North Side Memories

An oral history of Minnesota's largest Jewish neighborhood

Upper Midwest Jewish History
The journal of the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest
VOLUME 2 FALL 2000
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Minnesota's largest
Jewish neighborhood

EDITED FOR PUBLICATION
by Phil Freshman and Linda Mack Schloff

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Introduction

Linda Mack Schloff

The Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest (JHSUM) takes great pride in publishing the second issue of Upper Midwest Jewish History, entitled “North Side Memories.”

The North Side of Minneapolis once held the largest concentration of Jews between Chicago and Denver. The community began coalescing in the late 1800s and flourished until about 1960. Within the North Side, two neighborhoods developed—an early, immigrant neighborhood and a second-generation one—each centered on different commercial avenues. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the neighborhoods were not geographically separate. One could, and indeed did, walk to and from one and the other. Reva Rosenbloom, for example, remembered that during the early 1940s she would walk with her grandfather from her home at 1601 Oliver (in the second-generation neighborhood) to Kenesseth Israel synagogue on Olson Highway and Sixth Avenue North (in the immigrant neighborhood)—more than a mile as the crow flies. Everyone interviewed recalled walking. They walked to and from shops, synagogues, the Talmud Torah, and other places. Although streetcars served the area, one could even walk downtown. Many institutions remained for decades in the same locations where they had been established, serving both the older and newer Jewish neighborhoods. Until 1951, for example, the Talmud Torah was situated midway between the two, as were several of the synagogues and other Jewish institutions. Thus it is impossible to draw fixed boundaries between the neighborhoods. Their joint outer borders, however, can be roughly outlined: the eastern boundary was the northwestern edge of downtown Minneapolis; the western line was the city limits; the southern edge was Olson Highway; and the northern boundary was Broadway Avenue.

The immigrant neighborhood—known as the near North Side—was chiefly made up of people who had, like many thousands of other Jews,
fled the Russian empire to start life anew in America. Between the late 1880s and 1900, Minneapolis's Jewish population swelled from about five hundred to approximately four thousand.

As its name suggests, this neighborhood formed on the northwestern edge of downtown in the vicinity of the present-day Farmers Market. Its central commercial streets were Sixth Avenue North (today Olson Highway) and Lyndale Avenue (now East Lyndale). Here were butcher shops, fishmongers, delicatessens, and all the other commercial establishments, offices, and clubs that gave the area its Jewish flavor. Also near this intersection were the first North Side synagogues: Keneseth Israel, Mikro Kodesh, Sharei Zedeek, Gemilus Chesed, and Tifereth B'Nai Jacob. Close by as well were the Talmud Torah's initial locations—the first building, on Bassett Place; and the second, at Eighth Avenue North and Fremont. On Elwood Avenue stood the Emanuel Cohen Center, a social and recreational facility. Across the street from it was the Oak Park Children's Home, a short-term care center. The Labor Lyceum, owned by the Jewish Socialist movement's Workmen's Circle, and the Farband House, home to the Labor Zionists, were located a few blocks away.

Tenements were to be found in this neighborhood, as were the remnants of a fine middle-class neighborhood that predated the burgeoning Jewish-immigrant community. Near North Siders utilized their backyards to store scrap metal for resale and as places to slaughter chickens. They taught Talmud in their dining rooms and cultured sour cream in their basements.

The near North Side flourished until the early 1920s. As housing in the area decayed and as Jews there gained an increasing measure of financial security, many began moving west and north, finally buttressing up against the western city limits. In 1936 the city tore down several blocks of housing between Lyndale and Dupont avenues North and between Olson Highway and Eighth Avenue North, replacing them with the Sumner Field Housing Project. Jews and other needy white families, along with blacks, were delighted to move into the sparkling new buildings.

The locus of the second-generation North Side, which flourished from about 1930 through the 1950s, was Plymouth Avenue (particularly west of Knox Avenue). Along Plymouth could be found the relocated delicatessens, kosher butcher shops, fish markets, barbershops, and grocery stores, the Homewood Theater, and the pool room—all of which made the street a magnet for young and old alike. As Jews moved to the newer area so, too, did a few synagogues—Mikro Kodesh, for one, as early as 1926. Generally, the Orthodox synagogues relocated at a more leisurely pace. Keneseth Israel did not move until 1948, Gemilus Chesed

not until 1954! Beth El, the North Side's only Conservative congregation, was based in this newer neighborhood. The congregation had its roots in the Talmud Torah. There in 1923, alumni who were dissatisfied with religious services at Orthodox synagogues and wanted to practice a modern yet traditionally oriented form of Judaism organized the "Young People's Synagogue." They met at the Talmud Torah until the following year, when Rabbi David Aronson was hired to lead the congregation, and a house at the corner of Fourteenth and Penn Avenue North was purchased as a temporary site for worship. The synagogue was built on that site and dedicated in 1926.

Significantly, the children of all North Side Jews—whether they lived in the Sumner Field Housing Project or in the relatively affluent Homewood area nearer the western city limits—all attended Lincoln Junior High and North High School as well as the same Talmud Torah. In addition, all North Siders mingled at the Emanuel Cohen Center, shopped and were entertained on Plymouth Avenue, and belonged to the same group of synagogues. Although class divisions were present, the shared facilities of the neighborhood tended to mute them. Such divisions were in fact greater between North Siders as a whole and the Jews who lived in South Minneapolis, particularly those who belonged to the Reform Temple Israel.

In sum, the North Side was a complete neighborhood: it had all the institutions and commercial establishments that Jewish communities need. It also had its great men and women, and it had its rogues.

Although both neighborhoods of the North Side were heavily Jewish, the area also was home to other ethnic groups. Finns lived along Glenwood Avenue to the south of Sixth Avenue North, and along Broadway, to the north of Plymouth Avenue, there were Irish and Poles. Blacks in need of inexpensive housing moved into formerly Jewish housing on the near North Side during the 1920s. Relations between the two groups were good. Indeed, some blacks remembered having served as "Shabbos goys," turning on lights and ovens for their Orthodox neighbors. The schools, playing fields, and settlement houses drew children from the various ethnic and racial groups together. After World War II, blacks began moving toward Plymouth Avenue. Blacks and Jews remained on generally amicable terms until the mid-1960s. If anything, there were more problems with young white toughs in the neighborhood a mile or two north of Plymouth Avenue, and fistfights in North Commons Park were not unusual.

After World War II the North Side experienced the same vicissitudes as many urban Jewish communities nationwide: movement to the sub-
urbs and urban unrest. By 1958, a Minneapolis Jewish Federation study found that while 38 percent of Minneapolis's roughly twenty-three thousand Jews still inhabited the North Side, that figure was down from the 1937 high of 66 percent. The nearby Minneapolis suburb of St. Louis Park now housed 28 percent of the city's Jews, and an equal percentage lived in South Minneapolis. In 1959 Beth El synagogue purchased land in St. Louis Park after a study commissioned by the congregation found that one-third of its member families with young children already lived in that suburb; the first structure on this new property, an activity center, opened in 1963. In December 1965 a meeting was held at Beth El during which its congregants voted 250 to 9 in favor of relocating the synagogue entirely to St. Louis Park. The new edifice was completed in 1970.

Meanwhile, the black civil rights movement and accompanying social struggles of the 1960s, especially in Northern cities, led to urban riots across the country beginning in 1965. Violence erupted along Plymouth Avenue in the summer of 1966: five business establishments had their windows smashed and were looted. In 1967 the violence was worse citywide. During the nights of July 19 and 20, three Plymouth Avenue businesses were firebombed and looted, while numerous other stores suffered smoke damage and shattered windows. Order was restored when Governor Harold LeVander called out the National Guard, and black leaders worked to subdue teenage hotheads.

Although the majority of North Side Jews had chosen to move to the suburbs, many of them remain bitter today about the violence of the mid-1960s and about the collapse of the Jewish neighborhood. Still, affection for the once-vibrant community continues to be manifest—through the high school alumni clubs that still meet weekly, through well-attended North High School reunions, and through projects, such as the recent renovation of the Lincoln Community School playground, that bring former Jewish residents and present-day North Siders together.

The oral histories in this publication are divided into six parts. After a brief section contrasting several immigration stories, we move on to memories of the physical elements of the neighborhood—the commercial streets, homes, public and religious institutions, loan societies, and the Talmud Torah. We then read recollections about the texture of life—bar mitzvah stories, Jewish holiday celebrations, socializing, work, friendly and not-so-friendly interpersonal relations, and memorable people and incidents. A fourth section is made up of interviews focused on the decline of the Jewish North Side in the 1960s as well as on the remnants of the community there that lingered into the late 1970s. We conclude with reflections on the North Side's legacy.

We are sorry that we couldn't include more voices; if we had, this journal would have turned into a book. Nonetheless, because the Jewish Historical Society's commitment to gathering and preserving North Siders' recollections is ongoing, we perhaps will be able to devote a future issue to the same topic.

This issue of Upper Midwest Jewish History draws from four oral history projects involving former residents of Minneapolis's North Side. Early interviews represented include those done for the Minnesota Historical Society (1979), the Beth El Synagogue History Project (1983), and the JHSUM (1983-93).

The great majority of interviews excerpted here were taped in 1999-2000 by volunteers working on the JHSUM's North Side Oral History Project; this was part of a more ambitious effort to create a video history of the Jewish North Side. The video-project committee sponsored a North Side Reunion, held at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Minneapolis (JCC) on August 22, 1999. More than twelve hundred people attended this event, and dozens of people's memories were captured on videotape. Since then, far more videotaping has been done, and ancillary materials, such as photographs, news clippings, and city surveys of the neighborhood, have been accumulated. The project will culminate with the premiere of an hour-long video at the JCC on November 26, 2000.

Although this video represents a milestone, the JHSUM felt it was important to conduct longer interviews than could be done by the video producer. Respondents in the JHSUM project ranged in age from about forty-five to ninety years old. An interesting range of memories also is reflected, mirroring the varying times and circumstances in which the respondents came of age. The one non-Jew interviewed is Ronald Beauchane, who is of French-Canadian Catholic background; his memories provide a valuable counterpoint to those of the many "insiders." Together, the recollections in this issue constitute a vivid mosaic of North Side places, people, and experiences.

The names of respondents, interviewers, and the individual projects in which they are included are listed in the Oral History Sources section (pp. 11-12). Birth years of those quoted here have been included so that readers may better match respondents' memories to specific periods. We
are grateful to the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, and to Beth El Synagogue, St. Louis Park, for allowing us to quote from the interviews they conducted, particularly because a number of those respondents have since passed away.

Our thanks go to everyone who consented to be interviewed. We are grateful, as well, to those who conducted the interviews. Other people deserving recognition include: Reva Rosenbloom, chair of the video-project committee; Naomi Kastenbaum, chair of the 1999–2000 JHSUM North Side Oral History Project; high school intern Shira Goldetsy, who not only did interviews but also researched visual sources; graduate school intern Beth Matlock, who interviewed and helped make decisions about the interview questionnaire, the journal’s layout, and much else; Alan Ominsky, who consulted on the project; Phil Freshman, who provided his usual superb editing; and Judy Gilats, who set the type and created the design for this issue and who also supplied calm helpfulness.

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Additional copies of this issue may be obtained by writing or calling the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest.

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**Oral History Sources**

North Side Oral History Project, 1999–2000

Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest

**Name**

Roz Baker, b. 1923  
Maureen Beck, b. 1939  
Pacey Beers,* b. 1920  
Stepha Berman  
Ronald Beauchane, b. 1931  
Shirley Dworsky  
Arthur Felsen  
Harry Friedman  
Charlotte Azine/Barbara Goldfarb  
Bernice Cowl Gordon, b. 1916  
Sally Greenberg  
Allen Greenstein  
Naomi Kastenbaum, b. 1918  
Robert Latz, b. 1930  
Mel Maisel, b. 1926  
Herman Markowitz  
Irv Nudell, b. 1924  
Allen Oleisky, b. 1938  
Julius Raen  
Martin Ring, b. 1918  
Harry Rosenbaum, b. 1916  
Reva Rosenbloom, b. 1933  
Fannie Schanfield  
Frank Schochet  
Earl Schwartz, b. 1953  
Blanche Singer  
Irene Stillman*  
Allen Stone

**Interviewer**

Ann Schulman  
Muriel Saltzman  
Rhoda Lewin  
Linda M. Schloff/Naomi Kastenbaum  
Beth Matlock  
Nancy Markowitz  
Sharron Steinfeldt  
Richard Cuts  
Shira Goldetsky  
Lillian Raen  
Linda M. Schloff/Beth Matlock  
Rhoda Lewin  
Linda M. Schloff  
Rhoda Lewin  
Marcia Hinitz  
Nancy Markowitz  
Marcia Hinitz  
Shira Goldetsky  
Richard Cuts  
Lillian Raen  
Linda M. Schloff  
Liuda M. Schloff  
Beth Matlock  
Rita Fisher  
Linda M. Schloff  
Marcia Hinitz  
Linda M. Schloff/Naomi Kastenbaum  
Marcia Hinitz

*deceased
Oral Histories

Immigration

My [maternal] great-grandfather and grandmother ... came to Minneapolis in 1883 from Quebec. The family had been in Quebec since about 1700. My grandfather’s family came here in 1873 from Quebec. They had been in Quebec since 1649. My grandmother’s family moved right into a little area in North Minneapolis. In fact, the address is 214 Sixteenth Avenue North.

When they moved there, it was French. In fact, the area that they moved to eventually, at Plymouth and Logan, was a French farm [later] called the Crepeau Addition. They moved there before that addition was even part of Minneapolis.

RONALD BRAUCHANE

My grandfather Victor Greenstein came here in the 1880s and ended up in North Minneapolis, on Thirty-fourth and Knox Avenue North. ... It was a dairy farm, and [it] was known as Greenstein’s pastures.

ALLEN GREENSTEIN

[My family] came here in 1921 from the Ukraine. My older brother preceded the family and got here in about 1915, served during World War I, saved up some money, sent it back to the family with Harry Mankoff, Marilyn Rovner’s father. ... They came through Montreal, not Ellis Island ... directly to Minneapolis.

IRV NUDELL
Memories of the Neighborhood
Near North Side

Sixth and Lyndale
The center [of the Jewish neighborhood] was Lyndale, and it stretched West from there through about Emerson, and even beyond that. . . . Starting on Lyndale, one of the centers of Jewish gathering . . . was Brochin’s. Solomon Brochin came to this country: He was an educated man, and he was a Hebrew scholar, and he opened a store—a delicatessen. But not a delicatessen as you know them today. He was a principal in selling steamship tickets to help immigrants come over. He sold Jewish artifacts. He carried a line of Jewish newspapers; there were many in those days—daily, weekly, monthly. . . . And his store was a “center.” Jews gathered there and talked about local and national and international problems relative to Jews. . . .

K)itty-corner across the street was a drugstore run by Rosoff. . . . And on another corner was the Kistler Building. The Kistler Building was a social center for the Jewish community of that era and that neighborhood. Most weddings were held there. . . . And Dr. Kistler . . . had his medical offices on the second floor. . . . And on the fourth corner was a grocery store run by some non-Jews. I can’t remember their name. Next to it was a hardware store that was also run by non-Jews. And that continued down to the next corner, which was Bassett Place, and on that corner was a store called The People’s [Store] that was run by a man named Shapiro. . . . [There were the] Feinmans, who had a dry goods store another block farther down on Sixth Avenue [and] there was a wonderful shoe store run by a man named Katz, and he was on the same side of the street a few doors down from Brochin’s. And in between him and Brochin’s was a fruit-and-vegetable store run by a family called Pearl.

MARTIN LEBEDOFF

Sixth and Lyndale was a very interesting corner. One corner was my father’s store, Brochin’s, and the southwest corner was the Kistler Building, and the northeast corner was Rosoff’s Drugstore. And then the other corner was Markert’s Confectionery store. . . . And it seemed like
every other business seemed to be a Jewish butcher shop. ... There were very few cars. Most of the vehicles were wagons drawn by horses and carriages, and there were a number of electric streetcars. ... [The avenue] was teeming from seven o'clock in the morning till way past midnight! Also, there wasn't any air-conditioning in those days, so people had to get out of the houses. But people were so friendly. Everybody knew their own neighbors, not their immediate neighbor, but for blocks and blocks around. And every corner had a group discussing topics of the day.

**BEN BROCHIN**

Sumner Field [at Bryant Avenue and Eighth Avenue North] was the meeting place. [It] must have had at least four or five baseball diamonds. They had five or six tennis courts, and they had sandboxes and regular playground equipment like slides and swings and teeter-totters. ... Another meeting place was the Sumner Branch Library. ... [B]ut the biggest meeting place of all was the Kenesseth Israel synagogue, right off Sixth and Lyndale. It seemed like there were mass meetings going on all the time during World War I and right after ... when the Ukrainian pogroms were taking place. ... As I recall, before the mass meeting to

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iron out any problem that confronted the Jewish community, the various leaders of the Jewish community would meet in our store—Dr. George Gordon, Rabbi [C. David] Matt, Rabbi [Solomon Mordecai] Silber.

**BEN BROCHIN**

All grocery stores sold schmaltz herring in those days. The Jews as well as the Swedes used to eat schmaltz herring .... They had a long fork, and they'd stick it down in the barrel—they had herring in the barrel in those days—and pull out a herring. He had a dozen sheets of newspaper that he would wrap the herring in.

**MARTIN RING**

**Plymouth Avenue**

[By the 1940s,] upper Plymouth Avenue became the mainstream of economic activity. Sixth Avenue lost its ethnic flavor, and all the kosher butcher shops, bakeries, delicatessens, and fish markets moved to Plymouth Avenue. Streetcars and autos vied for the right of way, especially when a driver left his car double-parked along the bakery, picking out a fresh, well-rounded pumpernickel.

**MAISHE BERMANN**
We had daytime cooking schools [at the Homewood Theater] in conjunction with the gas company, where we’d give away a range as the principal prize. And Bank Night was a tremendous thing. And we’d have turkey giveaways, dishes, encyclopedias one night each week until you’d accumulated a whole set, and get a whole set of dishes, maybe eighty or ninety dishes. People would come every week to get a different piece.

MARTIN LEBEDOFF

The Homewood Theater is where we went... It was our theater. It was the thing to do on Saturday afternoon and then, when you got bigger, on Saturday night. Tuesday night [they] gave away dishes with the movie. I think we still have some of the Depression glass that we got... There was an Abe’s Delicatessen... Then there was Maloff’s Delicatessen, right across the street from the Homewood Theater. Brochin’s was around there. Stillmans owned a big grocery store. There was a Mr. Silverman, who had a fish market on about Morgan and Plymouth. There was a Gold family that owned kind of a department store, more likely a clothing store, someplace on Plymouth Avenue.

Blicker’s barbershop was on about Logan and Plymouth. The Kaplan brothers owned a barbershop on about Newton and Plymouth. There was a Jack’s Bar, which was a beer joint... someplace around Morgan. There were three bakeries. There was the People’s Bakery that was owned by the Kaufman family, one point. There was a Leman’s Bakery... [T]he people who owned the Lincoln Del had a bakery first on Olson Highway, and then they moved to Plymouth Avenue.

IVY NUDELL

On the southeast corner of Penn there was a sanitarium for mentally ill people.... Oh! I remember when I was a little kid... one day, somebody got away from there and rang our doorbell. I used to be scared by that...

Then there was a shoemaker... Mr. Goldman used to put the nails in his mouth, and you’d think he would swallow them as he cobbled away... Then, on Newton and Plymouth, was the Sugar Bowl. That was a little candy store where you bought green leaves six for a penny and chocolate soldiers two for a penny. [N]ext door was the Homewood Theater.

NAOMI KASTENBAUM

Hornes

[About 1920 we moved] to 34 Royalston [Avenue]. My dad bought a duplex... Royalston is a hard-to-find place. In fact, it doesn’t exist as such anymore. It’s parallel to the Seventh Street Bridge and directly north and east of it. The railroad switching yard was there, and a coal company had their coal piles down there. In the summertime, we could never have our back windows open, only the front windows.

HARRY ROSENBAUM

[My family lived] at 922 Girard Avenue North, up the block from the Gemilus Chessed synagogue, hard by the Talmud Torah on Fremont and Eighth... Well, it was a new place. My family lived downstairs, and the Stiegler family lived upstairs. Farrell Stiegler, Alan Stiegler, Mickey Stiegler. And I grew up listening to Farrell Stiegler play the Mozart Clarinet Concerto. So when I heard it in concert, I could sing along with the clarinet.

PACEY BEERS
Then there was a sun porch, and a dining room, and a little butler's pantry, and a kitchen. Then our dining room... I remember so vividly. There were always crumbs on the floor, lots of crumbs because you ate in the dining room.

NAOMI KASTENBAUM

There were seven or eight of us living in this house on James, which was real tiny. In fact, I was sleeping downstairs on a couch. It was a wicker couch, and there was an opening so my feet could stick through. My uncle stayed with us, and my aunt stayed with us, and my mother had help once in a while, and my two brothers. So there were seven of us. And there was one bathroom. Today, nobody lives like that if they can help it.

ALLEN GREENSTEIN

We ended up living in my grandmother's house in North Minneapolis, one-half block from North High School, 1401 Seventeenth Avenue North. It was a real menagerie... [When my Aunt Ruth's... husband died, which was in 1944, she moved in with us. And my Aunt Ida, who was single at the time... They kept telling me she was sweet sixteen. And when I was sixteen and she was still sweet sixteen, I thought something was weird... Would you believe that there were also two boarders? This was a three-bedroom, one-bathroom house. My [younger] sister and I slept in a double bed together. I must have been a real little bitch because I drew a line down the center of the bed and said, "You stay on your side, and this is my side and don't you dare put a little finger over!"

MAUREEN BECK

Libraries

I probably spent three or four times a week [at Sumner Branch Library] when I was a kid. I probably read every book related to sports that they had on the sports shelf and then had to start reading other stuff.

IRV NUDELL

One thing I remember so well from my childhood is reading. Going, when I was a youngster, to the Willard Library during the summer, [where] they'd have summer honor reading. [You] read certain books and wrote out a little report, and you'd get a star. Later on, they had a circus
friends went to law school, and I said to her, "Sandy, you are so smart to have chosen a profession." She said, "Maureen, I didn't have a prospect for a husband."

MAUREEN BECK

Emanuel Cohen Center

Emanuel Cohen Center was just a beat-up old mansion that was used by all the young people. We held meetings there. It had a pool table. We had an orchestra, and ... I played the trumpet. I was probably ten or eleven years old at the time. The conductor was Eli Barnett. ... One of the thrills we had was the Emanuel Cohen [Center] orchestra playing for civic events.

MEL MAISEL

North High School

I remember when I was living in that house on Seventeenth Avenue, a half a block from North High School, on Friday afternoons listening to the yells and the screams from the football field. And I couldn't wait to be high school age so I could go and watch a football game and yell and cheer and scream that way.

I think that I was caught up in the tag end of a generation where women were not yet valued as contributing members to society. There was no good counseling. When I was in school you could be a nurse, or you could be a secretary, or you could be a teacher. One of my close

Bernice Cowl Gordon

Sumner Branch [Library] ... was a wonderful place to go. It's still there, this Tudor mansion. ... They had a large Yiddish collection. They were open on Sunday so that everybody—Jewish gentlemen who were observant on the Sabbath or who had to work on the Sabbath—could ... use the facility on Sunday afternoon.

Pacey Beers

and balloons and fish and all kinds of different themes. But when I was a youngster, it was a gold star.

NORTH SIDE MEMORIES

North High School

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I grew up at the Emanuel Cohen Center. I went to nursery school [there], which makes me very modern, before I started public school. Then we hung out there after school and summers. I went to [what was] probably the first day camp ever held at the Emanuel Cohen Center. . . . Later, when I was in high school, I worked in the game room at the center. My brother, Joe, was one of the workers at the center and was very well known. . . . Then, when I was in college, I worked at the center again. And then, I worked at the day camp, which is where I met Charlotte. We were both counselors at the day camp for a couple of years before we got married.

IRV NUDELL

Talmud Torah

I recall the first building on Bassett Place. It was originally called the Hebrew Free School. Free tuition was necessary to encourage attendance. Those who could afford to pay were charged one dollar per month. There was no bus charge—there was no such thing as a bus. Everyone lived within walking distance, although I do recall one of our founding fathers picking up slow walkers in his horse and buggy and delivering them to class before the bell rang.

MAISHE BERMAN

The Talmud Torah building on Eighth and Fremont was built [as a complete] center. They had a swimming pool, and they had the auditorium, which could easily be turned into, and was frequently used for, a basketball court. They had meeting rooms . . . for kids. And it was a precursor, really, of the Emanuel Cohen Center, which became the Jewish Community [of Greater Minneapolis]. I think they thought that they could put the two [functions of education and recreation] in the same building. And that was the aim, because in those days the directors of the Talmud Torah were the directors of the Emanuel Cohen Center, were the directors of the Children's Home, and became, ultimately, the directors of Beth El. . . . [But] they discovered that it wasn't going to work because the Talmud Torah and post-school activities would be at the same time. And the noise from the gymnasium would interfere with the educational groups. And that's when they began to talk about splitting it and eventually building the Emanuel Cohen Center.

GUITA GORDON

[The Saturday morning service at the Talmud Torah] was a very special service, performed entirely by the students. We were the hazanim (cantors), we gave the sermons, we took care of decorum. It was a very participatory service, where everybody read in unison, they sang in unison. On the High Holidays, especially after I graduated from the Talmud Torah, we had our service, again with our choir, and without doubt the Alumni Services at the Talmud Torah were by far the most beautiful, the most meaningful services I've ever attended in my life.

DR. SAMUEL SCHWARTZ

[When I came here [from Atlanta] the thing that was so outstanding was the Talmud Torah and the fact that it was a community school, and the synagogues didn't have [their own] congregational schools. It was well organized, with full-time teachers, and the children went five days a week. This was very impressive.

HELEN ZIFF
[In the early years of the Talmud Torah there was, apparently, a small group of... young [male students whom the Talmud Torah fostered] who... spoke Hebrew in public constantly, who published the Barkai newspaper, who would play chess in Hebrew, and also were involved in the Hachsharah (Zionist youth movement) later on and Poalei Zion (Labor Zionist movement).

I remember relatively good teachers, 70 or 80 percent of the time, through all of my Talmud Torah years. It was a true communal institution, but the strength of its Hebrew instruction had to do with the fact that it was the heritage of fürbrente (zealous) Labor Zionists.

EARL SCHWARTZ

I went to Willard Elementary School on Sixteenth between Queen and Russell. Almost all of my friends went to Talmud Torah after school. I always felt sorry for them because they had to go school after we were done with school. But I think it gave them a sense of superiority, in a way, because they were learning a language as well as a religion... and not just the religion but the whole ethnic culture. . . .

Sometimes they had some guests they could invite, and I went. It was very much like going to—I was brought up a Catholic—my church. Everything that wasn't in Latin was in French, so I didn't know what was going on at all. And I felt the same way at the Talmud Torah. Once you walked in, you couldn't speak anything but Hebrew. But it was interesting.

RONALD BEAUCHANE

[I] joined the Talmud Torah Auxiliary. They—right away, I think—made me secretary. And then, I don't know how much time passed, but they [approached] me to take the presidency, and I was very much against it. I don't know how many children I had at that time... I just recall that they came to my house one evening, the two of them, and they sat there to convince me to take the presidency. They actually refused to leave until I would say, "Yes." It was about midnight, so I succumbed.

HELEN ZIFF

Synagogues

Keneseth Israel

The men sat in the main sanctuary, and the women and children sat in the balcony to the rear. When we got tired of standing next to father downstairs, we went upstairs to sit with mother for a while. Rabbi [Solomon Mordcay] Silber was the spiritual head of the congregation, a very learned man steeped in Talmudic lore... He had a long beard, a stovepipe hat, and delivered his sermons in Yiddish. All the men in the congregation wore hats... The aliyot (selected congregants being called to the bimah during Torah reading) were auctioned off: The price was determined by open bidding. When it came to maftir (concluding verses of Sabbath, holiday, and fast-day Torah portions) on Yom Kippur, the Book of Jonah commanded a premium.

MAISIE BERMAN

Mikro Kodesh

When we were at the Mikro Kodesh [during the 1950s and 1960s], it had a balcony and the women sat upstairs. As time went on, some of the women were refusing to sit upstairs, so they were sitting in the back downstairs and pretty soon, they were moving forward. At that time, the Keneseth Israel had not become a strictly Orthodox shul (synagogue), so we had families like the Joshuas and the Kutoffs and a few other families that were at Mikro Kodesh and wanted it to be strictly Orthodox. So when they were mingling too much, some of these people had approached Rabbi [Nahum] Schulman to make a separation, to have a mekhitzah (physical barrier separating the sexes) even on the ground floor. [Other people] objected.

There were about a half dozen or more families that left Mikro Kodesh, and they went to [Rabbi Louis] Ginzburg's shul, which was like a shtibl (small Hasidic house of prayer). We remained at Mikro Kodesh,
and we tried to make do with what was. These people that moved over to Ginzburg's shul, after a few years, had some disagreements there, and that was when they negotiated with the people who were running the Keneseth Israel. And they made a proposition to them that if they would allow the shul to be strictly Orthodox, these families would, then, [return to] Keneseth Israel. And they would help bring a rabbi, and they would have a strictly Orthodox shul. And that's how Keneseth Israel [once again became] a strictly Orthodox shul.

HELEN ZIFF

Genesis of Beth El
The Minneapolis Talmud Torah was unique in that it first of all was a community school, and secondly it didn't adopt the principles of the old-time heder (Hebrew school). It was a modern school geared to progressive education. . . In with the curriculum of the Talmud Torah we also had a Saturday morning service. Now these services were geared to the children. The children were taught to pray in unison in Hebrew. They had to behave themselves. It was a dignified service, and it went along very nicely for several years. . .

These children, after they graduated from Talmud Torah, would have to take their place in a synagogue, provided there was a synagogue to accommodate them. So the situation was ripe. Here we were building a new synagogue, and here we had children trained in the Talmud Torah to participate in the synagogue service in a meaningful manner . . .

In addition to the children's services, they also had what we called Alumni Services, particularly on Friday evening and also on the High Holidays. This all took place before Beth El was built, which would [place the services] in 1922–23.

The adults had moved away from Fremont and Girard and Humboldt up here into Homewood, and they were thinking in terms of building a new synagogue. And it was presumed that the type of service that we had in the Talmud Torah . . . would be the type of service we would have in the new synagogue.

MAISHE BERMAN

Early Services at Beth El
I came here in September 1924, before Rosh Hashanah. We held the services at the Talmud Torah auditorium on Fremont and Eighth. It was supposed to have been a modern congregation, with decorum. I still remember that every fifteen minutes I had to stop the service and plead for quiet. Now, I plead that I want to hear them daven. Now you can hear a pin drop, and I don't like it.

The second year we had our new building. The shell for the building, boards were laid on the ground in the vestry rooms, canvas was used for the doors, and we were in our own building. We used . . . a little theater that existed, that was on Plymouth near Knox, [for] the daily minyan [and] Shabbos while this building was being finished. We dedicated the building on the Hebrew month of Nissan (the beginning of the Hebrew month of Nissan) 1926.

RABBI DAVID ARONSON

Bar Mitzvah: Talmud Torah versus Beth El
Chuck Rubenstein was the first bar mitzvah at Beth El—downstairs, because we didn't have the upstairs. After that I realized that we had no bar mitzvahs scheduled because there were no bar mitzvahs in a synagogue in North Minneapolis. Every bar mitzvah was at the children's service at the Talmud Torah. And the Talmud Torah wouldn't give up. So I told the [Beth El] board that I'm through. I'm just not interested. If the synagogue is no place for a bar mitzvah, it's not my idea of a synagogue, and I mean that's all. There's no compromise, on that point I cannot compromise. A. N. Bearman's son Jacob was bar mitzvah in both places.

RABBI DAVID ARONSON
First Saturday Bat Mitzvah

So slowly, slowly, Rabbi Aronson tried to get the bat mitzvah on a Shabbat morning. And of course, the dear Lord had given him a wonderful opportunity—the triplets—the Lebedoff triplets had to be bar and bat mitzvah, so [in 1951] they had a joint service, naturally. And David was called to the Torah, and Johnny was called to the Torah, and Judy was called to the Torah: the first girl. And when they were through with the whole Torah reading, before the haftarah (reading from the books of the Prophets) section, I remember he walked to the front of the bimah (synagogue podium and altar area), and he looked outside and he said, “I don’t see any lightning. I don’t hear any thunder.”

GUITA GORDON

... and Fallout

I was the president of the Women’s League [at Beth El] for two years... I had had some very heated arguments with Rabbi Aronson when it came, for example, to Mother’s Day. He proposed the idea of the women conducting the service, and I objected. And I said that I felt that what we should do on Mother’s Day is for the rabbi to speak to the women and give them Judaic understanding of responsibilities and roles of the women. But I was not in favor of having them participate in the service. So, as long as I was involved, this was the pattern. Then, after they had this first bat mitzvah, they began to make all kinds of changes, so I just didn’t feel like I wanted to be involved.

HELEN ZIFF

Scouting

Now Troop 86 [organized at Beth El] was quite an active troop and one of the outstanding troops in the city... I had the good fortune to take Troop 86 up to Camp Many Point for a couple of summers, which was quite an enjoyable experience. One of the things that stands out there was Rabbi Aronson’s renewed interest in scouting at that time... And when we went up to Many Point, he saw to it, rather he insisted, that our kids had kosher meat. And the scout office was very cooperative... Also, we had services on Tisha b’Av (holy day commemorating destruction of the First and Second Temples)... [and on] Shabbos morning. I think it was the first time that many scouts of other faiths witnessed a Jewish service.

MAISHE BERMAN

United Synagogue Youth

[My vision of usy in 1948 was] that it would be a dedicated youth group, people who would try to make Judaism live in their own life and would involve other young people—teenagers—in it, and through them to revitalize the synagogue in the Jewish community... One of the first things that was organized was an athletic league where the youngsters competed not only with the other usy groups in Beth-El and in the city but got involved in a citywide league representing the synagogue... For me, at that point especially, the conception was that if you live a total life and [if] the synagogue is the focal point of that life, the synagogue should reach out and include everything.

RABBI KASSEL ABELSON

Young People’s League

[Beth El’s] slogan was, “We shall go with our young and our old.” And therefore the emphasis was on the young people. We organized the Young People’s League. We had the collegiate age... though most did not go to college. That was the finest group we had. They were dedicated, they were alert, [and] in those days [the 1930s and 1940s], you didn’t have to date in order to make an appearance anywhere... Two girls came in,
they were sure they would find boys [and vice versa]. And many, many of those couples who were married forty years ago or so met right there at those groups.

RABBI DAVID ARONSON

Women's League

Rabbi Aronson and [his wife,] Bertha, were extremely active in the founding of Women's League. They came up—they may have gotten it elsewhere, but I only know of it in this context—with the Fellowship for Jewish Living. [The women] met for a number of years—this was before I came—with Rabbi and Bertha in their home, and they worked out basic points for Jewish living ... a list of five or six points which involved Jewish worship, Jewish study, Jewish living—a minimum. They introduced it into our Women's League and then into the Regional Women's League in its early years. [The Fellowship] still existed when I came ... It was extremely influential ... in setting the tone at Beth-El and, to a great extent, the tone of the region as being educational and spiritual.

RABBI KASSEL ABELOSON

Every synagogue had its women's group. Pictured here are the ladies of Tifereth B'nai Jacob Synagogue, Eighth Avenue North and Elwood, 1944.

Loan Societies

If someone was in need, there was a synagogue [Gemilus Chesed] on ... about Ninth and Girard. ... I remember fully well, my father in the depths of the Depression borrowed a small sum. But to him it was probably a large sum. On a weekly basis, I would make payment on his behalf, whether it was fifty cents or a dollar. One would step up to the window, so to speak, in this tiny little structure, actually affixed to the synagogue, and make payment.

MEL MAISEL

Some poor people got money from the synagogues. There was always a collection taken up at the end of each day's minyan, so transients and wayfarers would come to the synagogue. There was also a Hebrew Free Loan Society, which was part of Gemilus Chesed synagogue. I know my parents used that frequently.

They would charge their groceries and stuff like that and then, when the bill got big, they would go to the Hebrew Free Loan Society and take out a loan, which they repaid at the rate of fifty cents a week. And there was no interest charged. So that's how a lot of the people in the community got by.

IRV NUDELL

[I]n the last quarter at the law school, I had to have tuition. I think it was around forty-eight dollars, and I didn't have forty-eight dollars, and none of the brothers had forty-eight dollars. So I said, "Pa, will you take a loan from the [Workmen's Circle] Loan Association?" He said, "No, I can't do it. I [already] signed [collateral] for somebody's loan for coal." ... I finally got the last few dollars for tuition a day before the school started.

SAM BELLMAN