.), 2069.



The plan sounded too good to be true. Kosher meat would be purchased directly from the meatpackers and sold at cost, ranging from 10 to 14 cents per pound—still more than Detroiters had been paying originally, but down from the high of 18 cents. They even found a willing shochet and butcher in the form of one man (presumably a cost-saving measure): Abraham Bordeloff. Along with partner Abraham Markovitz, Bordeloff agreed, on penalty of forfeiting his shop, not to raise prices even a quarter cent, before January 1, 1911. As a crowd gathered to watch Bordeloff put his name to the contract, Alexander declared that the co-op's operations would be above board: "This meat must be good kosher meat," he told the onlookers, "and if it isn't you people don't have to buy it." He assured the crowd, "Bordeloff has obtained a permit from the rabbi to kill and sell the meat."⁵⁴

In seeing the co-op Kosher-meat market inked into existence, Rebecka Possner was triumphant, telling the press, "We want no trouble and will have no trouble. We will win peaceably, but we will win. Our shop will do the business. We will buy our meat in our own store." Her claim of nonviolence seems true. One reporter attested, "A peculiar phase of this strike is the absence of anything bordering on violence. The dealers who are being boycotted and the strikers stand about the street corners and talk the situation over, but there does not seem to be any rancor in the discussion."⁵⁵

Sidney Alexander wanted to ensure things stayed that way. With the end of the Kosher-meat riot in reach, Alexander cautioned the crowd at Bordeloff's signing not to lose sight of the goal: "[D]on't go out into the streets and cause trouble. From what has happened here recently, some people would believe that we are bloodthirsty anarchists. That is not the case. This is an economic proposition and I believe we have gained our point. Within 24 hours after we decided to conduct our affairs peacefully, we have won. Now go home."⁵⁶

"I am sorry it resulted in a riot," Rebecka Possner apologized in Yiddish to the departing masses. "But we will forget that. We have won our struggle. If we hadn't emerged victorious, the price of meat would be even higher than it is now." The journalist covering the signing noted, "Not a [single boycotted] butcher appeared on the platform during the meeting." Unbeknownst to the attendees, there was a good reason for their absence.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ "Young Woman in Complete Charge of Meat Strike," *Detroit News*, May 12, 1910, 1; "Kosher Shops to Reopen Tonight," *Detroit Times*, May 14, 1910, 1; "Strike to End Today," *Detroit Free Press*, May 12, 1910, 1.

⁵⁵ "Independent Shop Puts Kosher Men Out of Business," *Detroit News-Tribune*, May 15, 1910, 14; "New Kosher Shop Does Big Business," *Detroit Times*, May 14, 1910, 5.

⁵⁶ "Strike to End Today" con't, *Detroit Free Press*, May 12, 1910, 2.

⁵⁷ "Strike to End Today" con't, *Detroit Free Press*, May 12, 1910, 2.



When the boycott committee announced that Bordeloff's co-op would open at 472 Rivard Street, the other Kosher butchers "hurried there, paid a month's rent, and got the place." Their stunt did not slow things down for long. The committee secured a new storefront at 152 Division Street, just in time for sales to begin at a quarter after seven o'clock on Friday morning, May 13. The grand opening was a mad house. Four policemen were on hand to force the women shoppers into two orderly lines: one in each direction from the front door. Only five customers were permitted to enter at a time. Even so, a shop window was broken in the frenzy. Outside the shop, "scores of men stood complacently by, figuratively patting one another on the backs over the victory over the butchers."⁵⁸

By eight o'clock that morning, Abraham Bordeloff had made an emergency run to a local slaughterhouse to find and kill more animals. By noon, all 2,200 pounds of meat from the eight cows and eleven calves he had scrounged "out in the country" to stock the shop had been sold. For the most part, customers were happy, although Bordeloff was not cutting the bones out of the meat before weighing it, as the other Kosher butchers did. But ultimately, the price was the thing. In the tumult of sales, he could not calculate if he had made or lost money. Significantly, he would not divulge the source of his meat.⁵⁹

The *Detroit Free Press* gave full credit for the riot's end to Rebecka Possner, calling her the "heroine of the hour" and the "savior of the situation." Possner agreed, "We have got them beaten now, and they know it. We are getting all of the restaurant keepers to sign an agreement to buy their meat from the co-operative shop. . . . The other dealers can go out of business if they want to."⁶⁰

Detroit's other Kosher butchers remained closed, but they were not out of business. Joe Ratkovsky, who memorably had carved up a beef shoulder to show his profit and loss, had seven fronts of cattle in his shop Friday morning. But he would only sell his chickens. He assured a *Detroit Times* journalist that "[w]e will open Saturday night, and sell steer beef at the [regular] prices." But that would not be the case on Friday:

Today, we all stay closed. . . . We want everybody, poor customers and good customers, to buy their meat at the strikers' shop today. We want them to see

⁵⁸ "Strike to End Today," *Detroit Free Press*, May 12, 1910, 1; "Meat Strike in Ghetto to End," *Detroit Times*, May 12, 1910, 1; "Meat Strikers to Open Shops," *Detroit News*, May 17, 1910, 9.

⁵⁹ "Meat Strikers to Open Shops," *Detroit News*, May 17, 1910, 9; "Independent Shop Puts Kosher Men Out of Business," *Detroit News-Tribune*, May 15, 1910, 14; "Meat Strike in Ghetto to End," *Detroit Times*, May 12, 1910, 1; "New Kosher Shop Does Big Business," *Detroit Times*, May 13, 1910, 1; "New Kosher Shop Does Big Business," *Detroit Times*, May 14, 1910, 5; "Strike to End Today" con't, *Detroit Free Press*, May 12, 1910, 2.

⁶⁰ "Kosher' Strike Seems Settled," *Detroit Free Press*, May 14, 1910, 2; "Young Woman in Complete Charge of Meat Strike," *Detroit News*, May 12, 1910, 1.



what kind of meat they are getting for 10, 12, and 14 cents a pound. It is the meat of old milch cows, the kind that is usually used only for sausage. Those cows cost as low as five cents a pound on the hoof. Dressed and slaughtered, they can be bought from seven to nine cents a pound. It is not good meat. . . . But the strikers are buying it now as chuck, flank, and shoulder steak, and are satisfied because they are getting it for 10, 12, and 14 cents.⁶¹

Ratkovsky's math was spot-on. Under pressure from a local journalist, Abraham Bordeloff admitted to selling cow meat, not steer meat, which he had purchased at an average cost of 10 cents per pound. That purchase point left little to no room for his own labor and wages. Ratkovsky was elated. He and the other Kosher butchers were "satisfied to have [Bordeloff] sell all of that that [he] want[s] to." "Our good customers, who never complained about the price of meat, will continue to trade with us, and we will supply them with meat at the old prices."⁶²

The boycotters envisioned a different outcome. They gave an ultimatum to Ratkovsky and the other holdouts: Unless the butchers agreed to sell meat at 10, 12, and 14 cents per pound, like Bordeloff, the boycotters would open several additional co-ops and put them out of business. To demonstrate their good faith to this new venture, the butchers were expected to fork over a \$50 payment each. "That's \$1,100 that they want to collect before they move on to some other town and start a disturbance," said Ratkovsky with a grin. "They'll never get \$50 from any butcher, and no butcher is going to deal with their committee." At least one other butcher did agree to open a co-op. Jacob Cohen would hang out his shingle at 441 Hastings Street the following week.⁶³

As Friday's frantic sales ground to a halt and the community returned home relieved, satisfied, and ready to prepare again for Shabbat, Abraham Bordeloff, the first co-op butcher, must have felt high anxiety. He had sourced his first day's meat at great, personal effort. He was extremely worried about maintaining the supply at the required price point. But while he fretted silently, his co-op partner, Abraham Markovitz, boasted, "I can get all the meat they want, and can sell it at 10, 12, and 14 cents, and keep in business." Markovitz did not disclose how he could possibly achieve what no other Kosher butcher anywhere in the United States could achieve for long. But the group of Jewish men working behind the scenes to broker the co-op deal made no bones about the supply lines. Bordeloff's meat would come from Chicago.⁶⁴

⁶¹ "Kosher Shops to Reopen Tonight," *Detroit Times*, May 14, 1910, 1; "Kosher' Strike Seems Settled," *Detroit Free Press*, May 14, 1910, 2.

⁶² "Kosher Shops to Reopen Tonight," *Detroit Times*, May 14, 1910, 1.

⁶³ "Kosher Shops to Reopen Tonight," *Detroit Times*, May 14, 1910, 1; "Another 'Co-op' Shop Opened," *Detroit Times*, May 17, 1910, 3.

⁶⁴ "Ghetto is Torn by Fierce War over Meat Prices," *Detroit Evening Times*, May 9, 1910, 3; "Kosher Shops to Reopen Tonight," *Detroit Times*, May 14, 1910, 1.



Conclusion and Epilogue

Regardless of what Baruch Charney Vladeck might have said about the larger forces at work in America's beef supply, those caught up in local beef fever tended to be shortsighted about the problems and their solutions. As Scott Seligman has argued for New York's 1902 Kosher-meat war:

Although the true villains in the drama were mostly gentile businessmen located hundreds of miles away, the local scene pitted Jew against Jew: housewives against butchers, butchers against wholesalers, the secular against the Orthodox, Eastern Europeans against Germans, honest rabbis against corrupt ones. It also exacerbated other frictions, such as those between the Jewish community and the police.⁶⁵

It was equally true in Detroit.

In the immediate term, almost everyone involved in the Kosher-meat riot of 1910 would have counted it a success—or at least no significant loss. Nobody was arrested. Nobody went to jail. Nobody seems to have been seriously injured. Nobody's business suffered catastrophically. The women who protested the high prices of chuck and flank got their co-ops at their desired price points; it is unclear for how long. Of the co-op butchers, Abraham Bordeloff's name—without Abraham Markovitz's attached to it—continued to appear in the city's meat-market directory. Whether he continued running a co-op is unclear, but it is unlikely. The names of "trust" butchers Joe Ratkovsky, Benjamin Krakowsky, and Charlie Pragg appear there too, outlasting the coercion and threats of closure by force. By 1915 all four had moved their shops away from the southern end of Hastings Street, relocating with the community as it moved north. A few Kosher butchers, including Abraham Hendin and Joseph Lansky, stayed in the old neighborhood.⁶⁶

Rabbi Judah Leib Levin remained, at best, behind the scenes during the 1910 Kosher-meat war. In his invisibility, he would have remembered in personal, painful detail how close the community had come during the 1903 rabbinical power struggle to being rent in two. Although Detroit's Jews responded differently to the 1910 price hike, their boycotts and riots still were directed at other victims. The true perpetrators, the covetous Beef Trust robber barons, were untouched. They continued to manipulate the national meat market until the National Packing Company was demolished at the US Supreme Court's direction in 1912. Levin lasted another fourteen years. By

⁶⁵ "Ghetto is Torn by Fierce War over Meat Prices," *Detroit Evening Times*, May 9, 1910, 3; "Kosher Shops to Reopen Tonight," *Detroit Times*, May 14, 1910, 1.

⁶⁶ *Detroit City Directory for 1915* (Detroit: R. L. Polk & Co.), 3254-58.



1923 (three years before his death) he was presiding over at least six *bimot*: Mogen Abraham, Beth Jacob, Ahavath Achim, B'nai Moshe, Emanuel, and B'nai Israel.⁶⁷

After being the face of the boycotts, Rebecka Possner and her husband Harry opened a restaurant—perhaps a byproduct of the boycott-related restaurant canvassing she did in 1910. Per census data, working in her own restaurant seems to have provided her the opportunity to learn to read and write. She continued running the business, after her husband's untimely death in 1915 or 1916, until at least 1920, remaining long enough to appear in the 1920 Detroit census and then vanishing from the historical record.⁶⁸

A year or two before Harry Possner died, he and his wife made the news again—this time for a near disaster. In February 1914 they and six others narrowly survived a coal gas leak in their rooming house at 261 Alfred Street (next door to their restaurant). Recuperating from an unspecified “operation,” Rebecka Possner was alerted to the danger by the cries of her 10-month-old niece, Rebecca Sklar. Rebecka Possner's screams alerted passersby, who were able to resuscitate the six unconscious adults. Their luck continued to hold five months later when their rooming house burned. All survived that misfortune too.⁶⁹

By then the Beef Trust had been dismantled, which improved the quality and availability of meat in the city and across the country. Even so, “intense” controversies in Detroit over its Kosher-meat supply and suppliers continued to arise—including in the year the Possners' home burned. Hired in 1914 from New York City to be Detroit's shochetim inspector, Joseph Zeltzer took stock of his new surroundings and deemed “the conditions under which [K]osher slaughtering took place . . . appalling.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Levin had left Shaarey Zedek in 1904. “Congregation B'nai David,” *Jewish Historical Society of Michigan*, <https://www.jhsmichigan.org/gallery/2017/06/congregation-b%E2%80%99nai-david.html>; Sidney Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 91.

⁶⁸ *Detroit City Directory for 1911* (Detroit: R. L. Polk & Co.), p. 1928; *Detroit City Directory for 1915* (Detroit: R. L. Polk & Co.), p. 1984; *Detroit City Directory for 1916* (Detroit: R. L. Polk & Co.), p. 2118. Rebecka Possner is listed as literate in the 1920 census: 1920 US Census, Wayne County, Michigan, population schedule, Detroit, ward 5, p. 171 (stamped), enumeration district 165, sheet 18a, dwelling 261 (Alfred Street), family 1, Rebecka Possner, NARA microfilm publication T625, roll 802, FHL microfilm 1374694, accessed May 21, 2023, <https://www.ancestry.com>.

⁶⁹ “Seven Saved by Wail of Babe,” *Detroit Times*, February 5, 1914, 8; “Hastings-st. Blaze Spreads,” *Detroit Times*, July 9, 1914, 9.

⁷⁰ Sidney Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 140, 488n111. Detroit experienced another Kosher-meat boycott in 1927 over persistently high Kosher-beef prices, even as non-Kosher-beef's cost declined—a circumstance the Jewish community attributed to the greed of the Kosher butchers. See “Kosher-meat War Declared,” *Detroit News*, March 3, 1927, 18. (My thanks to JHSM Vice President Barbara Cohn for this reference.) “Jewish Club Women Boycott Butchers,” *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, March 4, 1927, 1.



FEATURE ARTICLE

Littman's People's Theater: A Stage in the Wilderness A New History of Detroit's Yiddish Theater

Nadav Pais-Greenapple

From its opening in 1927 to its closure in 1944, Littman's People's Theater at 8210 Twelfth Street was Detroit's premier destination for Yiddish-language theatrical performance and film. Founded and managed by its eponymous impresario, Abraham Littman, the theater's story provides a window into the shifting fortunes of Yiddish-language cultural institutions in early twentieth-century Detroit. The northwest movement of the city's increasingly affluent Jewish community to Twelfth Street heavily influenced Littman's decision to construct the dedicated Yiddish-theater building. Playbills from the theater offer a glimpse into the theater's audience, illustrating how the venue became a locale of great significance to a wide cross-section of Detroit Jewry. Recent immigrants, Americanized upper-middle-class Jewish families, secular Yiddishists, and even gangsters made the theater their regular meeting place. Actors and crew, whose livelihoods depended on the theater, built intricate connections and lasting relationships within the Detroit Jewish community.

The theater's most important role was connecting Detroit's midwestern Jewish community to the global world of Yiddish culture. Outside the stage doors were the streetcars, automobiles, and two-family flats of Twelfth Street. Within its walls might be an old Russian shtetl, a Warsaw mansion, an ancient Judean palace, or a New York sweatshop. The theatrical productions and movies staged and screened at Littman's may have been written or filmed in the Soviet Union, Poland, or Long Island, but they spoke to the common concerns of their Yiddish-speaking Jewish audience. This vital cultural connection was made possible by the Hebrew Actors' Union (HAU), the trade union which represented Yiddish actors, directors, playwrights, managers, crews, and choruses.

No scholarly consensus exists on the causes for the closure of Littman's theater in 1944. Some have maintained that the theater's *shund* productions (low-quality popular entertainment which was often considered vulgar or debased by literary critics) doomed it to irrelevance and artistic bankruptcy.¹ Others have argued that

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¹ Sidney Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance: Voices of Jewish Identity in Detroit, 1914-1967* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 61.



shund performances were a symptom, rather than a cause, of structural difficulties both internal and external to the theater itself.²

Most historians have rooted the theater's failure in the Detroit Jewish community's economic, geographic, and demographic transformations. As Detroit Jews continued to rise into the higher strata of American economic life during the interwar years, they integrated into Anglophone cultural life. This integration was intensified by the passage of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924, which sharply restricted Jewish migration from Europe. Although these external factors certainly impacted Littman's venture, internal forces played an even larger role. Prime among them was, ironically, the well-intentioned but highly restrictive influence of the HAU. While the union had developed policies meant to ensure competitiveness for regional theaters such as Littman's, its lax enforcement of them contributed substantially to the theater's demise. Together, these intrinsic and extrinsic forces diminished Yiddish as a communal vernacular and hobbled cultural institutions such as Littman's that were devoted to preserving it. Although his theater closed in 1944, Abraham Littman left behind a legacy of social and cultural connections in Detroit's Jewish community that extended across socio-economic lines and levels of religious observance.

Abraham Littman and the Yiddish Playhouse

Abraham Littman was born in 1880, in Barysaw, Minsk Guberniya, in what is now Belarus.³ At the age of fifteen, he and his sister arrived in New York, where he began working in a sweatshop making jackets. In 1904 he became a naturalized US citizen, and the following year married Yetta Silberman.⁴ The two remained together until her death 42 years later.⁵ Littman was a kindly, flamboyant man, who by his later years was nearly blind and required thick glasses to read.⁶ He was known as one whom "the title of impresario described . . . to a tee! He even spoke with haughty authority!"⁷

² James Miller, *The Detroit Yiddish Theater: 1924 to 1937* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967), 129.

³ Zalman Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* (Warsaw: Hebrew Actors' Union of America, 1934), 2:col. 1034, accessed July 27, 2023, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc201090/zylbercweig-zalmen-mestel-leksikon-fun-yidishn-teater-vol-2>.

⁴ Petitions for Naturalization filed in federal, state, and local courts in New York City, 1792-1989, National Archives, New York, accessed July 27, 2023, <https://www.ancestry.com>.

⁵ "Organizations Pay Honor to Mrs. Littman's Memory," *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), January 24, 1947.

⁶ Jack Rosner, interview by Leah Jordan Bisel, 2007, accessed July 27, 2023, Museum of Family History, <https://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/yt-recollections-rosner-detroit.htm> (hereafter Jack Rosner interview).

⁷ Herman Yablokoff, *Der Payatz: Around the World with Yiddish Theater* (Silver Springs, MD: Bartleby Press, 1995), 258.



Figure 1: Abraham Littman founded and managed Littman's People's Theater in Detroit from 1927 to 1944, helping to connect the city's Jewish community to the global world of Yiddish culture. (Courtesy of Leo M. Franklin Archives of Temple Beth El, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.)

Jackets did not hold Littman's attention. He found himself enraptured by Yiddish-theater performances on New York's Lower East Side. Soon he abandoned the sweatshop entirely for any chance he could find to help out at the theater. Littman's World War I draft registration card shows that by 1918 he was employed as a stage manager at New York's National Theater.⁸

Before settling in Detroit he made a name for himself in theater, leading troupes in Buffalo, Rochester, Toronto, and Philadelphia. In Atlantic City he organized a local branch of the HAU.⁹ He traveled back and forth between Canada and the United States at least four times from 1912 to 1919, registering with the American consulate in Toronto.¹⁰ To make ends meet, Littman often worked odd jobs—as a

⁸ United States, Selective Service System, World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918, Family History Library microfilm, M1509, 4,582 rolls, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, accessed July 27, 2023, <https://www.ancestry.com>.

⁹ Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 141.

¹⁰ Consular Registration Applications, 1916-1925, NAID: 1251970, record group 59, General



men's clothing manufacturer's representative, a sewing machine agent, an insurance salesman—but always found himself returning to his first love, the theater.¹¹

During Littman's years of touring, success required tenacity and determination. While stopping overnight in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, Littman could not find a theater venue to rent at a reasonable price. At the suggestion of a local actor, he begged the *gabbaim* (managers) of the city's synagogue to allow the troupe to perform in the shul. He succeeded, and that Saturday evening after *havdole*, the shul's *shammes* (caretaker) walked the streets shouting, "*Yidn, kumt arayn in shul morgn nokhmitog, vu dos yidische teater vet shpiln!*" "Jews, come back to shul tomorrow afternoon, where Yiddish theater will be performed!"¹² The show went on, despite the lack of an actual theater.

In the summer of 1924, Littman came to Detroit. With business partners Misha Fishzon and Moshe Schor, he purchased the 700-seat Circle Theater at 2814 Hastings Street.¹³ Although touring Yiddish theatrical companies previously had operated out of this theater—led by managers such as Abe Cogut and Leon Krim—none had stayed in the space for more than a season or two.¹⁴ The trend would continue. At the onset of the 1924-25 season, the Circle Theater was renamed the Yiddish Playhouse. For the next two seasons it would be Detroit's home for high-quality productions of well-regarded Yiddish plays and musicals.¹⁵ However, Hastings Street itself was undergoing a transformation outside the theater doors. As a result of demographic shifts, by the mid-1920s, it was becoming the vibrant cultural and economic center of Detroit's Black community. Upwardly mobile, assimilating Jewish families increasingly avoided the neighborhood either because of bigotry, classism, or a desire to steer clear of what they may have regarded as the "ghetto."¹⁶ The longstanding trend of northwest Jewish migration was already underway.

Although the Jewish community continued to support the theater, its negative views of Hastings Street's changes seeped into its perception of the playhouse. For example, a well-received performance of S. Ansky's *Der dybbuk* by the world-renowned Vilna Troupe in March 1926 nonetheless drew criticism in the *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*:

Records of the Department of State, 1763-2002, National Archives, College Park, MD, accessed July 27, 2023, <https://www.ancestry.com>.

¹¹ Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 141.

¹² Zalman Zylbercweig, *Hintern forhang* (Vilnius: *Vilner Farlag fun B. Kletskin*, 1928), 220.

¹³ Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 52.

¹⁴ Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 49-50.

¹⁵ Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 53.

¹⁶ Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 60; Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 61.



The depressing inadequacies of the Circle Theater, the home of the Yiddish drama, were never so apparent as during these remarkable performances of the *Dybbuk*. One felt that the artists were using symbols and substituting drops for scenic effects. Despite every effort to concentrate upon the delightfully spoken lines, one could not but feel the synagogue walls were crowding the congregation out of the place. . . . Messrs. Littman and Fischson [sic] have done splendidly under most trying circumstances. They are anxious to give Detroit Jewry the best available Yiddish drama, but they cannot do it on Hastings Street. . . . Are there not men and women sufficiently interested in Yiddish drama to help build a theater in a Jewish locality?¹⁷

Indeed, there were members of the community willing to assist financially in the construction of a new, state-of-the-art Yiddish theater. The Yiddish Playhouse closed at the end of the 1925-26 season. While the troupe found a temporary home at the Majestic Theatre on Woodward for the 1926-27 season, foundations for what would become Littman's People's Theater were being excavated further north in the heart of the rapidly developing Jewish Twelfth Street neighborhood.¹⁸

Littman's People's Theater and the Twelfth Street Oylem

Littman saw the continuation of Yiddish theater in Detroit as his personal mission to complete at any cost:

"I have had the hardest struggle of perhaps any actor or manager in the profession," said Mr. Littman. "I have gone hungry many times. I have worn shoes with shined tops even when the soles were worn thin and torn. Even the building of [Littman's People's Theater] was not always smooth sailing. There were terrible obstacles to overcome and many times it looked as if the project were doomed to failure."¹⁹

Despite the obstacles, Littman's People's Theater opened at the corner of Twelfth Street and Seward on September 2, 1927.²⁰ Described as "a playhouse Detroit Jewry can well take pride in," the stately brick building, designed by local architect and former Yiddish-theater actor Maurice Finkel, was within walking distance to numerous Jewish-owned barbershops, clothiers, furriers, restaurants, and, of course, synagogues.²¹ East and west from the main axis of Twelfth Street

¹⁷ "Vilna Troupe and the Yiddish Theater," *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, March 5, 1926.

¹⁸ Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 72-73.

¹⁹ "New Home of Jewish Drama," *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, September 2, 1927.

²⁰ "New Home of Jewish Drama." *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*.

²¹ "New Home of Jewish Drama." *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*.



stretched residential areas comprising two-flat houses and corner apartment buildings. Auto shops, corner stores, diners, and schools—to say nothing of the many Jewish organizations—dotted the neighborhood.²²



Figure 2: A poster for the production at Littman's People's Theater of Shepsel's khosene (Shepsel's Wedding), starring well-known Yiddish-theater actor Max Bazsbik, circa 1935. (Courtesy of American Jewish Historical Society, Center for Jewish History, New York—Abram Kanof Theater and Film Poster Collection [P-978].)

²² Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 187.



The theater's marquee, reading "Littman's," stood tall along the west side of Twelfth Street, bright bulbs accentuating an ornate window with a Star of David motif at the center of the brick facade.²³ The large building was framed by the shade of a large tree to the south and the low roof of a commercial building to the north. One can imagine the waiting patrons in front of the theater—seeking the tree's shade on hot September evenings or jostling their way into the lobby for warmth during winter when whipping winds would tear down the wide expanse of Twelfth Street, halted under the glow of the marquee only by the theater's welcoming doors.

Although few photos survive of the theater's interior (the building was no longer standing by 1973), it is possible to glean what the building's decor may have looked like from the Michigan Theater, 40 miles away in Ann Arbor. The Michigan Theater is one of two surviving buildings also designed by Finkel and was completed only a year after Littman's in 1928. Restored professionally to its original condition in the 1990s, it boasts gilded moldings and ornate sculptural details in the style typical of the period. Littman's was likely just as grandiose, if not more so. Contemporary descriptions of Littman's note:

[The sumptuous decorations demanded] an outlay of \$250,000, [which] compares favorably with the finest Jewish playhouses in the country. In seating capacity it equals the famous Jewish Art Theater, Maurice Schwartz's playhouse, in New York. The interior decorations . . . are in the Assyrian style, rich in color and in the best artistic taste. In stage equipment it ranks with the best theaters in the city. Its construction is modern, fireproof, and of the best quality of materials.²⁴

While the auditorium and stage were decorated with "gilt cherubim around the proscenium," Finkel inexplicably omitted dressing rooms for the actors from the building's design.²⁵ Herman Yablokoff, a player during the theater's 1928-29 season, recalled the maddening oversight:

One could hardly demand that the theater be rebuilt just for the comfort of the actors! So, we had to make the best of it. . . . On the third floor, way up under the roof, where the flies were hung, several cubicles were partitioned off, and the actors each got their corner where they could change and makeup. In the summer one could stifle up there and in the winter one could freeze. But this was only the half of it. The real hardship was running up and down the three flights to make our changes. It was hard enough on the men. But, the women, for whom it was a never-ending process of on-with-a-costume, off-with-a-costume, it was pretty rough. In

²³ "New Home of Jewish Drama," *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*.

²⁴ "New Home of Jewish Drama." *Detroit Jewish Chronicle*.

²⁵ Yablokoff, *Der Payatz*, 257.



a pinch we changed in the wings. Climbing up and down on that spiral stairway during the nine shows a week, we referred to ourselves as the angels in Jacob's dream, ascending and descending the ladder to heaven!²⁶

The audience likely was oblivious to the behind-the-scenes frenzy. Having typically heard about the evening's performance either in print advertisements in the *Detroit Jewish Chronicle* or the local edition of the *Forverts*, or on Harry Weinberg's *Yiddish Radio Hour*, the loyal audience members would flock to the lobby box office en masse just before the show.²⁷

On Saturday nights the theater would be only half full five minutes before curtain time, but there were always crowds quarreling, shoving, leaning, and elbowing around the box offices, till Littman himself became exasperated and bawled them out. "Where were you all week? From nine to five every day we were sitting, waiting to sell tickets, and you didn't come. Now it's too late." He worked himself into a fury and slammed down his window. But his public knew him "from the old country," as the saying went; they simply stood around the lobby till he calmed down enough to stalk back and let them buy their tickets. The following week they would again wait until the last minute.²⁸

The regular patrons of Littman's People's Theater—the loyal *oylem* (audience)—who assailed its proprietor each evening at the box-office window, experienced at the theater a sense of connection to the wider global world of Yiddish culture. For patron Jack Rosner, Littman's provided a social and cultural context in which to learn and practice the *mame-loshn* (mother tongue): "I learned a lot of Yiddish from these shows. We didn't speak it at home because my parents wanted to become Americanized."²⁹ The theater also served important local roles, adding to the network of Yiddish-language cultural institutions in Detroit's Twelfth Street neighborhood and becoming a significant social hub for a wide cross section of Detroit's Jewish community.

Audience members from many walks of life would have received a bilingual playbill, written in Yiddish and English, such as the one distributed during the week of October 15-22, 1933.³⁰ This playbill reveals the production's anticipated patrons, the goods they were encouraged to purchase, and their social and political commitments. Along with a cast list for that week's performance—*Khloymes fun libe* (*Dreams of Love*) by noted shund author Isidor Lillien (Figures 5 and 6)—guests

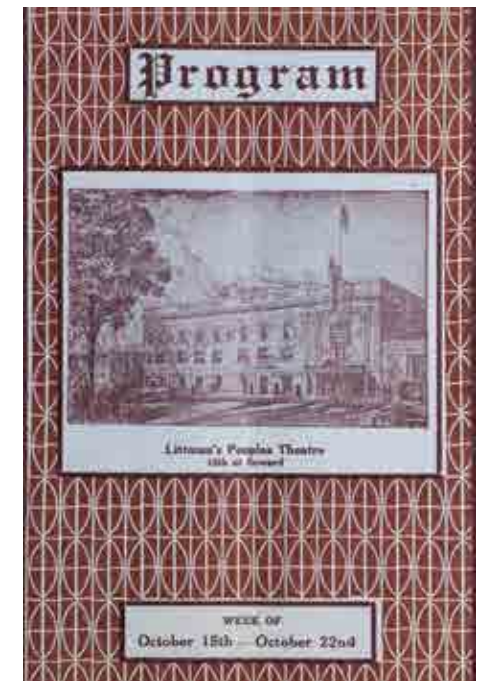
²⁶ Yablokoff, *Der Payatz*, 257-58.

²⁷ Jack Rosner interview.

²⁸ Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 252-53.

²⁹ Jack Rosner interview.

³⁰ Esther-Rachel Kaminska Theater Museum Collection (hereafter Kaminska Collection), box 82, folder 942, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York (hereafter YIVO Archives).



Figures 3 and 4: The Yiddish- and English-language covers of the bilingual playbill from Littman's People's Theater, October 15-22, 1933. The outside of the theater is pictured on each cover. (Figures 3-8 accessed at YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, Esther-Rachel Kaminska Theater Museum Collection, box 82, folder 942.)

could peruse advertisements for local businesses or read articles describing exciting new developments in New York City's bustling world of Yiddish theater.

Children and adults could find jokes and humorous anecdotes within the playbills, such as one entitled "Detroit—also a birthplace." The joke played on the complex ways in which American life challenged the traditional form of the Jewish home. Old-world cultural norms regarding divorce and adultery altered or dissolved to accommodate "modern" American mores, especially for women:³¹

Judge: (*to an adulterous wife*) How many children do you have?

Wife: Eleven.

Judge: Do you live in New York?

Wife: Yes.

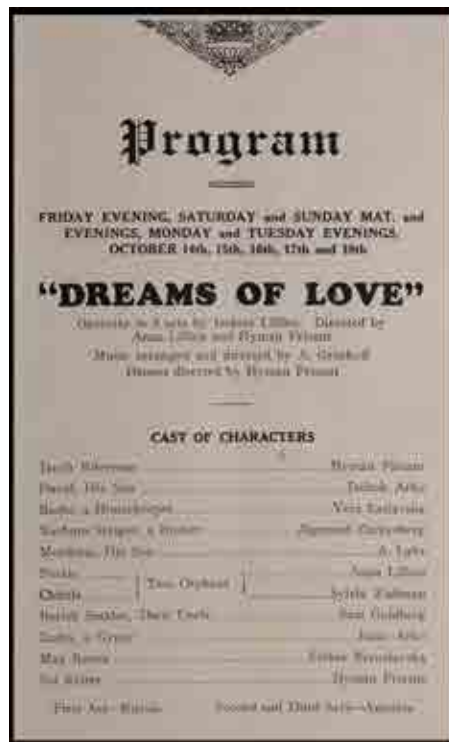
Judge: Is New York your birth city?

Wife: Not entirely. I gave birth to two of the kids in Detroit!³²

³¹ Henry L. Feingold, *The Jewish People in America: A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920-1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 38.

³² Kaminska Collection, box 82, folder 942, YIVO Archives.





Figures 5 and 6: Bilingual cast list for the performances of *Khloymes fun libe* (*Dreams of Love*) at Littman's People's Theater the week of October 15-22, 1933.

A short article in the playbill titled "*Di yiddishe teater welt*" ("The Yiddish Theater World") described, in casual and humorous prose, the latest and most notable performances in New York City's numerous Yiddish theaters. The article referenced Jewish liturgical and folkloric metaphors to communicate a sense of refinement and upward mobility to Littman's guests, who were provided a connection to the more densely Jewish world of the east:

The eleven Yiddish theaters, which great New York possesses this season, present: The former Yeshiva student, Joseph Rumshinski, opposite the eleven stars, the *ekhod-esar khohkvim*, which appeared to [the biblical] Joseph in his dream, bowing to him. Who, then, you'll ask, is our Joseph, if the eleven theaters are the eleven stars which also appeared and bowed to him? Rumshinski answers that Joseph is not so different than the old-time New Yorker, "Moyshe," whom today is already no longer "Moyshe." He has already settled down, become smart, gotten his taste of the finer things, and today is already in the category of the *ben-poret* [beloved son] Joseph, who can no longer be satisfied by a "Potiphar's wife" whose best accessory is a couple of tinkle bells.³³

³³ Kaminska Collection, box 82, folder 942, YIVO Archives.



The Torah tale of Joseph, who rose from slavery to privileged advisor to the Pharaoh of Egypt, would certainly have resonated with 1930s audience members at Littman's People's Theater. Although economic conditions were dire for many, Jews in general suffered less than other ethnic groups during the Great Depression.³⁴ Evidenced by Littman's years of operation, even at the nadir of the economic downturn, Jewish Americans had the means to patronize the theater and continue acculturating into American life. "Moyshe," a kind of Yiddish "Joe Schmo," represented the stereotypical Jewish immigrant. Thus, it is unsurprising that "Moyshe" has found his taste for the finer things in life and turns to the theater's headliners, who, like sheaves of grain and stars paying deference to Joseph, bow before him for his elite entertainment.

The upwardly mobile target demographic of Littman's playbill also is evident in the types of advertisements found within its pages: a "Persian lamb mink collar and cuff," available for \$325 at George Dimas' Fine Furs on Woodward Avenue; a bilingual ad for Fuhlbruegge's Flowers at Twelfth and Clairmount enjoining customers to "*patronayzt*" their neighbor the florist on occasion of a Jewish wedding (Figure 7); living room furniture manufacturer Yockey Bros. on West Lafayette (Figure 8); a full-service Chevrolet dealership at Twelfth and Philadelphia; "Fox or Beaver trimmed" furs "at an incomparable price," found at Brown's Smart Furs on Bagley.³⁵

The assumed reader of the playbill was an ascendant middle-class Jewish family with disposable income to spend on fine furs worth over \$7,000 in today's money.³⁶ These advertisements and the expression of middle-class identity inherent in the tale of the ordinary "Moyshe," who has become the "ben-poret" Joseph, reflect the degree to which many American Jews had, even at the height of the Depression, carved out for themselves a relatively comfortable middle-class lifestyle.³⁷

That lifestyle likely was only aspirational for much of the theater's audience. Although records of ticket sales have not survived, members of working-class families, such as Shirley Zaft, were regular patrons of Littman's.³⁸ Particularly popular were the radical proletarian plays of Artef, the New-York based leftist theater group, which, under the leadership of playwright Moshe Nadir, performed at

³⁴ Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 141.

³⁵ Kaminska Collection, box 82, folder 942, YIVO Archives.

³⁶ "US Inflation Calculator," Coinnews Media Group LLC, accessed July 27, 2023, <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>.

³⁷ Feingold, *Jewish People in America*, 126-27.

³⁸ "Shirley Zaft Benyas' Oral History," interview by Christa Whitney, Wexler Oral History Project, Yiddish Book Center, Amherst, MA, June 29, 2016, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/interviews/woh-fi-0000815/shirley-zaft-benyas-2016> (hereafter Zaft Benyas Oral History).



Littman's in January 1929.³⁹ These findings track with the trends of Yiddish theater across the United States and beyond, which held strong appeal for working-class audiences. Even so, the theater's playbill advertisements convey something of the audience's change over time. As the Detroit Jewish community at large acculturated and moved up the American economic ladder, the theater audience's original "folk base," in Miller's words, faded, transitioning from Yiddish-speaking immigrants to Americans living middle-class American lifestyles inflected with Yiddish.⁴⁰

There were many different paths to that middle-class lifestyle. Some legitimate, others not so much.⁴¹ For example, Littman's served as a meeting place and entertainment hotspot for Jewish mobsters:

Some of our staunchest theater fans were the Jewish "boys" from the notorious Purple Gang. . . . Their "activities," such as they were, never kept them from attending all of our shows. . . . [I]n the theater one would never suspect that these fellas were any such thing as mobsters. Interestingly enough, when one of our actors was burglarized, our devoted fans got wind of it, and assured us that the missing stuff would turn up—as indeed it did! Before long the stolen goods were returned and the burglar got a few bones broken for his daring to lay hands on the worldly possessions of a Yiddish actor!⁴²

During the flu epidemic, which rocked Detroit in the winter of 1928-29 and killed two actors at Littman's, fellow player Yablokoff credited his survival to heavy doses of cognac smuggled over from Windsor by those very same "Jewish 'boys.'"⁴³ However, in sticky situations, Littman relied upon Detroit's Jewish clergy as much as the community's criminal element. For example, Yablokoff recalled breaking down crying after receiving sudden word that his father had died in Belarus:

"You have our deepest sympathy," said Littman. "But you know, we have absolutely no one to take over for you. Under the circumstances, even a rabbi would sanction your performing tonight. If you don't come to play, Yabby, I will be forced to close the theater."⁴⁴

Did Yablokoff not have a religious duty to mourn his father? Would a rabbi agree with Littman? Yablokoff set out to find out:

³⁹ Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 278; Kaminska Collection, box 82, folder 942, YIVO Archives. For further reading on Artef's performance of Nadir's play in Detroit, see Nadav Pais-Greenapple, "An *ovnt bay Littmans*: A Night at Detroit's Historical Yiddish Theater," *In geveb* (April 2023), accessed July 27, 2023, <https://ingeveb.org/blog/detroits-historical-yiddish-theater>.

⁴⁰ Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 129.

⁴¹ Feingold, *Jewish People in America*, 54.

⁴² Yablokoff, *Der Payatz*, 258-59.

⁴³ Yablokoff, *Der Payatz*, 261.

⁴⁴ Yablokoff, *Der Payatz*, 263.



Distraught beyond words, I was persuaded to go and discuss my situation with the rabbi at the little shul on Twelfth Street. I would then abide by his ruling. The rabbi took into consideration the extenuating circumstances peculiar to my profession. He also took into consideration the plight of the other theater families, who would be deprived of a living if the theater closed. The good rabbi then gave consent to my working that same evening, with the promise that I will recite the Kaddish in memory of my father three times daily, for the entire year of mourning—a promise I religiously fulfilled.⁴⁵

Despite the curtain between them, the actors and crew of Littman's People's Theater relied on—and were relied upon by—the people of Twelfth Street. They were integral members of the community as much as the audience who filled the auditorium.



Figure 7 (left) and Figure 8 (right): Among the local bilingual advertisements targeted to upwardly mobile theatergoers in the playbill distributed at Littman's during the week of October 15-22, 1933, were those for Fuhlbruegge's Flowers (Figure 7) and for Yockey Bros., a furniture manufacturer (Figure 8).

⁴⁵ Yablokoff, *Der Payatz*, 263.



Also essential to the theater's continued existence was its patronization by Detroit's community of Yiddish cultural activists, as evidenced by a full-page advertisement in the October 15–22, 1933 playbill for an upcoming fundraiser from the *Umpartaishe folksbul gezelschaft* (Non-Partisan Folks-School Association, later known as the Sholem Aleichem Institute).⁴⁶ As part of the organization's "hundert toyznt taler kampayn" (hundred thousand dollar campaign), the announcement promoted a set of three theatrical performances by the school's students at their own meeting hall on Kenilworth Street, called the *kinder teater* (children's theater).⁴⁷ It also urged parents to "send your children to the Non-Partisan Folks-School—give them a modern Jewish education."⁴⁸ By advertising in Littman's playbill, the organization hoped to reach Yiddish-speaking families who desired secular education for their children in the *mame-loshn* and had the means to pay for it.

Shirley Zaft, a member of the *folksbul*, recalled her regular attendance at Littman's:

We lived next to 12th Street, and Littman's People's Theater was also on 12th Street. Every Friday my father worked at night, and so my mother and I went to the theater every Friday night, and we watched the plays. When I was a child the theater seemed huge, but now I don't know. Littman's People's was much like a soap opera, a tearjerker. Either that or musicals, and they had the orchestra in the pit. They brought in extras who worked in the theater with the actors who came [from out of town]. . . . [W]hen there was a very good production like a Maurice Schwartz or a Jacob Ben-Ami, it went to one of the large theaters downtown. We had three large, legitimate theaters in Detroit. I remember seeing *Di brider ashkenazi* [*The Brothers Ashkenazi*] at the Cass or the Schubert-Lafayette.⁴⁹

These "legitimate" productions were popular with the more literary-minded segments of Littman's oylem. While tickets for the shows were sold through Littman's box office, non-local producers managed the productions in violation of HAU policy.

Educated at the Sholem Aleichem Institute's secular Yiddish school by theater director and educator Moshe Haar, Zaft was inculcated with a deep appreciation for the vast literary and theatrical wealth of the Yiddish language.⁵⁰ Owing in no

⁴⁶ Yablokoff, *Der Payatz*, 263.

⁴⁷ Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 154; Kaminska Collection, box 82, folder 942, YIVO Archives.

⁴⁸ Kaminska Collection, box 82, folder 942, YIVO Archives.

⁴⁹ Zaft Benyas Oral History.

⁵⁰ Zaft Benyas Oral History; Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 155.



small part to this appreciation, Zaft's recollections expose a fundamental tension between the theater's obligation to serve dueling oylems, those seeking *shund* and those seeking *kunst*:

[C]ontemporary commentators tended to describe the Yiddish theater in Manichean terms: *kunst* (art) versus *shund* (trash); "better" or "literary" plays versus those designed to please Moyshe; plays and productions to which one could proudly welcome the *umes ha-oylem*—literally, the "nations of the world," the non-Jewish public—versus the cultural equivalent of dirty laundry that would, in the eyes of many a critic, both debase the theatre-going Yiddish-speaking public and bring it disgrace in the eyes of its non-Jewish (as well as Jewish but non-Yiddish speaking) neighbors.⁵¹

On the one hand, Littman's provided popular entertainment for those from all walks of life, many of whom placed no importance on a distinction between *shund* and *kunst*. On the other hand, those audience members for whom the distinction was relevant—such as Zaft and her family—were more likely, when the opportunity arose, to forgo performances at Littman's in favor of higher-budget, ostensibly higher-quality, touring productions featuring big-name stars and writers.⁵² This friction may well have contributed to the theater's eventual demise.

External and Internal Forces on Stage

A steady hemorrhaging of actors, financiers, and audiences plagued Littman's People's Theater during the 1930s. Littman often used the precariousness of the situation to his advantage. When money was tight, as it often was, Littman lamented that the theater was on the brink of collapse. If someone—perhaps HAU director Reuven Guskin, local financiers, or a competing manager—did not come to his aid, the theater would be forced to close.⁵³ Despite accusations of hysteric or hyperbole, this perennial assertion was Littman's common refrain and, it seemed, his greatest fear. Whether out of a desire for profit, egotism, or a simple devotion to the Jewish community of Detroit, Littman could not bear the thought of the

⁵¹ Joel Berkowitz and Barbara Henry, *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 10. For further discussion of the often slippery distinction between *shund* and *kunst*, see Joel Berkowitz, Sonia Gollance, and Nick Underwood, "Murder, Lust, and Laughter, or, *Shund* Theatre: A Special Issue of *In geveb*," *In geveb*, April 2023, accessed July 27, 2023, <https://ingeveb.org/articles/murder-lust-and-laughter-or-shund-theatre>.

⁵² Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 61.

⁵³ Hebrew Actors' Union Papers, box I-1:49, folder 1520, YIVO Archives.



marquee going dark. By the late 1930s, there was no denying that the quality and frequency of the performances paled in comparison to the theater's golden years of the late 1920s.

Historians have placed much of the blame for the decline and closure of Littman's on the theater's propensity for performing shund. Sidney Bolkosky, for example, emphasizes its prevalence in both the theater's repertoire and communal memory.⁵⁴ In James Miller's more contextualized view, however, the increasing proportion of shund productions was not the illness, but rather a symptom of the overwhelming structural and demographic forces that conspired against Yiddish theater. Miller's argument, specifically concerned with the impact of changes to immigration law and linguistic trends in the community, holds true.⁵⁵ However, his analysis accounts only for *external* factors leading to the theater's decline, missing the *internal* damage inflicted by the HAU's haphazardly enforced policies.

Certainly, the Jewish community's upwardly mobile trajectory, both cultural and geographic, exerted external pressure on the theater: as audiences moved away from Yiddishkayt, figuratively and literally, Littman's clientele diminished. Although Yiddish remained a central component of the cultural landscape for the Jews of Twelfth Street into the 1930s and 1940s, organizations such as Arbeter Ring/Workmen's Circle—which ostensibly promoted Yiddish's use and cultural value—placed an equal or greater emphasis on English as an essential vernacular for socializing, interviewing for jobs, labor organizing, and expression of personal identity.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Restriction Act, which introduced a quota system that severely restricted the number of Eastern-European Jews who could settle in the United States, brought about a massive decline in Yiddish-speaking immigrants. Without a substantial, regular influx of new arrivals to reinvigorate Jewish communities in the United States, Yiddish's grip on American Jews' identity and their vernacular loosened. As Sidney Bolkosky has shown, “With the decline in their numbers, new immigrants assumed marginal roles, exerting less impact on Jewish behavior and social practices.”⁵⁷

The generation of Americanized Jews coming of age in the late 1930s and early 1940s generally spoke English at home and in their social lives. This new generation also was well-educated, “[t]he abiding Jewish social imperative of education . . . fueling the fires of secular assimilation and the movement toward upwardly mobile socioeconomic positions.”⁵⁸ But in general in this period, participation in Jewish

⁵⁴ Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 61.

⁵⁵ Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 128.

⁵⁶ Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 129; Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 95–96.

⁵⁷ Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 141.

⁵⁸ Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 141.



education contracted.⁵⁹ Yiddish-language after-school education programs had increased in number during the 1920s and 1930s, “in an attempt to counteract the enfeeblement of Yiddish in the children's English-speaking daily environment.” But they declined sharply after the 1940s.⁶⁰

English-language film and theater likewise proved more attractive than Yiddish shows to young, English-speaking audiences.⁶¹ For many of the younger generation, Clark Gable and Greta Garbo had more cultural currency than Yiddish-theater stars Maurice Schwartz or Molly Picon. The old-world settings and Jewish-focused plots of Yiddish theater had been essential in providing Jewish Americans with a sense of connection and identity in the new world, but American children increasingly dismissed nostalgic visions of the shtetl. As a result, Yiddish theaters performed fewer literary plays in favor of lower-quality popular entertainment—shund—often in a mix of English and Yiddish, derisively called “potato Yiddish.” Scholars, including Sidney Bolkosky, attribute the decline of Detroit's Yiddish theater specifically to these developments. But that easy argument misses the larger cultural levers controlling Littman's machinery.⁶²

Miller argues that high-quality Yiddish theater was no longer a social necessity for the process of assimilation, and thus was no longer a viable draw for audiences:

The decline of better-class drama correlates with the decline of the viability of the Yiddish Theater. The major emphasis of the early Yiddish Theater was in its “folk” base which reflected the mores of the Eastern European Jew, his problems, his religious attitudes, and his human values. When the need for this expression was drowned in the environmental changes wrought through his process of Americanization, the theater expired as a vital agent in Jewish life. It had served as a catalytic agent in the process of the melting pot, and in that process it disappeared.⁶³

However, to say that Yiddish theater had served its purpose and was now inevitably fated to disappear misses important cultural and socio-economic processes. The artistic debasement that critics perceived in “potato-Yiddish” shund performances was in fact playwrights and producers attempting to mirror the younger, Americanized generation's experiences of assimilation and acculturation back at them—as a means not of pandering to the lowest common denominator, but rather keeping the theater engaging and relevant for its audience.

⁵⁹ Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 159–60.

⁶⁰ Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 293; Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 252.

⁶¹ Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 294.

⁶² Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 294.

⁶³ Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 129.



Linguistic assimilation was, of course, a corollary of the economic transformations Detroit's Jewish community underwent during the 1930s. Although the Depression continued, the Jewish American upper-middle class began to take shape in the 1930s. "Alongside such shifts in economic status came correlative changes in social status. Acculturation, if not assimilation, hastened and grew more intense."⁶⁴ Thus, while experiencing a decline in Yiddish as a communal vernacular, patrons of Littman's theater were able to afford the fine furs and Chevrolets advertised in the playbill.

As they had during the transition from Hastings Street to Twelfth Street, upwardly mobile Jewish families sought new neighborhood developments further northwest. Twelfth Street became the extreme southeastern corner of a larger majority-Jewish enclave near Dexter Avenue and Davison Street, where, as of 1941, 80 percent of Detroit's Jewish residents lived.⁶⁵ Jack Rosner's family was one of many who moved to Dexter-Davison, and he recalled that after leaving Twelfth Street he "didn't go back to the theater much."⁶⁶ Just like the Hastings Street Yiddish Playhouse of the 1920s, Littman's People's Theater—and so many of its sibling institutions across the country—found itself in an increasingly remote, increasingly Black, and decreasingly fashionable, neighborhood.⁶⁷

The foregoing external forces have been well documented. Until recently, however, forces intrinsic to the Yiddish theater have not been adequately considered. In her national study of Yiddish playhouses, Nahma Sandrow has demonstrated just how deleterious the HAU's policies were to the overall social and economic conditions of Yiddish theater. While Sandrow focuses mostly on New York, a similar case can be made for Detroit. Although well intentioned, by the 1930s the HAU stymied Littman's operations in two devastating ways: it inconsistently enforced its non-competition policy (in some cases blatantly ignoring it), and it inflicted restrictive rules about actors' recruitment and employment.

On the face of it, the HAU should have made Abraham Littman's life easier. Originally intended to preserve Yiddish theater in America, the union provided access to essential services from its nationwide network of actors and crew, which no doubt contributed to the quality of the productions and to Detroit's participation in the global world of Yiddish culture. By the 1930s, however, with revenues of both English and Yiddish theatrical enterprises declining, theatrical

⁶⁴ Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 141.

⁶⁵ Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 185, 191.

⁶⁶ Jack Rosner interview.

⁶⁷ Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 294-95.



unions like the HAU imposed financial demands that were too high to ensure full employment for their members. As live theater audiences dwindled due to the cheaper, more exciting attraction of "talking pictures," fewer performances by live theater companies could not generate sufficient profit to pay union wages *and* keep the lights on.⁶⁸ This problem plagued Littman's throughout the 1930s, causing each successive season of performances to be shorter than the last. By the 1935-36 season, Yiddish-language films largely had replaced higher-quality "literary" plays.⁶⁹ What use was there in negotiating pay and transportation for actors from New York to perform a famous work such as Peretz Hirshbein's *Grine felder* (*Green Fields*) when a filmed version could be screened multiple times at a fraction of the cost?

Touring Yiddish-theater productions—helmed by non-local managers—would prove some of Littman's stiffest competition. In theory, the touring companies were in violation of the HAU's stated non-compete policy. In practice the HAU sometimes played its union members off one another, to Littman's detriment. For example, in 1934 a star-studded touring company, led by Yiddish-theater star Molly Picon, was scheduled to perform a kunst production in Detroit. The HAU assigned Abraham Littman's bitter rival, New York-based manager Edwin Relkin, to the engagement. Although tickets would be sold at Littman's box office, the actual performance would take place downtown at the Cass Theater at 300 W. Lafayette Street—a fair distance from the heart of Jewish Twelfth Street and still further from Dexter-Davison. Worse yet, Relkin expected Littman to front the funds for the production's advertisements, even though Littman would not profit from the performances.

Littman's letters to Relkin displayed his frustration at being edged out of his hometown market in violation of HAU policy:

I hope you will be honest enough and admit whether you would make these gambles that you want me to make. You think that when you play these few attractions in a downtown theater, that my reputation in Detroit doesn't mean anything by the Detroit people, and where is the rights of franchise that we have with the Actor's [sic] Union. . . .

Why do you want to get all you can out of Detroit from those few attractions, which are the strongest ones of all, and you don't want the next one to make even a few dollars out right?⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 298.

⁶⁹ Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 117-18.

⁷⁰ Hebrew Actors' Union Papers, box I-1:49, folder 1520, YIVO Archives.



Relkin responded with insults: "It is no use arguing with you as no one has ever won an argument with you. . . . There are fifteen people in Detroit who don't know the Yiddish theatrical business and you are all fifteen. . . ."71 Littman's only consolation was that the circus was a box-office failure.⁷²

The situation repeated itself in 1936 and 1938 when Relkin helmed performances starring Maurice Schwartz and Jacob Ben-Ami, respectively. Each time, HAU leadership did not intervene, forcing Littman's already strained theater to take losses by advertising and selling tickets for performances from which it would not profit. Further, the practice of holding higher-quality kunst performances at "legitimate" theaters only cemented Littman's reputation of being an uncultured shund theater with "a lot of Coca-Cola bottles on the floor, bad acting, and always a happy ending."⁷³

By the early 1940s it had become clear that Littman's People's Theater could no longer survive as an independent institution. In late 1941 Detroit Jewry embarked on a novel project to create a permanent, communally subsidized Yiddish theater, with Littman at the helm. A smart idea that came too late, the *Gezeshafteker yidisher teater fun detroit* (Jewish Theater Guild of Detroit), would soon founder, due to the HAU's other management blunder: obstructive regulations about how actors could be hired and paid for working on Guild productions.

The Guild was spearheaded by the former head of Poland's Yiddish actors' union, Mark Yoaviler. With patronage from local businessman Benjamin Dov-Ber Leykin, Yoaviler designed the Guild to attract a broad cross section of Detroit's Jewish community (especially targeting young people) to both underwrite and attend its productions.⁷⁴ In the words of Nahma Sandrow, the plan would prove a flop:

[I]n the face of the dissolution of the old Yiddish community and the sinking proportion of serious dramatic efforts to popular entertainments,

⁷¹ Hebrew Actors' Union Papers, box I-1:49, folder 1515, YIVO Archives.

⁷² Hebrew Actors' Union Papers, box I-1:49, folder 1515, YIVO Archives.

⁷³ Zaft Benyas Oral History; Bolkosky, *Harmony & Dissonance*, 61.

⁷⁴ Zalman Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn Teater* (1970), 7:col. 6223, line 9, accessed July 27, 2023, <https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/encyclopedia/gezeshafteker-yidisher-teater-in-detroit>; Benjamin Leykin, *Zikhroynes fun a praktishn bal haloymes* (New York: Shulsinger Bros., 1970), 196, accessed July 27, 2023, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc208264/laikin-benjamin-zikhroynes-fun-a-praktishn-bal-haloymes>.



community leaders . . . tried to use the theater as a bulwark against the tide, hoping to lure young people into Yiddish theater as a way of linking them with Yiddish culture. Plays like *Green Fields* portrayed pious old country people and could serve as an educational glimpse of grandfather's world. Unconsciously such leaders seemed further to hope that the warm intimacy that the Yiddish theater experience still held for them might also envelop American youngsters and teach them Yiddish by osmosis.⁷⁵

In December 1942, with Jacob Ben-Ami leading a star-studded troupe, the Guild offered its first two performances: Hirshbein's *Grine felder* (*Green Fields*) and Pinski's *Yankl der shmied* (*Yankl the Smith*). Yoaviler laid plans for two shows each week, 48 weeks a year, plus a subsidized Yiddish drama school for young people. Despite the grand ideas, these would be the only two performances ever funded by the Jewish Theater Guild.⁷⁶

Behind the scenes and hundreds of miles away, budget negotiations in New York between the Guild, represented by Leykin, and HAU Director Reuven Guskin broke down, leaving the Guild without actors to perform in productions. The impasse had arisen when Yoaviler had insisted that recently arrived Polish refugees, none of whom were HAU members, be recruited for the Guild. Thus, the Guild would be outside the auspices of the union. In response, Guskin refused to modify HAU employment policies which prohibited the recruitment of HAU actors for non-union performances. Yiddish-theater historian Zalman Zylbercweig recalled the stalemate:

I remember this period very well, and was a close friend to both [Yoaviler and Guskin.] . . . How Guskin explained it to me is that Mark Yoaviler, undertaking to organize a Yiddish theater association in Detroit, would have broken the backbone of the Hebrew Actors' Union by setting aside the principle that members of the Hebrew Actors' Union in America should not be recruited [for non-union performances]. [Yoaviler desired] that all members of the troupe must be Yiddish performers from Poland who had found themselves in America and remained outside the union. Besides this the union had no trust in the association's promised funding, and demanded a strong guarantee in this matter, fearing that the collected

⁷⁵ Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 299.

⁷⁶ Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 299.



cash would be spent on administrative expenses and would almost certainly not remain in the coffers to ensure the practical existence of the theater.⁷⁷

With the failure of negotiations in New York, the Guild dissolved after only two performances. Littman would struggle on, operating the theater without the community's broad financial support for another year and a half.

Littman's Final Years

Following the failure of the Guild, each season at Littman's People's Theater grew shorter, relying heavily on film screenings and benefits to make ends meet. Soon, the money ran out, and Littman began to wind up operations in a well-regarded finale.⁷⁸

For three nights starting on May 28, 1944, Littman's staged *Green Yankees*, starring Aaron Lebedeff and Leon Fuchs. After the limited run, in the fall of 1944, he managed a number of touring Yiddish musical productions not at his own theater, but at the Masonic Temple's Scottish Rite auditorium. By this time, it appears he no longer owned the landmark that bore his name at 8210 Twelfth Street. By year's end he was selling tickets from his apartment at 1927 Pingree St., No. 32, just a few blocks north of his empty theater.⁷⁹

In November 1944 *Detroit Jewish News* publisher Philip Slomovitz reflected on the theater's decline and demise:

For 21 years, Abraham Littman had made the Yiddish theater his life's work. Year in and year out, he struggled to perpetuate activities for the Yiddish stage. This year, for the first time, he is compelled to reduce his efforts and to limit them to just a few specially sponsored performances. In previous years, the theater, by this time, had already functioned for a number of weeks. This year, Mr. Littman arranged for two Sunday performances and at this writing it is impossible to foretell whether there will be other presentations before long. We record these facts with deep regret. Mr. Littman has earned the community's support and encouragement. But, apparently, the Yiddish theater-supporting audience has been considerably reduced and there is little hope of the theater's

⁷⁷ Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn Teater*, 7:col. 6223, line 9.

⁷⁸ Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 101, 295.

⁷⁹ "Littman Presents *Green Yankees* May 28, 29, 30," *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), May 19 1944; "Yiddish Theater Season Opens at Masonic Temple," *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), September 15, 1944; "Littman to Bring Yiddish Play to Masonic," *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), December 15, 1944.



permanent revival. . . . [I]t is a source of regret to us that Mr. Littman should be subjected to disillusionment after many years of loyal services to the Yiddish theater.⁸⁰



Figure 9: The building on Twelfth Street in Detroit that housed Littman's People's Theater from 1937 to 1944 operated as a movie theater under the name "Abington Theater" from 1945 to 1953. (<https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/2798/photos/32971>.)

Although diminished, Yiddish theater would find new life in America following the end of World War II. But Littman's People's Theater would not stage another production. The building remained in use for another decade, but for startlingly different purposes. The Michigan Department of the Jewish War Veterans held Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services there in September 1945.⁸¹ The auditorium reopened as a movie theater sometime that same year under the

⁸⁰ Editorial, *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), November 24, 1944.

⁸¹ *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), August 31, 1945.



name “Abington Theater,” seen in an undated exterior photograph (Figure 9).⁸² It closed once again in 1953, reopened as the “Goldcoast Theater” in 1956, and closed for good two years later in 1958.

Littman died at the age of 81 in Brooklyn, New York, on August 10, 1962. By this time Detroit’s Twelfth Street was no longer a majority-Jewish neighborhood. After the demolition of Paradise Valley and Black Bottom for the construction of I-375, Twelfth Street became the economic core of Detroit’s Black community. Aerial images show that the building that housed Littman’s theater was no longer standing by 1973, a victim either of arson during the Uprising of 1967 or of demolition for the widening of Twelfth Street.⁸³

Conclusion

For the seventeen years during which it operated, Littman’s People’s Theater was a hub for Yiddish-language artistic and cultural productions, connecting members of Detroit’s Jewish community to each other and to the global world of Yiddish culture.⁸⁴ Despite distinctions of class, citizenship, religious denomination, and secularism, the audience, actors, and crew all found a home at the theater. The institution’s economic position was often precarious. And despite suggestions that shund productions caused the theater’s demise, its success and failure were broadly determined in large part by structural trends in population, geography, language, and economics, which transformed the Detroit—and American—Jewish community.

⁸² Brian Krefft, “Goldcoast Theater,” *Cinema Treasures*, 2015, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/2798>.

⁸³ Historical Aerials, accessed July 27, 2023, <https://www.historicaerials.com/viewer>.

⁸⁴ In *The Detroit Yiddish Theater: 1920 to 1937*, James Miller claimed that Littman’s People’s Theater closed in 1937. He based this assertion on the fact that Littman rented the theater space to the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Theatre Project for the summer of 1937. It is unclear why Miller assumed that Littman’s did not continue operating as a Yiddish theater after this rental period expired. His assumption may be based on the fact that the core group of actors known to audiences at Littman’s experienced considerable turnover in the late 1930s. However, this type of turnover was common, and audiences certainly would not have viewed it as significant enough to consider the theater “closed.” Shirley Zaft Benyas recalled attending Littman’s well after 1937, and primary source documents—ranging from personal correspondence between Littman, Relkin, and Guskin, to newspaper articles—confirm that although the number of performances each season diminished, the theater was not by any means considered “closed” until after the final production of *Green Yankees* in May 1944. Additionally, Abraham Littman remained in Detroit at least until the death of his wife, Yetta, in 1947. See Miller, *Detroit Yiddish Theater*, 121-22; Zaft Benyas Oral History; Hebrew Actors’ Union Papers, box I-1:49, folder 1515, YIVO Archives.



Like its predecessor, the Yiddish Playhouse, Littman’s lost appeal for its upwardly mobile audiences as they acculturated more fully into American linguistic and economic life—migrating northwest and placing less importance on the communal role of Yiddish as a result of new immigration policies and generational shifts. Well-intentioned, but restrictive, HAU employment policies put further pressure on the theater and hindered efforts by its manager and the community to save it from closure. Despite the theater’s demise, Abraham Littman’s “loyal services to the Yiddish theater” and to Detroit Jewry made a long-lasting impact on the cultural life of the city.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ See Editorial, *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), November 24, 1944.



BOOK REVIEW

Impossible Takes Longer: 75 Years After Its Creation, Has Israel Fulfilled Its Founders' Dreams? By DANIEL GORDIS.
Ecco/HarperCollins: New York, 2023. 384 pages. \$32.99.

Reviewed by Martin B. Shichtman, PhD
Professor Emeritus of English and Jewish Studies, Eastern Michigan University

It seems reasonable to dwell, just for a moment, on the title of Daniel Gordis's new book, *Impossible Takes Longer: 75 Years After Its Creation, Has Israel Fulfilled Its Founders' Dreams?* There is, of course, a joke, hiding in the first part of the title: that the Jews who conceived of, and created, the State of Israel understood their project was impossible, but believed they could accomplish that impossibility anyway, *maybe*, with just a little more time. The joke points to the incredible audacity of Israel's founders, their chutzpah, if you will, and to the idea of a nation both powerful and "unfinished," that, by necessity, will always be a "work in progress." While the second part of the title does not quite offer the zinger of the first, it, too, embraces irony. Much of the point of Gordis's book is that Israel's founders frequently argued with one another, presenting conflicting dreams, and, periodically, advancing notions of statehood wildly divergent from the realpolitik of the Middle East. Nevertheless, these architects, even as they disagreed about what their new nation might look like, desired elusive perfection. They understood that Israel would be exceptional, aspirational—more so than the United States, from which they would draw much inspiration.

Political theorist Benedict Anderson writes of the modern nation as an "imagined community," a space where, thanks to technologies like the printing press, a large group of people can be brought together under a shared system of language and beliefs. This shared system teaches what it means to be, say, an Englishman, a Frenchman, an American, a German.¹ For the founders of Israel, language was a significant issue in the formation of their imagined community. Gordis makes much of the significance of Hebrew to the Jewish state. By reviving a language only used in religious ceremonies, Israel's architects provided a political and religious foundation for belonging, for citizenship. But, Gordis also insists that Israel is different from many modern nations. *Impossible Takes Longer* suggests that Israel was created by idealists of many, sometimes wildly differing, stripes—prolific thinkers and writers—all imagining very different states for the Jewish people. Today, no longer a young nation, Israel is the product of a preponderance of sometimes coalescing, but more often, colliding, idealisms.

¹Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).



First and foremost, Daniel Gordis, PhD, Koret Distinguished Fellow at Shalem College—Israel's first liberal arts college—author of more than a dozen books, and two time National Jewish Book Award winner, is a Zionist. An American who made Aliyah (immigrated to Israel) in 1998, Gordis celebrates the Jewish state in virtually all of his writings. Gordis is not, however, blind to Israel's problems, and he is willing to air at least some dirty laundry. In fact, it is the space between Gordis's affection for Israel and his recognition of its imperfections—some might even call them failures—that makes *Impossible Takes Longer* a fascinating read. As the book compellingly demonstrates, Gordis is a model of public intellectualism: he moves from history to politics to religion to linguistics to literature to popular culture with grace and ease, explaining conditions undergirding the "complexity" of the Jewish state for an audience of non-specialists. He makes difficult arguments accessible. He brings scholarship to life, which is vitally important work. Too frequently the subject of facile praise or criticism, Israel, as Gordis argues, is neither a "miracle" nor a "colonialist," "genocidal," "oppressive" nation. It is a mass of contradictions, always striving to be something more. Gordis's layered discussion leads readers to appreciate the ambition of Israel's struggles.

Israel's Declaration of Independence—which Gordis posits as the nation's establishing document—is the launching pad for his book. He explains at length why a constitution was impossible for early Israel, and is still disturbingly out of reach, given the numerous agendas fueling the parties making up the nation's parliament, the Knesset. This is not a book for those who prefer "taking sides" on Israel; Gordis offers nuance. He explains how Israel's founders struggled with imagining a "new Jew"—a tough, formidable Jew—without forgetting the traumatic experiences of many immigrants—especially those who survived the Holocaust. He considers how the thinkers who created Israel fought over economic systems—some strident communists, others capitalists—and the ways they managed uncomfortable compromise. He addresses the constant tensions between the secular Jews who wrote the political documents establishing the Jewish state, and the Orthodox Jews to whom they ceded considerable power—including authority over marriage, divorce, and, in many cases, who is a Jew. He talks about problems with racism, how Jews from the Middle East and Africa have often been left behind as Israel has transformed itself into "Start-Up Nation." (Israel earned the moniker based on having the largest number of start-ups per capita in the world.)²

²See Dan Senor and Saul Singer, *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle* (New York: Twelve Books, 2009); Gil Press, "The Promise and Future of Startup Nation," *Forbes*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/gilpress/2023/02/24/the-future-and-promise-of-startup-nation/?sh=4b77703395dd>.



But for all of these difficulties, Gordis is quick to remind us that Israel sends physicians and nurses into the world's hottest spots. He points to Israel's many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), working to solve the problems of the poor, the weak, the suffering. He points to the military's policy of "purity of arms," requiring soldiers to refrain from targeting non-combatants, even when the non-combatants are used as human shields by those targeting Israel.

Perhaps it is inevitable that Gordis gets bogged down in the quagmire that most troubles Israel, the continuing conflict with Palestinians. The complexity of this problem requires a more thorough consideration than Gordis can provide. If the book succeeds because it is willing to embrace nuance, it is in the discussion of this conflict that nuance becomes elusive. Gordis's dismissal of Israel's left as being lost to the dustbin of history is a bit too quick and easy—as was recently demonstrated by massive anti-government demonstrations in Tel Aviv. His conviction that Israel's right has some potential to find an equitable solution may be wishful thinking—he may overstate the successes, for instance, of the Abraham Accords (a series of agreements, effective September 15, 2020, normalizing relations between Israel, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, and later, Morocco and Sudan). Gordis reliably addresses many of the crimes committed by Palestinian terrorists against Israeli citizens, and he does not shy away from Israel's sometimes horrific punishment of Palestinians. He seems to indicate that we are heading towards some sort of a one-state solution—and while he wants to be positive, he is too clear-eyed a thinker to believe that this will suffice for either party.

Impossible Takes Longer is a wonderful book. It wants to be a happy book, celebrating a huge milestone for the State of Israel, but it can't quite get there. Seventy-five years ago, Israel's founders set themselves on a path that would create a great nation—but this nation would struggle with internal conflicts and face constant threats from the outside. Perhaps 75 years is just not long enough for Israel, for Israelis. There is so much more work to be done, so much more time to be spent, striving towards the impossible.



ESSAYS AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Remembering Detroit's Celebration of the Establishment of Israel, May 14-16, 1948

Robert A. Rockaway, PhD

Friday, May 14, 1948. I was nine years old. I lived with my widowed mother and grandparents at 1924 Hazelwood, near 12th Street, across from Boesky's Delicatessen. (Boesky's had achieved notoriety because it served as a favorite hangout of Detroit's Jewish Purple Gang.) On that day David Ben-Gurion declared the establishment of the State of Israel.

I'll never forget the exciting atmosphere in Detroit's Jewish community. Imagine, a Jewish state had arisen just three years after the end of World War II and the Holocaust. For the first time, the Jewish people had a state of their own—in their ancient homeland. Detroit's Jews were ecstatic.

The radio in my home, along with the radios in most of the city's Jewish residences, was tuned to the roll call taking place at the United Nations in New York City. When the United States cast the deciding vote, cheers went up in my house and could be heard in Jewish homes throughout the country.

At the time I was a student at Yeshiva Beth Yehuda, located in Detroit on Dexter and Cortland, so I was aware of what was happening in Israel. Our teachers talked about the events daily. I clearly remember one of my instructors telling us about an extraordinary battle between the Jews and Arabs in the 1948 War of Independence. He said that twenty or so Jews were outnumbered by 200 Arabs, and both sides were shooting at each other. All of a sudden the Arabs threw down their weapons and raised their hands in surrender. Stunned,

Robert A. Rockaway, PhD, was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. He received his doctorate in history from the University of Michigan in 1970. Since 1971 he has been a member of the Department of Jewish History at Tel Aviv University, where he is professor emeritus. In addition to numerous articles, Rockaway has authored four monographs: *The Jews of Detroit, From the Beginning, 1760-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), *The Jews Cannot Defeat Me: The Anti-Jewish Campaign of Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1995), *Words of the Uprooted: Jewish Immigrants in Early 20th Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), and *But He Was Good to His Mother: The Lives and Crimes of Jewish Gangsters* (Jerusalem and New York: Gefen Publishing House, 2000). He has appeared on radio and television in Israel and the United States. He appeared on the Arts and Entertainment series, *American Justice* ("The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Mobster"), and on *American Biography* ("Louis Lepke" and "Mickey Cohen"). A number of his writings are being made into feature films.



the Jewish fighters collected the weapons and asked the Arabs why they had surrendered. The Arabs responded that they had been certain they had seen hundreds of Jews shooting at them, and believed they had no chance of winning. My teacher said the Jews whom the Arabs “saw” were Biblical Jewish warriors who came alive to help the Israelis.

I can’t remember if I believed this tale or not.

During recess my classmates and I didn’t play typical games such as “King of the Hill.” Instead we divided up into the *Haganah*, the paramilitary organization of the Jewish community in Palestine, and the *Irgun*, the underground “terrorist” organization headed by Menachem Begin, who would become prime minister of Israel in 1977. We engaged in pushing and shoving matches, but no one ever got hurt. The hill we fought over was very low.

In a Purely Commentary column published in the *Detroit Jewish News* on May 14, the paper’s founder and editor—and a committed Zionist—Philip Slomovitz, urged readers to “turn out en masse” on Sunday, May 15, at Detroit Central High School’s athletic field to celebrate Israel’s statehood. “No one should be missing from Detroit’s gathering in honor of the Jewish State.”¹

Saturday, May 15, 1948. I went with my grandfather, as I did every Saturday, to services at Congregation B’nai David on Elmhurst and 14th Street. It was called in Yiddish the *Russische shul*, the Russian synagogue, because most of its congregants had immigrated to America from Russia. The excitement in the building was palpable, and no one stopped talking about the miraculous event: A Jewish state? Who believed this could happen in our lifetime?

During services, I remember congregants crying when the Mourner’s Kaddish prayer was recited. No one could imagine a Jewish state after centuries of dispersion and persecution. Unbelievable. Throughout the service, congregants kept walking around and talking. B’nai David’s rabbi, Joshua Sperka, had to ask for quiet a number of times because the cantor, Hyman Adler, could not be heard above the hubbub. Walking home with my grandfather after services, I could hear people on their porches talking about these momentous events with their neighbors.

Sunday, May 16, 1948. That afternoon I was bussed with my Yeshiva classmates to Central High School’s athletic field. We joined more than twenty thousand exuberant revelers to celebrate the birth of the State of Israel. Event organizers had arranged for “all of [Detroit’s] Jewish school children [to] attend

¹ Editorial, *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), May 14, 1948.



Figures 1 and 2: On Sunday, May 16, 1948, more than twenty thousand people, including the author, crowded Central High School’s athletic field to celebrate the establishment of the State of Israel. Revelers overflowed onto nearby sidewalks, and thousands of others had to be turned away. (Courtesy of Leonard N. Simons Jewish Community Archives, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.)



the celebration as a mark of unity with the youngsters of Palestine who shared in the fight for freedom.”² The field was mobbed, and the crowd overflowed onto the sidewalks lining Linwood Avenue. So many people heeded Slomovitz’s call in that week’s *Jewish News* that thousands of others had to be turned away.³ The *Jewish News* later reported that this was the largest demonstration by Jews in the history of Detroit.⁴

My classmates and I, along with students from other religious schools, marched around the field holding small paper Israeli flags. When we stopped, the ceremonies began.

Rabbi Sperka and other Detroit rabbis spoke, and Cantor Adler blew the shofar ram’s horn. The Detroit police band provided music. At the end of the program, we all stood and sang the Israeli national anthem, “Hatikvah” (The Hope).

That was not the end of it. The establishment of Israel was an ongoing topic among Detroit’s Jews and in the community’s Jewish press. As an ardent Zionist and crusader against antisemitism, Slomovitz ensured that events taking place in Israel received front-page coverage in the *Jewish News*—a policy that would continue throughout the remainder of his life.

At the time, little did I dream that I would eventually move to Israel, where I have lived for 50 years.

² *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), May 14, 1948.

³ *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), May 21, 1948.

⁴ *Jewish News* (Detroit, MI), May 17, 2018.



ESSAYS AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

The Day I Met a Hero, Yitzhak Rabin

Jeannie Weiner

In June 1994 Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin, had been in office two years. His constituents had not expected him to make peace with Syria because he had been concentrating on developing a path to peace with the Palestinians. However, in 1993 Rabin met with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad. And in 1994 the United States was encouraging Israel to engage in peace negotiations with both Syria and the Palestinians. So, when Rabin walked into his office late, he apologized. His phone conversation with Assad had delayed his meeting with us, but our small delegation was not in the least offended. In fact, I was thrilled and rather starry eyed to be spending any time at all with him. When he sat down and offered to pour me coffee or tea from the table in front of us, I truly was impressed with his courtesy and humility.

I was in Israel under the auspices of the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC, but known as JCC at the time). Our group, organized and led by JCRC’s then-executive director, David Gad-Harf, included Congressman Joe Knollenberg, a Republican from the Detroit suburbs; Congressman Dale E. Kildee, a Democrat from Flint; their wives; and me, then-president of JCRC. In those years JCRC trips to Israel with opinion makers and “influencers” were not infrequent.

When David Gad-Harf quietly told me Prime Minister Rabin would like to meet with the congressmen before we returned to the United States, I was surprised and pleased. I assumed all of us would have a brief meeting, a photo opportunity, and then proceed to the airport. But when we arrived at the prime minister’s office, Gad-Harf told me Rabin would see only three of us. Gad-Harf insisted that I should meet Rabin with the congressmen. I recall thinking that Gad-Harf really should be one of the three people in the room, but he would likely return to Israel many more times and have numerous opportunities to meet the prime minister. Little did any of us know that a year later, in November 1995, Rabin would be brutally assassinated in Tel Aviv after attending a peace rally.

Jeannie Weiner is a local freelance writer and a lifelong community activist and volunteer. She is a past president of the Jewish Community Relations Council and current president of JHSM. In 2021 Weiner received Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit’s prestigious William Davidson Lifetime Achievement Award for her “lifetime of service to the Jewish community of Detroit and the Jewish people.”



On various trips to Israel I learned about Rabin's influence in the success of the state—figuratively “running into him” at every turn while learning the history of modern Israel. Rabin was a much-admired prime minister, known for his fierceness on the battlefield and his strong leadership skills. He was considered “hawkish” as a soldier, but what drove him to succeed in battle was his desire for peace. Rabin believed Israel must have a strong military to defend itself, to make peace with its neighbors, and to find the way to internal peace with its Arab citizens. He became a centrist as a politician and a practical leader. Rabin connected with the early pioneers and founders of the state. He was linked to the land and had a strong Jewish identity.

He was born in Jerusalem in 1922, in contrast to previous prime ministers who were born in Europe (Ben-Gurion, Sharett, Eshkol, Meir). As the first native-born Israeli prime minister, Rabin was the bridge between the idealistic founders of the state and a new generation of leaders. He was raised as a Labor Zionist in Tel Aviv. He excelled in school.

As a teenager, Rabin joined the *Palmach* commando force, the elite fighting unit of the underground army prior to the establishment of the state. Because Israel was under British rule, Rabin fought with the Brits in World War II. In 1943 he commanded a platoon at K'far Giladi in the north, training the troops in modern tactics.

A man of principle, Rabin fought *against* the British after the war because they were preventing Jews from immigrating to Israel (called Palestine at that time.) As a young soldier in Atlit in October 1945, he and others raided a detainee camp, freeing 208 Jewish immigrants. And he was a commander in the famous battles on the road to defend Jerusalem in the 1948 War of Independence.

In 1948 he joined the newly formed IDF (Israel Defense Forces). He oversaw the victory of Israel in the Six-Day War in 1967. Later he served as Israel's ambassador to the United States from 1968 to 1973.

It was Rabin who ordered the raid on Entebbe, Uganda, which startled the world with its boldness and success in 1976. The operation known as a “counter-terrorist hostage rescue mission,” freed 102 of 106 hostages and safely returned them to Israel.

He was minister of defense during the First Intifada (the Palestinian uprising against Israel's disputed territories), which began in 1987. In 1994 Rabin signed a peace accord with Jordan during his second administration as prime minister (1974-1977 and 1992-1995). Along with Shimon Peres and Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat, he received the Nobel Peace Prize that same year following the Oslo Accords.



Figure 1: In June 1994, during a trip to Israel organized by the Jewish Community Relations Council, the author (left), Congressman Dale E. Kildee (center), and Congressman Joe Knollenberg (second from right), met with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (right). Rabin discussed Israel's challenges and the importance of US support with his visitors.



Figure 2: The author shakes hands with Rabin during their meeting. (Photos courtesy of author.)



Our 1994 Michigan delegation was awed by Rabin's roles in Israeli history and his status in the world. What I remember upon meeting him was his deep, soft, and gravelly voice. He was tall and had the presence of a strong man, but he seemed gentle. He was serious and calm. We knew he had just come from intense negotiations with an enemy of Israel. But still, he was attentive and courteous. He told us about the negotiations with Syria and the challenges Israel faced. He emphasized the importance of the support of the US government and its citizens. He was engaged and genuine. Because Rabin arrived late, we were told we could meet with him for about 10-15 minutes. It was amazing to leave the conversation after 40 minutes.

There were two other people in that room, a young man and woman taking notes with pencil and paper. As we left I asked Rabin's aide who they were. He explained that it was necessary to have notes of every word at every meeting so that anything said later about the discussion could be verified and corrected, if necessary.

Congressmen Knollenberg and Kildee were both moved and impressed by Rabin. Sadly, these longtime public servants are no longer living. That 1994 mission to Israel with members of different political parties was congenial, friendly, and celebratory. The two congressmen remained friends and colleagues and supporters of the Jewish community and Israel.

I have returned to Israel many times since that visit. I have visited the grave of Yitzhak Rabin at Mount Herzl National Cemetery. In 2023, on a Jewish Federation mission, we stopped at the spot in Tel Aviv where he was murdered. We saw the small space on the street where he was felled and which now tells the story of this tragic loss. Being there almost 30 years after meeting Rabin, I was overcome with indescribable sadness.

Yitzhak Rabin's final speech, at an enormous rally for peace, moments before he was shot, clearly demonstrates the courtesy, humility, and gentle nature I observed when I met him:

Permit me to say that I am deeply moved. I wish to thank each and every one of you who have come here today to take a stand against violence and for peace. This government, which I am privileged to head, together with my friend, Shimon Peres, decided to give peace a chance—a peace that will solve most of Israel's problems.

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ESSAYS AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Israel at 75: Celebrating the Non-Miracle of the Jewish State

Rabbi Yoni Dahlen

There's a word it seems everyone uses when they talk about Israel. At least when they're talking about her through a historical context: her creation, her formation, her blossoming as a nation. The word they all seem to use is "miracle"—that Israel's birth (or rebirth, depending on your political philosophy) represents nothing short of the miraculous.

I get why they say it. The odds were definitely not in our ancestors' favor. The Western world, seemingly, couldn't *tolerate* Jews, let alone support a Jewish claim of sovereignty and self-determination. And that was just the West! In the East and Middle East, the very idea of Jewish autonomy in our ancestral homeland was met, not with antipathy or ambivalence, but with hostility, threats, and violence.

And yet . . . here we are. Israel at 75. Not an Israel on life support or an Israel preparing to make peace with the dream of political Zionism. But rather, an Israel that continues to grow and thrive, an Israel that continues to innovate and inspire, an Israel that consistently ranks at the top of the list in quality of life and overall happiness. An Israel that, yes, can feel like a miracle.

But this word . . . it just doesn't sit well with me.

To be fair this is a conversation that our people have been engaged in since the Second Temple was standing. This conversation on miracles. But that's a topic for another time.

To me, calling Israel a miracle misses the entire point of Israel. Israel does not exist as a nation because G-d appealed to the UN, or, to be historically accurate, the League of Nations. Nor does Israel exist because G-d resettled within the walls of the *Beit HaMikdash* (Holy Temple) and brought *Moshiach* (Jewish Messiah) to give peace to the world.

Israel exists—Israel breathes, and grows, and thrives—because for 2,000 years, we Jews have never forgotten our home. And that simple statement is, of course, anything but simple because Jewish history is a rollercoaster. But the balancing and harmonious thread through the twists and turns, the loops, the climbs, and the plummets has been . . . home.

Rabbi Yoni Dahlen grew up on the prairies of northern Iowa. After falling in love with Jewish thought and philosophy in college in South Dakota, he attended Brandeis University and obtained his rabbinical ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary. He is a rabbi at Congregation Shaarey Zedek in Southfield, Michigan.



When the first exiles returned from Babylon, *Tehillim* (the Psalms) tell us that they were like dreamers. When Titus took tens of thousands of our ancestors in chains and scattered them throughout the Roman Empire, they all set their eyes back on Jerusalem and longed for the day they would return.

Through the zealots' belligerence in the Crusades, the humiliation of dhimmi status during the caliphates, the Inquisition, the dehumanizing and life threatening Papal bulls, and the countless pogroms, we still prayed, *u'vevei Yerushalayim, Ir ha'kodesh bimbera v'yameinu*, "to rebuild Jerusalem and return us home."

And through the Enlightenment; contributions to the worlds of art, science, medicine, and philosophy; and unprecedented moments of Jewish success, achievement, integration, and acceptance, we still put ourselves at risk and brought about mockery and derision because we dared to say that our bodies were in the West, but our hearts were in the East.

And while other nations of the world scratched their heads, perplexed by the so-called "Jewish question," we shouted back the "Jewish answer" to deaf ears, repeating the words we've been whispering since time immemorial: *l'biyot am chofsi be'artzeinu, Eretz Tzion, Virushalayim*, "to be a free people in our Land, the Land of Tzion, and Yerushalayim."

And that's what we did. We returned. Not because the sea split for us again and allowed us to walk back on dry land. But because Jewish tenacity, Jewish determination, and hope—endless, endless hope—said, "It's enough. It's time."

That return has been hard. There is a lot of sweat and blood in that return. There is sacrifice in that return. And there are the elements of human weakness in that return: hubris, arrogance, power struggles, hate, and conflict. But at no point did the hope go anywhere. At no point did we lose sight of the dream.

So here we are. Israel at 75. An imperfect country with monumental challenges before it. But a country—a Jewish state—a home for a people who never forgot it. A home filled with more magic, passion, pride, defiance, and chutzpah than any home in history. A home where our limitless potential harkens back to the words of Tehillim, and we say, just as those exiles did so long ago, that in our return, we are like dreamers.

The dream is not a miracle. It is a promise kept for millennia. It is a *ner tamid*, a fire that never goes out and that makes this moment possible. It is a fire called *tikvah*—called hope. And it hasn't gone anywhere. And it isn't going anywhere. Because we're still here. Because *am Yisrael chai*, "the people of Israel live."

Israel . . . you are complicated. But, my word, are you remarkable. Thank you for allowing us to dream. *Yom huledet sameach and mazal tov!* "Happy Birthday and congratulations!"



NOTABLE JEWISH MICHIGANDERS IN HISTORY

MWWMD Biography—Emma Lazaroff Schaver: A Philanthropist, Zionist, and Musician Who Brought the Gift of Song to Holocaust Survivors¹



Emma Lazaroff Schaver was a professional soprano soloist and philanthropist who supported the global Jewish community, including by using her gift of song to help Holocaust survivors. (JHSM collections.)

“She was the biggest star ever in the history of our Jewish community,” said Oak Park author and historian Irwin Cohen after Emma Lazaroff Schaver’s death in 2003. Born to Jacob Lazaroff and Tzippe Henye Velinsky on March 15, 1905, in a small village near Yekaterinoslav, Ukraine, Emma immigrated to the United States with her family as a young girl. By 1914 the family had moved to Detroit. “I have always considered myself a Detroiter,” Emma would later say.

¹ This article is adapted from Shirlee Rose Iden, “Repairing the World—After the Night,” *Michigan Jewish History* 37 (September 1997): 4-5.



She attended Northern High School, beginning in its first year of operation. Following her graduation, Emma studied voice at the Detroit Conservatory of Music and The Juilliard School in New York. “[M]y whole consciousness was singing,” she would later recall. “I usually say that it was not special, it was simply breathing out and breathing in.” As a young woman, Emma performed with several opera companies and orchestras, including the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, developing a prominent career as a soprano soloist. She performed concerts in Europe, North and South America, and Israel, and recorded two albums. She married Morris Schaver in 1924; they were married for 30 years until his death.

Yiddish was Emma’s first language, and her parents—followers of the Lubavitch Hasidic movement—instilled in Emma a rich tradition of Jewish culture and values. From a young age, Emma also was a proud Zionist. “I was a Zionist in my mother’s womb, and I cannot remember ever not being one.” “My father was a Labor Zionist and that was the path I followed.” In 1917 she danced in the streets when the British government issued the Balfour Declaration calling for the creation of a homeland for the Jewish people in what was then Palestine. In 1932 she made her first trip to the land that would become Israel. She wrote to her family, “You have no idea the feeling to be in your own home.”

Emma Lazaroff Schaver used her vocal gift to help Holocaust survivors as a member of the first cultural mission to Europe after World War II, sponsored by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the World Jewish Congress. For six months, she traveled to displaced persons’ camps in the American zone in Germany presenting concerts to survivors. “When I saw the condition of the people, I volunteered to stay longer. . . . I felt I had something to do there.” Emma also sang for the first group of survivors allowed into the US after the war. These performances, she would later say, were among her most moving experiences.

Throughout her life, she used her fame and talent to support cultural and education causes locally and globally. She and Morris were noted philanthropists and civic leaders who endowed scholarships and libraries: the Morris and Emma Schaver Library-Archive at the Zekelman Holocaust Center in Farmington Hills, Michigan; the Emma Lazaroff Schaver Library at The Shul in West Bloomfield, Michigan; and the Emma Lazaroff Schaver Music Building at Detroit’s Wayne State University. They also created an accounting scholarship at the WSU School of Business Administration and founded the Morris and Emma Schaver Educational Fund at Wayne State University Press.

Emma Lazaroff Schaver was committed to supporting the global Jewish community too. She was a founder of the Harry S. Truman Research Institute



for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1965 and received the Eleanor Roosevelt Humanities Award from the State of Israel Bonds for outstanding service to humanity in the spirit and ideals of the former first lady in 1967.

Emma Lazaroff Schaver also received numerous awards for her work. Among these are honorary degrees from The Juilliard School and the Jewish Teachers Seminary; 1995 Holocaust Memorial Center Legacy Award; 1995 Leonard N. Simons History-Maker Award from JHSM; and a 1997 Arts Advocate Award from WSU. Her papers are collected at the Jewish Community Archives at the Walter P. Reuther Library at WSU.

She spent her later life in Southfield, Michigan, where she lived for more than 35 years until her death on January 26, 2003, at the age of 97. A public concert of vocal music was held in her memory in Israel in February 2003—a fitting tribute for a lifelong Zionist who worked tirelessly to support Israel both financially and through the gift of song.

Emma Lazaroff Schaver is just one of Michigan’s remarkable Jewish women. Since 2013 JHSM has highlighted achievements like hers in the Michigan Women Who Made a Difference Project. To explore and support this undertaking, please visit JHSM’s MWWMD online gallery at www.jhsmichigan.org/mwwmd.



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Guest Editor's Message

Zieva Dauber Konvisser, PhD

I was raised in a family where Israel was “home,” the place where my parents met and married, and would return many times to visit and to live. They have both come “home” to Zion and Jerusalem for their final Aliyah and resting place on the Mount of Olives (*Har Hazeitim*), Judaism’s oldest and holiest cemetery.

My first trip “home” was in the summer of 1955, when I was twelve years old. We visited my grandfather, *Saba*, my aunts and uncles, and my cousins, whom, until then, I had known only as pen pals and from photos. Since then, I have visited our “home” over 25 more times—lovingly embraced each trip by my family, friends, and homeland.

In celebration of Israel’s 75th anniversary, this year’s Creative Expressions offer a glimpse at the enduring bonds Michiganders have with the Jewish state. From sharing a birthday to recalling childhood memories to marrying into an Israeli family to volunteering to experiencing life-changing visits, Israel draws each of the authors “home.”

Like my mother, who came to Jerusalem in the 1930s from Vilna, Lithuania, Deborah Hochberg’s father immigrated to Tel Aviv from Poland in 1935. In her poem, “When I Think of Israel,” Hochberg recounts her father’s golden childhood in his new home and deep connections to the land of Israel.

In their memoirs, “From Apricots to Air Raids,” and “You Are Our Second Army,” Sue Ross and F. Linda Cohen, respectively, explore the draw “home” to aid Israel. Sue, who shares her birth year with the modern State of Israel, recalls her experience as a recent high school graduate in 1966-1967 volunteering on a kibbutz and choosing to remain in the country to assist during the 1967 Six-Day War. Linda recounts her decision to follow in the footsteps of her three daughters and spend her “vacation” volunteering with Sar-El, The National Project for Volunteers for Israel, on an Israel Defense Forces military base for three weeks in the summer of 2004.

Zieva Dauber Konvisser, PhD, is an adjunct assistant professor of criminal justice at Wayne State University and a fellow of the Institute for Social Innovation at Fielding Graduate University. Her research focuses on the human impact of traumatic events, including terrorism, genocide, and wrongful conviction, and the possibility of positive change after trauma. She is the author of *Living Beyond Terrorism: Israeli Stories of Hope and Healing* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2014), and is the oral historian at the Zekelman Holocaust Center in Farmington Hills, Michigan. She serves on the boards of METIV: The Israel Psychotrauma Center, Strength to Strength, and Proving Innocence, and is a member of the Innocence Network Research Review Committee.



In her poem, “Ode to the *Hatzar*,” Beverly Kent Goldenberg, also a birth-year twin with Israel, reflects on her ties to the Jewish state as she describes the welcoming courtyard of her Israeli husband’s family home in Ramat Gan.

Three additional poems beautifully depict the impactful connections visitors coming “home” make with the people and land of Israel. Joy Gaines-Friedler reveals the sense of belonging she felt during her first visit to Israel as a teenager in “USY Pilgrimage, 1971”; Claire Weiner describes her thoughts during her hike to one of Israel’s iconic locations in “Aubade at Masada, 1973”; and Linda Laderman reflects on the people she met during her 2012 visit to Israel in “A Promise.”

Finally, in his essay, “Forever Changed by Israel,” Detroit Jewish News Foundation archivist Mike Smith reflects as a non-Jew on his life-changing first visit to Israel in March 2023 with Jewish Federation of Metro Detroit’s Motor City Mission.

As always, we invite readers to submit personal essays, short stories, memoirs, or poems for our Creative Expressions section. If interested, please email publications editor Tracy Weissman at tweissman@jhsMichigan.org or call us at (248) 915-1844.



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

When I Think of Israel

Deborah Hochberg

I think of my father
 As a child
 Standing on the beach in Tel Aviv
 Holding a balloon
 Dreaming the soccer ball
 That danced between his feet
 Would take flight
 Like the moon
 The moon reflected on the sea
 Where he danced and sang with his friends—
*we don't want to go to sleep,
 we want to go crazy*
 The long summers
 at Kibbutz Dorot, Tzorah, and Zhamadiyah
 Harvesting grapes
 And three years in the army
 When I think of Israel
 I think of my father
 My father
 Whose soul will always belong
 To the land of Israel

Deborah Hochberg lives in Oak Park, Michigan. She is the author of two poetry collections, *Waiting for the Snow* (Traverse City, MI: Mission Point Press, 2021), and *Memory's Reservoir* (Traverse City, MI: Mission Point Press, 2022).

Author's note: This poem first appeared in *Waiting for the Snow*. The author wrote this poem about her father, Israel Hochberg (1933-2018), as a way to maintain her connection with him, and to preserve some of the memories and stories he shared with her. He immigrated with his parents to Tel Aviv in 1935 from Kosow Laski, a small town in Poland. His youth in Israel was a golden time in his life. After serving in the Israel Defense Forces for three years, he came to the United States at the age of twenty, full of hope for the new life he would find—marriage, children, a family. He met his wife, Diane (Hadassah) Schreiberman, who was born in Warsaw, through the Israeli student organization at Wayne State University. Israel Hochberg worked for many years at New Horizons Rehabilitation Services in Oakland County, ultimately becoming its executive director.



The author's father, Israel Hochberg, circa 1950, served in the Israel Defense Forces for three years before immigrating to the United States at the age of twenty. (Courtesy of author.)



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

From Apricots to Air Raids

Sue Ross

I don't believe my connection to Israel was an accident. After all, I was born on February 2, 1948, just a few short months before the Jewish state, 75 years ago. And I doubt it was sheer coincidence that the relatives for whom I was named resulted in my Jewish moniker—*Liebe Yisrael*, or “Love Israel.”

So, it shouldn't be surprising to learn I shared the nascent country's rebellious nature as I pushed back against the predestined life chosen for me. I was expected to attend college, go on to teach kindergarten, marry, produce a handful of children, and live in a house in the suburbs. Yet, at age eighteen, I longed for a self-directed life where I could come and go as I pleased, expand my horizons beyond expectations, and emerge more mature from the experience. Later, I could go to college.

Understandably, my parents were less than thrilled, so I negotiated an alternative. Israel beckoned. It was fresh and shiny in 1966. A young country, seeking its place in the world. I applied and was accepted into the Jewish Agency's Ulpan program¹ and signed up for a six-month kibbutz residency.

Following my arrival at Lod Airport (now Ben Gurion International Airport), the kibbutznik driver, who had come to fetch me, pointed out the sights.

“Did you plant a tree in Israel?” he asked.

“Of course I did,” I replied. “Why?”

“See that grove over there?” he said. “That's where your tree is planted!”

“How do you know?” I asked, incredulous.

“Because every American's tree is planted there,” he laughed.

It was the first of many jokes Israelis would enjoy at my expense, but as most were good-natured, I learned to roll with the giggles.

Sue Ross has published her stories, articles, and poetry in five *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books, the *Detroit Jewish News*, *San Francisco's Upbeat Times*, *The Road Less Written*, and other nonprofit and small business publications. She has taught high school, college, and post-graduate studies, and worked as an executive fundraising consultant, a small business owner, and a senior administrator at nonprofit organizations, including Chicago's Art Institute, Joffrey Ballet, and Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership. Sue served on the board of Sonoma State University's Alliance for Holocaust and Genocide Lecture Series, and currently sits on the ADL's Michigan Regional Board and Farmington/Farmington Hills' MultiCultural/MultiRacial Council. She is an active volunteer at the Zekelman Holocaust Center in Farmington Hills and is completing her first novel about a Holocaust survivor.

¹ Ulpan is an intensive Hebrew-language program that the Jewish Agency started in 1949.



Figure 1: The author in front of her hut at Kibbutz Hazorea, 1966. (All photos courtesy of author.)

Nestled in the Valley of Jezreel, surrounded by the Carmelite mountains, Kibbutz Hazorea's lush surroundings and modern design spoke to its German wealth, a result of post-World War II reparations. It boasted a large dairy farm, with cows and chickens. Residents benefited from fresh milk, eggs, and chicken dinners, as well as apples, apricots, and other offerings from the kibbutz's orchards. In addition, Hazorea was home to both a plastics factory and a furniture manufacturer, which fashioned Danish modern chairs, tables, and beds—famous worldwide.

Adventures and misadventures made up life on the kibbutz. Rising at dawn, I rotated among a variety of assignments: ironing and folding sheets off a burning hot mangle in the laundry, serving meals in the large dining hall, cleaning the children's houses, plucking chickens, and picking fruit in the orchards. During the afternoons, I studied Hebrew and quickly became adept at conversation.

We celebrated Jewish holidays in the main dining hall. When Chanukah arrived, we enjoyed the oversized Chanukiah and candle-lightings. On Purim, Ulpan members donned costumes, with several of us performing in a riotous musical before the entire kibbutz. However, it was Passover, which presented a challenge. Many in our Ulpan group identified as Jews by virtue of our religion,



while the overwhelming number of Hazorea's kibbutzniks insisted religion was secondary to living in, and working, the land of Israel.

"We are the true Jews," we'd argue. "We believe in G-d, while you call yourselves atheists!"

"No, *we* are the true Jews," they'd shout back (debates were always shouted). "We are fulfilling the Biblical commandment '*lay-hee-ote am*' (become a people) by living in *Eretz Yisrael!*"

Such debates began when a few of us refused to place bread on the tables (alongside matzah) or rebelled when ham was served during the seder. (Pork was considered an infrequent delicacy: to accommodate religious protocols that prohibited pigs from setting foot on Israeli soil, farmers raised them on wooden risers.)

Yet, it was probably on work assignments where I learned how truly different life on a kibbutz in Israel was from my urban Jewish existence in America. Picking oranges was lovely, until monsoons turned the ground to knee-deep mud, and I had to be dug out by a bulldozer. Then, there was the time a member of our group (an Australian doctor) decided to inject a few oranges with Vodka, leading us to enjoy quite the inebriated mid-morning break. I preferred the orchard's apricots or *mishmish*, but discovered that my fondness for Israel's large, firm variety caused regular stomachaches due to my proclivity for snacking heavily on the job.

Each month Ulpan members were granted mini-vacations or "time off" from both work and Hebrew classes. It gave us the opportunity to travel the country on our own terms. As might be imagined, this led to all sorts of mischief. Once, I attempted to order scrambled eggs in a Tel Aviv restaurant. I should have guessed something was up when my laughing waitress kept asking me to repeat my order. How did I know I was using a pet term coined by a child on the kibbutz, who called scrambled eggs the equivalent of "confused eggs"?

Life was exciting, work often backbreaking, friendships bridged all nations and ethnicities, and "traveling weekends" were educational and fun. Until, that is, the weekend five of us rented a car to drive a fellow Ulpan member to a kibbutz near Gaza. It was May 1967, and our six-month program was drawing to a close. During the drive, we almost crashed through a makeshift border barrier late at night, prevented only by Israeli soldiers, rifles drawn. Quickly realizing we were English speakers and foreigners, one of them chuckled and said, "Welcome to Gaza." He reached into the car, turned off our headlights, and instructed us to follow his jeep so he could lead us safely to our destination.

Upon our arrival, we passed beneath a heavily armed watchtower and were shown first to an air-raid shelter and then to our overnight accommodations. We



were instructed to sleep in our clothes with running shoes and flashlights beside our beds, the blackout curtains tightly drawn. Life in Israel had taken on new meaning. The country was mobilizing for war.

Weeks later, traveling by rail alongside the Mediterranean coast, I was startled when the train suddenly lurched to an unannounced stop due to nearby gunfire. I had been reading the *Jerusalem Post* and was transfixed by the stories of Jews flocking to Israel from around the world, volunteering to stand in for Israelis called up to fight.

I spoke the language. I knew the work. Most importantly, I was a Jew and could be of service to the world's only Jewish state. I knew immediately that I would not be returning home following the upcoming Independence Day celebrations in Jerusalem.

After registering at the US Embassy, I found myself arguing with a ticket agent at El Al Airlines in Tel Aviv when I asked to cancel my return flight to America.

"Are you crazy?" he said. "We're going to war! I have people lined up around the block screaming for a flight out. They don't even care where it's going, as long as it gets them out of Israel! And you want to cancel your ticket to New York? What other language do you speak? Is there someone else there I can talk to?"

Back on the kibbutz, my Hebrew teacher stilled my hand, just as I was about to rotate the handle of an unfamiliar machine. "That's the kibbutz air-raid siren," he explained, instructing me to pack my bag and move closer to the shelter (the reinforced, windows-blackened dining hall).

On June 5, after reserving the telephone line for one last call home, I was awakened by that very same siren, and began the first of what would be several sprints to the air-raid shelter. In between, I was finally notified to report to the office to make my call. If I thought the ticket agent was a rough sell, I should have anticipated my parents' reaction! I was nineteen years old and making what was seen as a life-and-death decision.

"Mom, don't worry. The kibbutz is quite secure. I'll be fine."

"That's all well and good, but did you know there's a war going on over there?" she cried.

Considering the alarm in her voice, I decided not to mention having just witnessed a MIG shot down, or the Israeli colonel standing impatiently over me awaiting the line for the army's use. Finishing my call, I handed the phone to the colonel just as the siren sounded again, and I raced past the newly dug slit trenches back to the shelter.





Figure 2: Workers dig slit trenches at Kibbutz Hazorea in preparation for war, 1967.

I guess I had always known my life was inextricably woven with that of Israel. It was not simply a coincidence that following the end of the Six-Day War on June 10, 1967, now speaking Hebrew, I was welcomed onboard one of the first Egged buses in twenty years to cross from West to East Jerusalem.² Without hesitation, I followed the tanks clearing the area to the Western (“Wailing”) Wall. To the roots of my people. To my heart’s center. Where my name sang to me. “*Liebe Yisrael.*”

Happy 75th Birthday, Israel! May we both live to 120 and beyond!

² The Egged Public Transportation Company is the largest transportation operator in Israel.



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Ode to the *Hatzar*¹

Beverly Kent Goldenberg

An oasis amidst urban sprawl,
surrounded by concrete reaching the sky,
bustling sidewalks,
crammed vehicles
sounding their horns.

Open the gate,
follow the flat paver stones
to a garden,
trees and flowers
adorning a small house.

This home on a hill
once surrounded
by sand and orange groves,
from seeds to trees,
from generation to generation.

Hatzar, like its name,
is a royal courtyard.
The Queen of the Night pops
its elegant white blooms,
encircling all
into its fragrant splendor.

Once you open the gate,
cross its threshold,
it wraps you into its
sweet embrace.
Like this land of milk and honey,
from its blossoms
love’s sweetness flows.

Though the heat may swelter,
water and drink pour,
delectable delicacies
quench your appetite
even when no hunger looms.

The *Hatzar*’s beauty,
calm,
unconditional love
embrace me,
as do its residents
who now call me their own.

Beverly Kent Goldenberg was born and raised in Detroit. She earned a BA in psychology and a master’s degree in social work from the University of Michigan. She worked at Jewish Family Service and Hillel Day School of Metro Detroit for over 30 years, creating social skills programs that were modeled statewide. She and her Israeli husband, Michael (Mickey), raised their two sons, Etai (Caroline), a urologist, and Oren, a filmmaker, in Huntington Woods, Michigan, where Beverly and Mickey still reside today. Beverly is *savta* to four grandchildren—Leo, Ami, Estee, and Elie, and to a grand-dog, Sparrow.

¹ *Hatzar* is the Hebrew word for “courtyard.” This poem describes the *hatzar* in the Goldenberg family home, since 1934, in Ramat Gan, Israel.





Figure 1 (top) and Figure 2 (bottom): The queen of the night (Figure 1) and other flowering plants grow in the hatzar of the Goldenberg family home in Ramat Gan, Israel. The Goldenberg family name is pictured on the mailbox in Figure 2 at the entrance to the hatzar, circa 2021. (Courtesy of author.)



Author's note: The author and her “Birthday Twin,” Israel, were both born in the spring of 1948—post-World War II gifts. Each year the author’s mother, a passionate, proud Zionist, would remind her, “You and Israel will be celebrating your 10th, 16th, 21st birthdays. . . .” After graduate school, free to go anywhere, the author visited the mysterious place her mother loved, the place that shared her birthday. She came away in “awe of visually seeing the land and places that I learned about, heard about, and studied.”

In 1976, she met an Israeli man, Michael Goldenberg (Mickey), at a *Yom Ha’Atzmaut*—Israel Independence Day—celebration at the Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield, Michigan. The couple were married in 1978, further strengthening the author’s ties to Israel. She and her “Birthday Twin” continue to celebrate their birthdays together each year, sometimes twice—on the author’s birthdate and at a *Yom Ha’Atzmaut* celebration, often in the *hatzar* of Mickey’s family’s home in Ramat Gan, Israel.



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

USY Pilgrimage, 1971

Joy Gaines-Friedler

With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.

Moments after we climbed down the steps, walked across the tarmac to the tiny terminal, our world burst into song. Not just the sound of language we'd studied with vowels yet never understood, but songs of *water* & pronouncements: *Here is what is good. Here we sit together in unity.* We were sixteen. What did we know?

There was something shepherding about the air, about the Egged tour buses, the bursting into song, the strange blossoms of sage & thistle, pomegranate trees, Van Gogh-like olive branches. Desert & history penetrated our skin. We needed this return we never knew we needed. We sang. We danced. We were the antidote to grief.

One could feel envious for the simplicity of life here, for the clothes of old countries, luscious peaches, boisterous birds, the sea singing its quiet harmonies, ancient mountains softened into rocky desert, seas turned to salt. For the first time in our lives we let go of presumption. This is what Israel taught us. And more than what we felt was what we took home with us.

I took the children looking down on us from stone balconies, transparencies of the old road where an army jeep, soldiers with guns, escorted us *pilgrims* through their neighborhood. I took the face of a woman in Jerusalem, who, when I handed her a single long-stemmed rose on Shabbat, offered me the eyes of a mystic doe. She taught me yet another language. What did I really know of the faces of survivors & those children. From the Shuk I took home a jacket made from lamb's hide. I wore it all winter.

**Editor's note:**

With joy shall ye draw water . . . is translated from the Hebrew song, "Mayim Mayim."

Here is what is good . . . is translated from the Hebrew Psalm 133: "*Hinei ma tov oo mah nayim, shevet achim gam yachad.*"

Joy Gaines-Friedler holds an MFA in creative writing. She is the author of four award-winning books of poetry. In 1971 Joy traveled to Israel with USY Pilgrimage. That trip awoke a profound sense of connection to "place"—a sense of belonging to history, and to a People. It was an opportunity to witness Israel as a joyous homeland for earlier Jewish settlers and traumatized survivors of anti-Semitism. Years later that connection deepened when Joy married Moti, an Israeli child of Polish and Austrian Holocaust survivors. On this 75th anniversary of the establishment of Israel, Moti's mother, Shifra, still lives in Bat Yam. She is 101 years old.



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Aubade at Masada, 1973

Claire Weiner

Roused by silence
I start my ascent up

Snake Path,
darkness my shield.

Step-over-step
on dusty desert rocks,

scattering small ancient
stones, a well-worn path,
through pre-dawn chill.

Escorted by starlings
and the pale blush of the moon,

my own breathlessness
the soundtrack until—

the unfolding array
of a gleaming day
from earth's lowest point.

Drinking in the triumph
of my vertical odyssey until—

shadows of those
who fell on their own swords

reminded me
there was no triumph here.

Claire Weiner is a poet and author whose work has been published in *After Hours*, *Burningwood Literary Journal*, *Uppagus*, *Peninsula Poets*, Hoffman Center for the Arts' *Community Writes*, and others. She spent her non-writing career as a clinical social worker in psychiatric settings, helping people make more sense of their life stories. She currently teaches meditation in a variety of community settings. She splits her time between Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Tucson, Arizona, grateful to be surrounded by natural beauty in both places. Her upcoming chapbook, *For a Chance to Walk on Streets of Gold*, will be published by Finishing Line Press.



Masada, 2013 (Courtesy of Steve Haskin.)



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

You Are Our Second Army

F. Linda Cohen

As summer vacation began in June 2004, my colleagues at Detroit Country Day School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, said “goodbye” as if they might never see me again. They knew I was leaving to volunteer for three weeks at an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) base. Their reaction scared me, and I began to second-guess my decision. It was the first time I felt nervous. My rabbi offered me an *aliyah* on Shabbat morning and gave me a special blessing for my trip. He reminded me that this was an important *mitzvah*. His words deeply resonated with me, calmed my nerves, and restored my confidence that I was doing the right thing.

Reading Rabbi Daniel Gordis’s book, *If a Place Can Make You Cry: Dispatches from an Anxious State* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002), was the impetus for my trip. This book left me feeling that there are times when it is important to do what is meaningful, even if it requires taking a riskier route. Your actions define who you really are.

Following in the footsteps of my three daughters, I had decided to volunteer with Sar-El—The National Project for Volunteers for Israel, which contributes to Israel’s security by assisting on IDF bases in a logistical support role. Sar-El started in the summer of 1982, during the Galilee War, in response to an acute agricultural-worker shortage in the Golan Heights settlements. With the help of 650 Jewish American volunteers, unattended and already ripened crops received the necessary care and attention.

Realizing the merits of their actions, those first volunteers expressed their wish for the project to continue, and it still does to this day. Volunteers now come from different religious backgrounds, and from as many as 35 countries and all 50

F. Linda Cohen, from Baltimore, Maryland, now lives in Franklin, Michigan. She attended the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and earned her master of arts degree in teaching reading and language arts from Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan. A retired reading specialist, with a specialty in dyslexia, Linda published a book documenting her parents’ story in February 2019, *Sarinka: A Sephardic Holocaust Journey from Yugoslavia to an Internment Camp in America*. Linda is also a proud Next Generation speaker at the Zekelman Holocaust Center in Farmington Hills, Michigan, and most importantly, she is a wife, mother, and *savta*



US states. They perform various civilian, non-combatant work assignments, most often on military bases. Base locations are determined following arrival in Israel, depending on the need at the time. Sar-El’s main goals are to strengthen the bond and sense of solidarity between the Diaspora Jewry and the Jews living in Israel, and to send volunteers home as goodwill ambassadors for the Jewish state.

With excitement, I boarded the El Al flight. I looked forward to reading the special letters from my family on the plane. My daughter Lauren, who was already in Israel, wished me a safe trip and conveyed how excited she was for me to visit her in the one place that nourishes her soul each summer. My daughter Jaime reminded me that while my trip was just beginning, it had emerged from my steadfast determination to make my well-thought-out dream a reality. She wrote, “Although some people told you this was a rash decision, those who knew you best understood that this was not at all rash, but rather a dream which had been brewing for years.” My daughter Meredith, who had volunteered on an Israeli air force base a few summers before, was full of advice that made me chuckle. She wisely advised me to take every opportunity to meet and talk with as many people as possible, especially soldiers, because “each of them will share something that will help make you even better than you are today.”



The author (left) is pictured with IDF soldiers on the base where she volunteered and lived for three weeks during the summer of 2004. (Courtesy of author.)



People told me how great it was that I wanted to help Israel. My first thought was that they had it all wrong! *I* was the lucky one because Volunteers for Israel was giving me the opportunity and privilege to experience Israeli life, surrounded by amazing IDF soldiers. What could possibly beat that?

I knew before I signed up that the trip would not be a vacation, and I was certainly not going for the food or accommodations! I would have to wear a uniform, take orders, and work hard, but I was excited and ready.

Five of us shared a room in the barracks. Each morning began at seven with breakfast and a flag-raising ceremony. One day, I was asked to raise the Israeli flag, along with an IDF soldier. Tears welled up in my eyes as I looked up at the flag waving, looked down at myself in uniform, and then across to the soldier who assisted me. I have cherished that experience to this day!

Each morning, our *madricha*, the officer in charge of our group, announced the news before assigning our jobs for the day. Since I was on a medical base, a group of us was appointed to sort hundreds of medical supplies by expiration date, before categorizing, counting, packaging, and sealing packets—ready for use, if needed, during combat. We processed antidotes for nerve gas, emergency surgical instruments, tourniquets, and chest tubes. The soldier in charge thanked us profusely.

Some days I had kitchen duty, but even that job was meaningful. I worked side by side with the soldiers, learning their procedures. We washed dishes, prepared tables, and served officers. When we relaxed during non-working hours, interacting with the soldiers and hearing their views and opinions was my favorite thing to do.

It was a five-day work week on the base (Sunday through Thursday evening). We had to leave the base for Shabbat. Each week we were taken on one educational field trip, including visits to the first neighborhood in Tel Aviv, Ammunition Hill, and the Western Wall in Jerusalem. In the evenings we heard lectures on topics ranging from the history of Sar-El to the cultural background of the Ladino language to personal reactions of Israelis when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated.

Lecturer David Fink spoke about the modern State of Israel. He urged us to keep coming and to continue sending our sons and daughters. He reminded us of the importance of praying for Israel, considering daily purchases to help the country economically, and continuing to boycott anti-Israel media. He concluded with this message to the Diaspora, which is as true today as it was in 2004:



You are our second army. The State of Israel is locked in a worldwide battle for the hearts and minds of the world. We can't fight this war of perception alone. Everything you do counts. When someone talks about the Israel-Arab conflict, all eyes are on us. The Israel-Arab conflict is one where everyone is involved and everyone is taking sides. Everything we do is monitored by the whole world. We need your help. Worldwide opinion slanted against us inhibits our ability to do our job and protect our citizens. We need you to fight this war of perception with us. In many cases, we need you to fight this war for us. **YOU ARE OUR SECOND ARMY!** We need your help. A very grateful Israel thanks you.

During the concluding ceremony when we were given our hats, shirts, certificates, and a special Sar-El pin, our *madricha* said, "It is one thing to support Israel from your homes, but it's quite another thing to come here and support Israel physically and mentally. . . . And remember, no matter where you are, you should always carry Israel in your hearts." By volunteering, I showed the solidarity of Diaspora Jews, helped boost the morale of the Israelis I met, and felt a sense of pride in what I accomplished with a diverse group of new friends. Rabbi Gordis was right that the experience helped define me. On this 75th anniversary of the establishment of Israel, I hope that continuing to share my IDF story will inspire others to become part of Israel's second army, helping both themselves and Israel to thrive.



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

A Promise

Linda Laderman

Every year it's next year
 In Jerusalem. A journey,
 A promise, waiting.
 We sit cross-legged in a Bedouin
 tent, under a roof of billowing silk.
 Camels snort, bellow, spit.
 A prayer
 At the Wall, men wrapped
 in prayer shawls, sway,
 their bodies curled, unfurled.
 A note
 Tucked into crevices
 between cracks.
 an ask of an unseen God.
 A seedling
 planted in a desert.
 bent over, our bodies
 move from tree to tree.
 A miracle
 Copper skinned
 tribes of Abraham
 our palms pressed together
 we swing from side to side.
 A street vendor
 rolls his brown eyes.
 Scarved women bicker
 over price.
You want or not?
 We want, we want.

Linda Laderman is a Detroit-area writer and poet and the 2023 recipient of *Harbor Review's* Jewish women's poetry prize. Her poetry can be found in the *Jewish Literary Journal*, *ONE ART*, *Poetica Magazine*, *The Jewish Writing Project*, *The Write Launch*, and elsewhere. She has work forthcoming in *Rust & Moth* and *Thimble Literary Magazine*. For nearly a decade, she volunteered as a docent at the Zekelman Holocaust Center in Farmington Hills, Michigan. "A Promise" was previously published in the *Jewish Literary Journal*, no. 101 (November 2021), <https://jewishliteraryjournal.com/poetry/elementor-3032/>.



CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Forever Changed by Israel

Mike O. Smith

At a recent reception, a woman came up to me and said that she had read about my trip to Israel in the *Detroit Jewish News*. More to the point, she noted that it was my first time in Israel, which I acknowledged. "Well," she emphatically stated, "it's about time!"

You know, she was right. It was indeed about time that I experienced Israel.

I know the precise moment that I began a lifelong interest in Israel. Growing up in Garden City, Michigan, our home news media of choice was the *Detroit News*. As a young reader, I looked forward to the sports section, Sunday comics, and stories about the world beyond America.

One day, on June 6, 1967, the *Detroit News* published a story that caught my attention. It was a report about a tiny nation called Israel that was in the midst of a war with Jordan, Syria, and Egypt. Outnumbered and outgunned, Israel, nonetheless, emerged victorious after conducting one of the most brilliant military campaigns in modern history. This was the beginning of my respect for, and deep interest in, Israel.

Since then, I have read widely about the history of Israel. I studied the modern Middle East during graduate studies at the University of Michigan. In my current position with the *Jewish News*, I often write about Israel's history.

I have also worked closely with Detroit's Jewish community as an archivist, and then director for nine years, at the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University; and subsequently, at the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library. I developed an understanding of the history of Jewish Detroit and developed relationships with community members, many of whom are friends to this day. From them, I heard plenty of stories about Israel and the role it plays in their lives.

But reading about, and hearing stories of, Israel only goes so far. I felt I needed to see Israel for myself.

Mike O. Smith holds the Alene and Graham Landau Archivist Chair at the Detroit Jewish News Foundation. He has 30 years of experience as an archivist and historian of Detroit and Michigan, including nine years as director of the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University, and five years as the Johanna Meijer Magoon Principal Archivist at the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library. Mike also directed the graduate program in archival administration at Wayne State for five years.





Figure 1: The author took a life-changing trip to Israel in March 2023 as part of Jewish Federation of Metro Detroit's Motor City Mission. (Courtesy of Yevgeniya Gazman.)

I finally traveled to Israel in March 2023. *Jewish News* editor, Jackie Headapohl, and I were part of the Jewish Federation of Metro Detroit's Motor City Mission. (I will be forever grateful to *Jewish News* leadership for sponsoring our participation.)

My Israel experience actually began before I boarded the plane. The buildup was unlike any other trip I have ever taken. Usually, friends and family might say something like "that's very nice, glad you are getting away for a holiday." In this case, however, I was struck by the reaction of my Jewish friends and colleagues to the news that I was going to visit Israel. Again and again, they told me how pleased



they were for me, or, even if they previously had traveled to Israel multiple times, how they envied me. Several of my friends continued an old Jewish tradition and gave me *tzedakah* for my travels.

One pre-travel experience will stay with me forever. Mark Davidoff, special assistant to the *Jewish News* board chair, who has been to Israel more times than he can remember, was truly happy, even joyous, that Jackie and I would see Israel for the first time. It was a heartfelt moment that I really appreciated. All of this made me think . . . there must really be something special about Israel.

Well, my trip to Israel was nothing short of fantastic. Experiencing the sites and people of Israel was, as advertised, a life-changing experience. Although I am not Jewish, it left a deep impression upon me. A few experiences stood out among the many daily discoveries and delights.

Our excursion to the Golan and Israel's border with Lebanon was powerful. It was sobering to be so close to a potential area of conflict, knowing that hostile forces from Hezbollah and/or Iran were watching us. We could see with our own eyes that Israel lives in a tough neighborhood, with enemies on its national border, literally a few yards away. This is an experience that, fortunately, most of us do not encounter in America.

In Jerusalem, our first stop was Mt. Herzl and the new soldiers memorial. Inside the National Memorial Hall for Fallen Soldiers is a wall of bricks, each



Figure 2: Federation's March 2023 Motor City Mission stopped at Jerusalem's National Memorial Hall for Fallen Soldiers. Inside are more than 23,000 bricks, each engraved with a soldier's name and death date. (Courtesy of John Hardwick.)



with the name of a fallen soldier. I noticed that one of our guides, Itzik Yzanai, become emotional as he looked at bricks with the date, February 4, 1997. Itzik related that he lost many comrades that day when two Israeli Air Force helicopters crashed, killing all 73 soldiers on board. Having served in the US Marines, I understood the comradery he felt with fellow soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces, and the sense of loss.

As sundown approached on Shabbat, our rabbis sang to us on the monumental steps in front of the Double Gate at Jerusalem's Temple Mount. Dating from the period of the Second Temple, and overlooking the city, the monumental steps have been partially restored due to the generosity of Detroit-area philanthropists Doreen and David (z"l) Hermelin and family. During his lifetime of service, David Hermelin served as president of the American ORT Foundation (today, ORT America), and later, as only the second American president of World ORT. (ORT is a global education network, grounded in Jewish values, that was founded in Russia in 1880.) From December 1997 to January 2000, Hermelin was the US ambassador to Norway.



Figure 3: Motor City Mission participants listen to Detroit-area rabbis sing on the monumental steps in front of the Double Gate at Jerusalem's Temple Mount, March 2023. Detroit-area philanthropists Doreen and David (z"l) Hermelin and family provided support for the steps' partial restoration. (Courtesy of John Hardwick.)



That same evening, we visited the Western Wall, history in front of our eyes. The Davidson Center in the Jerusalem Archaeological Park overlooks the Wall. Named for Detroit's William "Bill" Davidson (z"l), the Center, which first opened in 2001 and was recently renovated, displays excavated artifacts from the Second Temple period. President of Guardian Industries, one of the world's largest manufacturers of architectural and automotive glass, and owner of the Detroit Pistons, Davidson supported numerous Jewish causes in Detroit, Israel, and elsewhere. As a Detroiter, I felt a sense of pride upon seeing local connections amid the ancient wonders of Jerusalem.

Finally, the walking tour of the Old City of Jerusalem was special. The feeling one has traveling along the same path as Jews, Christians, and Muslims from thousands of years ago cannot be described.

During the mission, we visited various Israeli non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or historic social-service organizations. These side trips were both interesting and enlightening. During our stop at the Jewish Agency for Israel's Beit Brodetsky young-adult absorption center, we met women from Belarus and the Ukraine and a man from Iran, who had all recently made Aliyah. The center provided them with lodging, food, and intensive Hebrew lessons to give them a fresh start. They spoke about their reasons for making Israel their home. Beit Brodetsky is really doing great work. I decided to donate my tzedakah to it.

Another day, Jackie and I chose a "diversity tour" as our side excursion. During the tour, we rode the light rail system. According to our guide, the purpose was to see Israel, beyond the usual television images. Our railcar held as diverse a group of people—all nationalities and colors—as would be found anywhere on earth. All riding harmoniously to or from their daily activities.

At the winery at Moshav Yesud Hamaala, I met some of my favorite people on the mission: Jacob, Jonathan, Shira, and Brooke, from JARC. A great moment occurred during our evening at Kibbutz Sarid when Jacob took Jonathan to dance with members of the Kibbutz. The look on Jonathan's face was something to remember. I have never seen a bigger smile in my life.

As we traveled across Israel, a strong, ongoing Detroit-Israeli relationship is evident. Detroiters visit and support Israel, and Israelis visit and connect with Detroit. Evidence of this dynamic can be found throughout Israel—certainly, in Jerusalem, as I mentioned above, and in our partnership area in the Galilee region.



Besides having a wonderful time, participating in the Motor City Mission will have a direct, positive impact on my work. I write a weekly history-focused column as well as other stories about the local Jewish community for the *Jewish News*. Touring Israel, meeting its people, and seeing first-hand various historic and modern landmarks will influence my writing. As the adage claims, “seeing is believing.” Indeed.

Even as a gentile, I feel forever changed by my trip to Israel. It is one dynamic, unique nation.



 2024 APPLEBAUM AWARD

Call for Submissions



Rabbi Emanuel Applebaum, circa 1948. (JHSM collections.)

JHSM invites article submissions to *Michigan Jewish History* for consideration for the 2024 **Rabbi Emanuel Applebaum Award**. The award honors outstanding original scholarship in the field of Michigan's Jewish history, broadly defined.

Purpose and Process: This award is named for Rabbi Emanuel Applebaum (1922-2001), a JHSM founding member and *Michigan Jewish History's* first editor, serving from 1960 to 1963. All entries are reviewed and judged by *MJH* editors, the *MJH* advisory committee, and external referees. The winner receives publication in *MJH*, a cash prize of \$2,000, \$150 worth of JHSM books, special recognition at JHSM's awards ceremony, and a complimentary JHSM annual membership. Finalists also may be invited to publish in *MJH*.

Eligibility: Graduate and advanced undergraduate students, faculty members, public historians, and independent scholars are encouraged to submit manuscripts for the Applebaum Award on any topic appropriate to the aims of *MJH*. Double-spaced manuscripts should not exceed 10,000 words, excluding notes, tables, and figures. Chicago-style notes should not exceed 5,000 words.

Submission: Please email a Word version of the complete manuscript to Tracy Weissman, *MJH* managing editor: tweissman@jhsMichigan.org. **Please write “Applebaum Award” in your email's subject line.** Submissions received by close of business on **December 20, 2023**, will be considered for the 2024 award cycle.

About: *Michigan Jewish History*, a peer-reviewed academic journal, is published annually by JHSM. The most successful submissions will be accessible to JHSM's entire readership, including scholars and the interested general public.



IN MEMORIAM

Judith Levin Cantor

1928–2022



(JHSM collections.)

On July 26, 2022, JHSM lost its matriarch, Judith Levin Cantor—a president, tireless fundraiser and supporter, writer and editor of Michigan’s Jewish history, and the power behind our endowment. Judy impacted so many lives at JHSM and throughout the Detroit Jewish community that no single tribute could do justice to this amazing human being. We have included below memories from just a few of the people who loved and admired Judy.

L’Dor v’Dor. From Generation to Generation. Those were the defining thoughts of my mother, Judith Levin Cantor, who saw herself as a bridge between the immigrant Jewish population of Detroit in the nineteenth century and her modern grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the twenty-first century.

My mom was born in Detroit in 1928, shortly after the death of her highly respected grandfather, Rabbi Judah Leib Levin, after whom she was named. She grew up immersed in stories of Rabbi Levin’s involvement in taking care of



Detroit’s growing Jewish population: the founding of a Hebrew education system, including a school that later became Yeshiva Beth Yehudah; Jewish charitable organizations to provide meals for the poor; organizations for the maintenance of Kashruth (see related article on page 8); and Jewish cemeteries. As the daughter of Lillian Keidan and Professor Samuel Levin, chair of the economics department at Wayne University (now Wayne State University), Judy heard many first-hand stories at the dinner table of the growth of industrialism in Detroit and efforts to educate union organizers who were struggling to improve the lives of workers in the automotive industry.

As a teenager, my mom was resourceful and adventurous, starting a small daycare business during World War II, picking cherries in northern Michigan to aid the war effort, and bicycling across the state and back with her friends in 1944. Because she had skipped two grades of school, she graduated from Detroit’s Central High School at age sixteen and enrolled as a student at the University of Michigan. I recall my mom’s stories of how the students would package up their dirty clothes and mail them home to their mothers, who laundered them and mailed them back every week. She recounted a wealthy girl in her sorority who was so profligate that she telephoned home every week, a luxury no one else could afford.

After graduating, she sought adventure by moving far away, to Washington, DC, where her older brother Joe, and his wife Molly, lived. There, she was a teacher in an elementary school and later in a high school, where she taught journalism, English, history, and government, in what was then the small rural community of Gaithersburg, Maryland. She recounted the humiliations she suffered, including a bank that refused to let her, as an unmarried woman of only twenty years of age, open an account and deposit her first paycheck without her father’s signature. She told me that when she started to become politically active, she encountered raw anti-Semitism from the school principal.

It was in Washington, DC, that she met Bernard (Bernie) Cantor, a law student who worked in the US Patent Office and was studying to be a patent attorney. They were married in 1951. She moved back to Michigan with Bernie, first living in Oak Park, then Farmington Township (now Farmington Hills), and later Bloomfield Township. She raised five children, Glenn, Cliff, Jim, Ellen, and Mark, teaching us to love the outdoors, play hard, camp, hike, and get dirty. There was no such thing as squeamishness. After swimming in the nearby pond, I recall how she would line us up and calmly sprinkle salt on our feet, to dislodge the leeches between our toes.

Meanwhile, Judy pursued an energetic social and intellectual life. She and Bernie organized Discussion Club, which met to discuss political and social issues



of the day. Discussion Club went on for decades, until Bernie and Judy were in their eighties. There was also Drama Club, where the group would rent scripts and perform plays every month in each other's living rooms. She entered local politics, became a Great Books teacher at the junior high school, and started her own business, designing and selling "The Coordinator," a book for organizing events, such as weddings or bar mitzvahs; and forms to guide research and document family trees.

Once the children were grown, she enrolled in graduate school, earning a certificate in archival administration from Wayne State University in 1988. Initially, she did contract work, such as a commission by Sinai Hospital to curate and design an exhibit commemorating its 50-year history, and a project to videotape the recollections of Jewish immigrants from Russia about their military experiences during World War II.

This led to a multi-decade involvement with Jewish Historical Society of Michigan, where she sat on the board of directors; served as president; and, as editor of *Michigan Jewish History*, helped propel its growth from a small pamphlet to the prominent, scholarly journal it is today. Her passions at JHSM included organizing bus and J-Cycle bike tours to showcase Jewish historical sites in the Detroit area and teach people about Michigan Jewish history.

One of Judy Cantor's driving goals was to familiarize the entire population of Michigan with the significant role Jews have played in the history of the state. She lobbied tirelessly for the placement of historical markers at locations of interest. She involved herself in broader historical societies, such as the Historical Society of Michigan and the Detroit Historical Museum. In 2001 she authored *Jews of Michigan*, a volume in the *Discovering the Peoples of Michigan* series, published by Michigan State University Press, and then lectured extensively across the state.

For many years Judy and Bernie traveled to Israel annually for three-month stints, teaching English to newly arrived Ethiopian immigrants. When called upon, Judy threw herself into the fray. On one trip, when a war broke out while she was teaching, she refused to come home, insisting that if Israeli children had to take cover, she would go along with them to the bomb shelters to hold their hands and comfort them.

In addition to serving on several boards, Judy received many honors, including the state of Michigan "First Lady of Michigan" award in 1987; JHSM's Leonard N. Simons History-Maker Award in recognition of her outstanding contributions to the enrichment, conservation, knowledge, and dissemination of Michigan Jewish history in 1998; the Eight Over Eighty Award from Jewish Senior Life of Metro Detroit in 2010; and induction to the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame in 2013.



The mother of the late Ellen Cantor, Judith Levin Cantor leaves behind her husband, Bernard Cantor; children, Glenn Cantor (Inge Eriks), Cliff (Pauline) Cantor, Jim (Susan) Cantor, and Mark (Karen) Cantor; grandchildren, Lani (Stig) Vatland, Alida Cantor (Travis Pritchard), Clara Cantor (Juliette Larmier), Dan (Anna) Cantor, Emma Cantor (Josiah Brown), Tilly (Tadd) Pearson, Lauren Cantor, Brian Cantor, and Erica Cantor; great-grandchildren, Lily, Kai, Arthur, Leo, Luca, Max, and Aya; and a world of colleagues and friends.

—Glenn Cantor

Herstory

My earliest recollection of Judy Levin Cantor was of her babysitting me! We were twelve years apart, and our families were good friends. I recall her whispering, way back then, that I should become involved. . . .

Judy's knowledge, passion, and commitment to JHSM convinced me, and countless others, not just to join the organization, but to become involved. After I did, Judy continued to work tirelessly promoting JHSM's mission of celebrating and highlighting Michigan's Jewish history.

During my terms as vice president and president, and even afterwards, Judy would call or email me with her thank-yous, but then take the opportunity to "offer" suggestions. She was always complimentary, friendly, and intuitive, and I welcomed her feedback and ideas even if it was not always possible or practical to put them into practice.

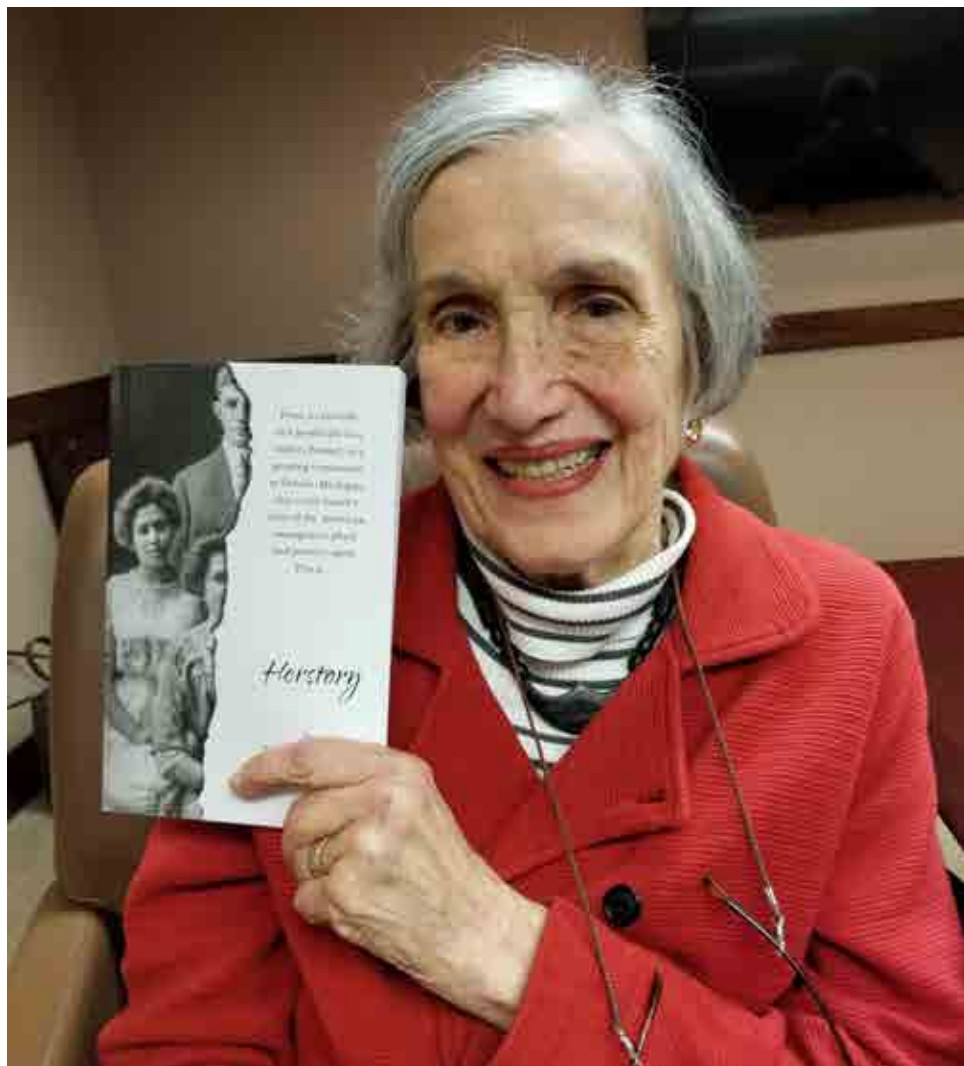
While president of JHSM, I proposed that Judy give each board member a copy of *Herstory*—Judy's memoir of her mother, Lillian Keidan Levin, a braille transcriber and volunteer English teacher.¹ I thought it was an offer Judy couldn't refuse, but it took all my powers of persuasion to convince her to "allow me" to do so. Although a passionate spokesperson for JHSM's achievements, Judy was humble about her own accomplishments.

It is because of Judy that I became involved, and remain involved, with JHSM. I miss you, Judy.

—Mickey Maddin, JHSM Past President

¹To learn more about Lillian Keidan Levin, visit JHSM's Michigan Women Who Made a Difference online gallery at <https://www.jhsmichigan.org/mwwwmd/2022/01/lillian-keidan-levin>; see also Judith Levin Cantor, "MWWWMD Biography—Lillian Keidan Levin: Braille Transcriber and Volunteer Educator," *Michigan Jewish History* 62 (Summer 2022): 57-60.





Judy Levin Cantor holds a copy of Herstory, Judy's memoir of her mother, Lillian Keidan Levin. (JHSM collections.)

In the Room Where It Happened

Working from home is a widespread practice today, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, but in the days before JHSM had proper offices, it was what we did. And it was always a joy to work at Judy Levin Cantor's home. Creativity and brainstorming were aided by the surroundings of family photos, artwork, and artifacts from Judy and husband Bernie's travels—especially from the American



Northwest. The beautiful, wide view of Wing Lake across the back of the house was inspiring, too. In those days, Judy's dining room table was the nerve center for organizing JHSM's events, fundraising plans, journal editorial meetings, and membership strategies. A lot of the energy and growth of JHSM happened in that room. And no work session took place without tea and cookies, because Judy—the boss, the mentor, the hostess—insisted.

—*Aimee Ergas, former JHSM Director*

Saying “Yes”

My memories of Judy Levin Cantor go back to a time before I was involved with JHSM. I can't recall where we were, but I visualize Judy's arm gently stopping me to explain that I needed to go through docent training for a Detroit Historical Museum exhibit she was developing on Michigan's Jewish history. I had no idea why she asked me or even why she was involved. I just knew that it was difficult to say “No” to this woman. She would flatter you with accolades about how capable you were and tell you she really needed help. And that was that. So, I said, “Yes.”

Then I said “Yes” to another exhibit. And then I said “Yes” when she asked me to “work with her” in the library at Congregation Shaarey Zedek in Southfield. It was going to be remodeled, and “we needed to go through the books.” She showed me what to do before leaving. During the next four or five days, I went through every book in that library. On the last day she returned, was joyful upon seeing the completed task, and thanked me profusely.

Judy Cantor understood the value of volunteers and how best to utilize their skills. She was part mother, part teacher, part mentor, part friend. She gave people who worked with her the highest praise and endless thanks. And she was sincere. It was this exuberant kindness, together with her high expectations, that enabled Judy to draw in numerous volunteers to help achieve her goals.

I also observed her working tirelessly on her own. She spent hours lobbying for the placement of historical markers at Michigan locations that honored Jews, Jewish history, and Jewish institutions. And when money was needed, I witnessed her fundraising skills. Because she was out ahead with her leadership—doing much of the work herself to promote JHSM's mission—it was difficult to turn her down when she asked for assistance.

There was no project too large for Judy to consider. When she approached you, the first thing you saw was her wide smile. She was enthusiastic and positive. I told her once that it seemed she actually believed that whatever she was planning could



be done. “Of course,” she smiled broadly, “How can you make it happen if you don’t think it is possible?” I don’t recall which project she was encouraging me to assist her with, but I’m sure I said, “Yes.”

I recall with pleasure my final collaboration with Judy. The staff asked her to write the history of JHSM for our 60th anniversary, and she requested that I do it with her.² Judy was smart, professional, and complimentary, as always. She remembered JHSM history with precision. I had hoped she would write it herself, but she said she preferred a partner. I could feel her arm on mine, asking me to join her. Of course, I said, “Yes.”

—*Jeannie Weiner, JHSM President*

A Seat at the Table

It’s hard to remember Judy Levin Cantor without thinking about her sure voice and hearty laugh; without envisioning her intense eyes and her heartwarming smile. I recall the discipline with which she edited a manuscript, scribbling notes along the sides; and her steadfast attention to detail as we debated and discussed the latest issue of *Michigan Jewish History*, the publication she so deeply cherished. Our debates weren’t always settled, but she never held a grudge. Moments later, full of her trademark poise and charm, she’d offer up a serving of tea and cookies.

Judy was a “force of nature,” an apt description by her son Glenn. But she was more than that. She was also a trailblazer who grew up in the era of Rosie the Riveter and went on to become an educator, raise a family, and carve out a career as a noted historian. She was a feminist at her core and served as a role model for me and many others before I had the honor of knowing and working with her. And, at the very root of all she did and accomplished, was her Jewish faith and heritage.

She thanked her parents for instilling in her the blessings of Jewish values and traditions, including, and especially, her deep passion for family, *teva* (nature), and *tikkun olam* (making the world a better place), traits shared by her loving life partner, Bernie. While she never claimed to be the “founding mother” of JHSM, it is true that without her passion and dedication, the organization could not have survived. (She could coax a donation from just about anyone!)

² See Judith Levin Cantor and Jeannie Weiner, “In the Beginning: The History of JHSM, Celebrating 60 Years,” *Michigan Jewish History* 59/60 (Summer 2020): 68-77.



To Judy, the commandment of honoring thy mother and father was her life-guiding post, and a mantra she taught many others. She was consummate in demonstrating how to respect the thoughts and experiences of those who came before us . . . to treat others with deep reverence and listen carefully to their ideas. We all know that history is often left up to the interpretation of others, but Judy believed that whether those memories were absolute or inferior, the words were worth hearing and the experiences worth honoring.

Judy’s feminism can be traced to her parents, who demonstrated that women could be strong, smart, and equal without shame, and that women could have a professional life while raising a family. Her father, Samuel, was the first Jewish faculty member hired at Detroit Community College—which later became Wayne State University. Her mother, Lillian, led a women’s study group and taught English to refugees. When health limited her mobility, Lillian learned braille and offered transcription services. Judy and Bernie raised their own family of five (four sons and one daughter) with these same values.

Never one to back down, Judy possessed an inner strength that kept her going and going. She never stopped learning; she never quit fighting for gender equality. She once told me she didn’t see this trait as feminism, but rather humanity. Shortly after I became the executive director of JHSM, Judy pulled me aside, looked at me with love and respect, and said, “You now have a seat at the table.” It would be a table often occupied by men who might not see me as an equal, but, she said, “You earned that seat and you belong there. Be tough, be bold, and be comfortable. Don’t think of yourself as any less than them.” But, always, she reminded me, “Be a lady.”

May Judy’s memory always be a blessing and may she continue to rest in peace.

—*Wendy Rose Bice, former JHSM Executive Director
and former Editor of Michigan Jewish History*



IN MEMORIAM

Eugene Driker

1937–2022



(Courtesy of Wayne State University Photography.)

On September 29, 2022, JHSM lost a longtime member, supporter, and friend, Eugene Driker. Born February 24, 1937, at Women’s Hospital in Detroit, Eugene was the youngest child of Ukrainian immigrants Charles and Frances Driker. He and his siblings, Ruth and Jack, grew up in the close-knit Jewish community near Dexter and Davison. In the Driker home Yiddish was the primary language, and Eugene maintained a lifelong love of it.

In 1944 Eugene welcomed the family’s move from a “two-flat home” to a nearby four-bedroom, one-and-a-half-bath, single-family residence. The family made good use of the extra space, as Eugene would warmly recall growing up in a “very full house”: at one point he, his sister and her husband, his brother, his parents, and his bachelor uncle lived together in the home. When asked about the most influential people in his life, he always named his parents, who taught him to cherish family and friends over material possessions.¹

¹ “Eugene Driker’s Oral History,” interview by Christa Whitney, Wexler Oral History Project, Yiddish Book Center, Amherst, MA, June 28, 2016, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/interviews/woh-fi-0000814/eugene-driker-2016>.



Eugene graduated from Detroit’s Central High School in 1955. He would often share the story of his father telling him he could attend any college he wanted . . . as long as he could get there on the Dexter bus. That bus took Eugene to Wayne University (now Wayne State University). “Wayne was the obvious choice,” Eugene later recalled. “So many of my friends from Central and the neighborhood went to Wayne. You took the Dexter bus a little further. It was a wonderful experience.”² Following his college graduation, Eugene attended Wayne Law School and later earned a master of laws degree at George Washington University Law School in Washington, DC.

As an undergraduate, Eugene majored in math and joined the Sigma Alpha Mu fraternity. Through a fellow “Sammy” member, he met his future wife, Elaine Zeidman, who was pursuing a degree in education. He asked her to a fraternity party; he gave her his pin, and a marriage proposal soon followed. The two wed when he was 22 and she was 20; at the time of Eugene’s death, they had been married for 63 years. The Drikers raised their family in Detroit—first in Green Acres, and then, beginning in the mid-1970s, in the Palmer Woods neighborhood where Elaine still resides.

Eugene’s first job after graduating from law school was with the antitrust division of the US Department of Justice in Washington, DC, from 1961 to 1964. His years in Washington, DC would be the only time he did not live in Detroit.

In 1968 Eugene and his partners founded the law firm, Barris, Sott, Denn & Driker, P.L.L.C., in downtown Detroit, where it remains today. Eugene was the “heart and soul of [the] firm, and devoted his professional life to it.”³ He and his partners were known as “lawyers’ lawyers,” often sought out by professional colleagues to resolve complicated legal matters. Eugene also represented some of the largest corporations in the state.

In 2013 Eugene was selected as one of six mediators—the only one who was not a federal judge—in the City of Detroit bankruptcy case. The mediation team successfully negotiated a resolution of the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history. Eugene also played a key role in crafting the “Grand Bargain,” which, in part, prevented the Detroit Institute of Arts’ collection from being sold off to

² “Eugene Driker Oral History Interview,” interview by Susie Papas, Leonard N. Simons Jewish Community Archives, Bloomfield Hills, MI, June 21, 2018, <https://jewishdetroit.org/oral-history/oral-history-main/the-albert-and-pauline-dubin-oral-history-archives/eugene-driker/>.

³ Tribute to Eugene Driker, Barris, Sott, Denn & Driker, P.L.L.C. website, accessed August 17, 2023, <https://www.bsdd.com/>.



pay the city's creditors. "One of the reasons I threw myself into the bankruptcy so much," Eugene said, "was my own goal to make Detroit a place where my grandchildren would want to stay."⁴

Eugene's passion for Wayne State University was legendary. He was an avid financial supporter as well as a prolific fundraiser for the university and its law school. He was a member and chair of the University's Board of Governors and the Wayne State University Foundation and was instrumental in the creation of the Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy at Wayne State University Law School, established in tribute to his dear friend, Senator Carl M. Levin.

In addition to his civic work, Eugene was a dedicated member of the Detroit Jewish community. He donated his time and money to the American Jewish Committee (now JCRC/AJC), Jewish Family Service, and Kadima Mental Health Services. He served as president of Jewish Vocational Service. (Jewish Vocational Service and Kadima Mental Health Services merged and are now known as Geshar Human Services.) He was active at Temple Emanu-El in Oak Park, Michigan, where his family remains a part of the congregation. Eugene also was a longtime member of JHSM and provided financial support as a member of JHSM's A. Alfred Taubman Heritage Council.

From an early age, Eugene was active in the Sholem Aleichem Institute (SAI), where his parents were founding members. Established in 1926, SAI has been dedicated to preserving Detroit's Yiddish history. "I went there after school three or four days a week for Yiddish lessons."⁵ He fondly remembered celebrating Friday nights and *yontefs* (holidays) at the secular "*shule*":

The word G-d wasn't obliterated, but it just wasn't a feature. It was not emphasized. What was emphasized were human qualities, human values, the *goldene keyt*, the chain of continuity. Israel was a very important focus of the Sholem Aleichem Institute. And *Yiddishkayt*, in all of its dimensions, from food to song to literature. . . .⁶

Eugene's love of Yiddish and commitment to SAI continued throughout his adult life. SAI President and longtime member Geoffrey Nathan described Eugene as "a staunch and enthusiastic" supporter:

⁴"Wayne State remembers attorney and Detroit supporter Eugene Driker," Wayne State University website, September 30, 2022, https://giving.wayne.edu/story/wayne-state-remembers-attorney-and-detroit-supporter-eugene-driker-45375?utm_source=link&utm_medium=email-6336eff051e49&utm_campaign=Wayne+State+remembers+Eugene+Driker&utm_content=read+a+full+tribute.

⁵"Eugene Driker's Oral History," Yiddish Book Center, June 28, 2016.

⁶"Eugene Driker's Oral History," Yiddish Book Center, June 28, 2016.



He attended High Holy Day Assemblies . . . every year, . . . frequently deliver[ing] some "Remarks," which were often political in nature, not partisan, but rather assessments of the state of the world with respect to the US and Israel, or the general political climate in this country. . . . He . . . also read Yiddish selections, a language he knew and loved.

Carrying on his father's legacy, Eugene took great pleasure in reading the Yiddish selection that Charles had read during his lifetime.

SAI Past President Margaret Winters recalled that Eugene's "support of the Sholem Aleichem Institute and of Yiddishkeit encompassed more than program participation. He was a cheerleader for the organization and cared deeply about its future."

Eugene's passion for preserving Yiddish language and culture extended beyond Michigan. He was a devoted supporter and former chair of the board of directors of the Yiddish Book Center, a nonprofit organization in Amherst, Massachusetts, dedicated to recovering, preserving, and celebrating Yiddish books and history.

In a statement following his death, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer remembered Eugene:

[He] was a preeminent attorney, a lifelong and untiring advocate for his home city of Detroit, and a friend. He served with distinction as a Wayne State University governor and spent every day working to enrich and uplift his community. Eugene's achievements in urban affairs, law, arts, and culture leave a legacy for every Michigander to carry forward.⁷

While Eugene's dedication to legal, cultural, and civic causes is evident, it was his role as *Zeyde* to his five grandchildren that was his proudest and most gratifying accomplishment.

He leaves behind his wife, Elaine; children, Elissa (Jay Zerwekh) Driker and Stephen (Jennifer) Driker; son-in-law, Perry Ohren; grandchildren, Charlie (fiancé Stephanie Takata-Struble), Caleb, Rebecca, Sophie, and Emma; and a loving circle of extended family and friends. A true friend to both the city of Detroit and its Jewish community, Eugene Driker will be missed.

⁷"Gov. Whitmer Releases Statement on Passing of Eugene Driker," Governor Gretchen Whitmer's official website, September 30, 2022, <https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/news/press-releases/2022/09/30/whitmer-releases-statement-on-passing-of-eugene-driker>.



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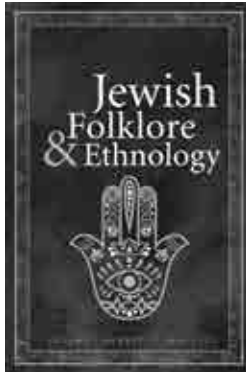
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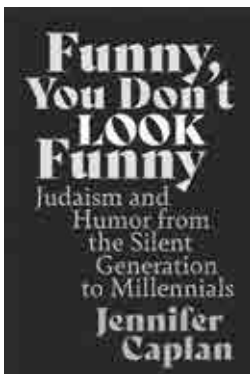


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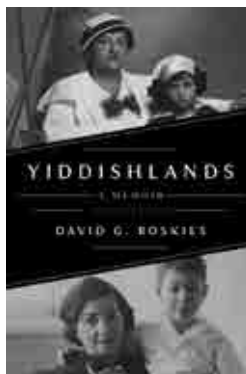
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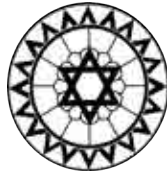
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