

COMMUNITY HISTORY

Jewish Pittsburgh history marked by highs, lows, splits and commitment

By Jo Rifkin, Staff Writer

When the first Jewish immigrants settled in America some 350 years ago, few gravitated to the region that would later be called western Pennsylvania. Even as late as 1840, as Pittsburgh grew into a manufacturing hub and became home to 12,586 people, there was no permanent Jewish community here.

Until, finally ...

Jews settle in Pittsburgh



Raub Jewish Archives Photo
William Frank, a member of Pittsburgh's original Jewish community, came from Germany in 1846 seeking adventure and economic opportunities.

William Frank, one of at least three men who founded the Pittsburgh Jewish community, arrived in 1846, seeking adventure and economic opportunity. "In my travels, I did not eat treif," he wrote in his autobiographical notes. But, like many German Jews, as he became more Americanized, Frank lost some of his Jewish traditions, said Ruth Frank of Squirrel Hill, wife of the late James Frank, William Frank's great-grandson. Yet Frank and his family did not hide their Judaism. There were scarcely enough Jews to hold a minyan, so they held formal services in private

homes and founded Ben Almon (Mourner's House) Society, which purchased land on Troy Hill for a Jewish burial place.

Eight years later, the area's first congregation, Shaare Shamayim (Gates of Heaven) began holding services in a rented room at Penn Avenue and Sixth Street.

The congregants — Jewish settlers from what is now Germany — were unable to agree on a religious leader. And so these two groups of Jews, with separate cultural mores, rituals, languages and methods of conducting religious services, tried to form two congregations. But there were not enough Jews to sustain them, even in the 1850s, when the United States had 50,000 Jews.

Later, "I resigned as a member (of Shaare Shamayim)," Frank wrote. And along with others, "organized a new congregation, which I named Rodef Shalom ('seek[ing] peace'), inasmuch as we desired peace. I was president of the temple when it was dedicated ..." in 1862 on Hancock (Eighth) Street.

But the community was still too small to maintain two congregations and they reunited within five years under the name Rodef Shalom, which today is the city's oldest congregation.

Despite several conflicts, Jewish Pittsburgh united to help one another: aiding transient Jews, seeking religious freedom for world Jewry, visiting the sick and watching over the dead.

This commitment to remaining unified and helping one another has repeated itself countless times over the years.

The community splits

By 1863, the Orthodox Rodef Shalom adopted Isaac M. Wise's "Minhag America" or Reform service.

It was then that a minority of Polish Jews, led by Gustave Grafner, resigned from Rodef Shalom and organized Etz Chaim, or Tree of Life, at a renovated church on the corner of Ross and Fourth streets.

In 1886, Tree of Life became one of the first congregations in America to affiliate with the Jewish Theological Seminary and 20 years later became a Conservative congregation.

It was around this time that Jeffrey Lenchner's great-grandparents, Zigmund and Esther Lenchner, arrived in New York from Lithuania and made their way to Pittsburgh, "looking for opportunity," Lenchner said.

Zigmund was a tailor who made suits for some of the richest people in the city, Lenchner said. He prospered and moved his family to a home in Oakland, complete with tennis courts.

Today, the family still prays at Tree of Life, and Jeffrey Lenchner's children are the fifth generation of the family to become b'nai mitzvah there.

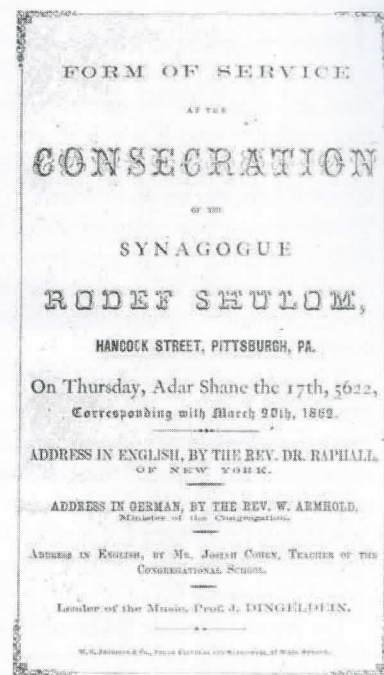
"We're just common people until we walk into Tree of Life and then we're rock stars," said Lenchner, who lives in Sewickley Heights.

Becoming Americans

Pittsburgh prospered during the Civil War and the Jewish community grew. Jews moved from other American cities, seeking opportunity. By 1864, there were 150 Jewish families here.

Some Jews volunteered for the Union army; others worked in the dry goods and liquor businesses or sold livestock. Some were entering the professions, establishing great wealth. Others learned trades.

A distinction developed between the established, affluent residents, who were mainly German, and the Yiddish-speaking newcomers.



Raub Jewish Archives Photo

Many services were conducted in German at Synagogue Rodef Shalom, the native language of its original congregants. Dedicated as an Orthodox synagogue on Hancock Street in 1862, it is Pittsburgh's oldest extant congregation. Now located on Fifth Avenue in Shadyside, its congregants have been following Rabbi Isaac Mayer's Reform services since 1873.

As Pittsburgh Jewry adapted to their new country, the once Orthodox congregations died out.

It was not until 1873 that Orthodox congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagodol began. Twenty years later, Beth Jacob established itself. The two were united into Beth Hamedrash Hagodol-Beth Jacob in 1964 and a new building was erected.

Because Pittsburgh's Jews were often separated by language and culture, numerous Russian, Hungarian, Rumanian, Polish, Galacian and Litvak synagogues arose in the Hill District.

In spite of its differences, Jewish Pittsburgh established social service organizations.

Around this time, William Frank began a successful glass manufacturing business, exporting bottles throughout the country and the world.

"There is a family story," said Ruth Frank, "that when Henry J. Heinz first started his homegrown horseradish, he went to great-grandfather for his bottles."

Like today's Jews, Pittsburgh's ancestors often changed residences.

The original Jewish community of the 1840s left their cramped neighborhoods in the Manchester section of Old Allegheny (the North Side) and moved into Oakland, Shadyside and Mt. Washington. Eastern European Jews settled on the bluff and around the courthouse.

As the years passed, an invisible wall often separated Jews. In 1874, The Concordia Club, a social hub for German Jews, banned immigrants from becoming members.

Nevertheless, most Jews banded together to assist their landmen. The framework was in place for the flood of immigrants Pittsburgh would eventually receive.

Jews came from Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Rumania

and Austria-Hungary escaping persecution and the pogroms of 1881. Thousands boarded trains to Pittsburgh, to the city known as the "Workshop of the World."

It was around this time that Israel Richman, grandfather of Washington, Pa., attorney Steven Richman, arrived in the area.

Born in Lithuania, Israel Richman came to Philadelphia with a pack of goods on his back to sell in rural areas — especially in West Virginia — away from stores and often from roads.

"The story given to me, was that he settled in Washington because it was the last Jewish community on the National Pike (Route 40) before entering West Virginia," Richman said. "West Virginia had a tax for peddlers. And Israel wanted to live in a Jewish community and not pay a tax."

The community grows

By 1905, 12,000 Jews lived in Pittsburgh. By 1927, the Jewish population rose to 53,000. Following the waves of Jewish immigrations, German Jews were no longer Pittsburgh's majority; Lithuanian Jews took their place.

However, during World War I, immigration virtually stopped.

While millions of European Jews suffered, great amounts of military supplies were produced in Pittsburgh and large fortunes were amassed here.

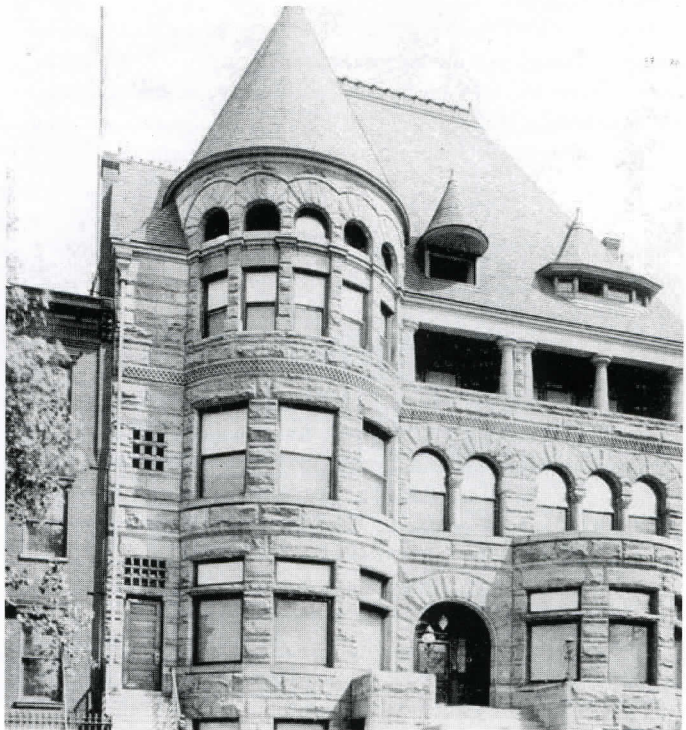
Isaac W. Frank, son of William Frank and the first Jewish civil engineer trained at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, made his money as owner of the United Engineering and Foundry Company.

Frank initially turned away the government's requests to manufacture arms or ammunition. "My products must add some degree of human happiness," he said in an interview in the Pittsburgh Dispatch in June 1915.



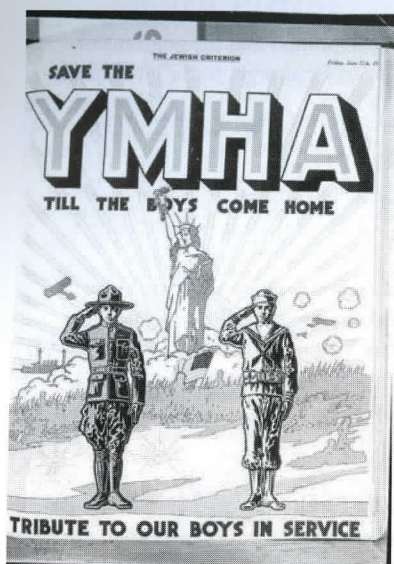
Raub Jewish Archives Photo

In the last years of the 19th century, German-Jewish families rented these Victorian row houses on Locust Street in Allegheny. The street name has been changed to Liverpool Street and Allegheny is now known as the North Side. The William Frank family lived at 1323 Locust and were neighbors to other members of Pittsburgh's fledgling Jewish community, including the families of Charles Aaron, Max Rosenbaum, Jacob Klee, Marcus Rauh and Josiah Cohen.



Raub Jewish Archives Photo

The first Concordia Club, a social hub for German Jews, was built in 1874 on Pittsburgh's North Side. Initially, immigrants were banned from becoming members.



Raub Jewish Archives Photo

The Young Men's Hebrew Association, founded in 1910 in Oakland, offered athletic, social, cultural and intellectual activities to all Jewish young men, who, because of their religion, were banned from Christian organizations offering the same. Following World War I, the YMHA joined with the Young Women's Hebrew Association in 1919 and became known as the Young Men and Women's Hebrew Association. The group, which combined with the Irene Kaufmann Center, became the foundation for today's Jewish Community Center.

the immigrants to work for them, especially in department stores such as Kaufmann's. But socially, many in the Jewish community lived worlds apart.

Some, like the department store giant Edgar Kaufmann and his family — though still unable to gain acceptance in elite Christian clubs — were mixing with high society, dining and Jews and non-Jews at their mansions and later at Kaufmann's weekend retreat, Fallingwater, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

The fall of the Hill

Most of Pittsburgh's 35,000 Jews lived in poor and crowded neighborhoods in the Hill District, congested with pushcarts and peddlers.

Helping the immigrants assimilate and learn English at the Irene Kaufmann Settlement (IKS) was The National Council of Jewish Women, controlled almost exclusively by Reform German Jews.

The IKS, later known as the Irene Kaufmann Center, was consolidated with the Oakland-based Young Men's and Women's Hebrew Association in 1960. The new entity ultimately became the present day Jewish Community Center, located in Squirrel Hill and Scott Township.

Other Jewish organizations, many begun by Orthodox Rabbi Aaron M. Ashinsky, tended to immigrants' needs.

The Hill District's congregations — all Orthodox — multiplied.

Rabbi Moses Simon Sivitz, the first Eastern European Orthodox rabbi in Pittsburgh, established a Jewish day school in the Hill District, where Dorothy Binstock's family owned a jewelry store.

As Jewish wealth increased, so did Jewish agencies, established to aid refugees in Europe and the Middle East after World War I, and later to help needy Jews during the Great Depression.

It was at this time that 14-year-old Baruch A. Poupko, who later became rabbi of Shaare Torah, arrived in Pittsburgh. "It was impossible," he said in an interview several years ago, "to get a yeshiva education in Communist Russia." So his parents smuggled him out of Poland in 1925 to study here.

Awaiting Poupko and other immigrants were Jewish organizations with food baskets and silver dollars. Small loans were provided by the Hebrew Free Loan Society.

Jewish businessmen hired

"People from Squirrel Hill and the East End came to my father's store on Sunday because Dad was observant and did not conduct business on Shabbat," Binstock said.

She remembered the Hill District as "a very, very nice place. It had trees and flowers and a lot of businesses. It was self-contained and a wonderful community for synagogues."

But despite its sense of community, many Jews, including the Binstock family, finally left.

"Everyone wanted to get out of the Hill District," said historian Nick Lane. "Jews only lived there for 20 to 30 years."

By 1901 approximately 500 Jewish families lived in Oakland, the East End and Squirrel Hill.

Fifty years later, many social service agencies, the beginnings of which were in the Hill District, consolidated and moved to Squirrel Hill, now the center of Jewish Pittsburgh.

The Hill District's ethnic congregations moved, merged or disbanded, and second-generation Jews often chose synagogues closer to home, selecting places of worship based on the various branches of Judaism. It is the same today, as Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations have followed some Jews out to the suburbs.

Post-war boom

During World War II and the Holocaust, Jews united as never before. After the establishment of Israel, they did so again. Edgar Kaufmann, for one, reached out to his landsmen.

"The original Kaufmann family wanted to get away from the Orthodoxy," said Kaufmann relative, James Bachman. "They wanted to be living a different kind of life. They wanted to make something of themselves, which they did."

Although Kaufmann had successfully assimilated into American society, he traveled to Germany at the onset of Hitler's regime and brought back 25 Jewish families to settle here.

And, as the times demanded, more Jewish organizations arose, including the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, the Jewish Labor Committee and the Jewish War Veterans.

The Pittsburgh Jewish Community Relations Council sought to unite these groups' efforts and, after World War II, pursued human rights legislation and fought against all forms of discrimination.



Raub Jewish Archives Photo

This poster was one of several entered in the Irene Kaufmann Settlement's poster contest in 1920, commemorating the Settlement's 30th anniversary. The IKS helped "Americanize" immigrants by teaching them English and more about their new culture.

Pittsburgh Jewry hosted the 1978 Holocaust Conference, enlightening both Jews and non-Jews alike. It was a strong beginning for Jewish-Christian relations, still reinforced by the Rudolph Holocaust Center of Greater Pittsburgh, local rabbis and lay people.

The United Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, begun in 1912, continued offering programs at home and in Israel.

More recently, the UJF began a partnership with the Israeli communities of Karmiel and the Misgav, offering a flow of people and ideas.

In the years following World War II, great strides were made in the civil rights movement, and Jews played a major role.

As the baby boomers aged, there was a resurgence of interest in synagogue life and Jewish education conducted by local congregations and organizations such as the Hillel Jewish University Center; the Chabad of Pittsburgh, which set roots in the suburbs of Mt. Lebanon, Fox Chapel and Squirrel Hill; and the Agency for Jewish Learning.

As in the past, Jewish Pittsburgh in 2005 is diverse, remains united.

"We're becoming more different and we're also becoming more like each other," Lane said. "Religious differences, which have always existed, have become in some ways less significant and the sense of identity of a people has become more significant as we seek to preserve our distinctiveness as Jews in the United States."

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Raub Jewish Archives Photo
Department store giant, Edgar Kaufmann, hobnobbed with high society in Pittsburgh and at his Fallingwater retreat. At the onset of Hitler's regime, Kaufmann brought 25 Jewish families from Germany to settle in Pittsburgh.



Raub Jewish Archives Photo
During the late 1800s to the early 1900s, approximately 90 percent of Jewish Pittsburgh's 35,000 people lived in the Hill District. It was the domain of Jewish immigrants, and Yiddish rang in one's ears.