

# Perth Amboy's melting pot once had a Jewish flavor | mycentraljersey.com

At one time, Perth Amboy had hundreds of Jewish families.

"My father was a kosher butcher," said 92-year-old Nate Witkin to illustrate the bygone Jewishness of the community.

"Now," he said, "we have a hard time getting a minyan" (the 10 persons required at a prayer session).

This has to be a slight exaggeration. But still, Perth Amboy no longer has a YMHA.

The original building constructed as a Y was dedicated in 1924 and was the site of Jewish cultural and social activities.

The building at Madison Avenue and Jefferson Street burned nearly to the ground on Feb. 12, 1975, but it rose from its ashes like the legendary Phoenix, with a little bit of help from its friends.

After the fire, Isadore ("Izzy") Silver, executive director of the Y, commented: "The entire Jewish community sat shiva."

Before opening its own facility in 1924, the Y had operated out in a building housing the Perth Amboy Savings Institution at Smith and Rector Streets, and then in two floors of the building at Smith and McLellan Street, where it remained until the new Y was built at Madison and Jefferson.

But the times, they were "a-changin' " and the YMHA building was being used less and less for its dedicated purpose, among which was programs for the elderly. In 2003, the Y was sold to a newly emerging Hispanic group that was seeking to put its own imprint on the town.

While the Y was still active, the speakers programs included writer and war correspondent Quentin Reynolds, California Congresswoman Helen Gahagan Douglas and Max Lerner, a columnist for the New York Post when that paper was owned by Dorothy Schiff.

And there were other interesting programs, with Sunday Brunch speakers including Harold Augustine, the former city clerk known as "Mr. City Hall"; Charles Paolino, editor of The News Tribune, successor to the Perth Amboy Evening News and a Catholic deacon, and Mirko Tuma, the music and drama critic and reporter who discussed his experiences as a writer and poet while a prisoner of the Nazis in Theresienstadt — also called Terezin — a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia.

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Witkin remembers all this, of course. He still keeps occupied, but he does need that afternoon nap. He and his wife Norma, 85, who moved here from Trenton at the age of 14, have been married 62 years. They talk of their old Perth Amboy friends and are both articulate about their love of community and are working to keep the "Concerts by the Bay" series operating.

Nate once had a liquor store called "Witty's," and he still keeps a real estate sales license with Elek Realty in Woodbridge.

Among her other activities, Norma Witkin was instrumental in setting up a nursery school program at the Simpson United Methodist church on High Street.

"We had a very vibrant Jewish community," recalled Harold Levy, 91, who in his younger years was head of the Perth Amboy YMHA and the Jewish Community Council and headed United Jewish Appeal drives.

Flames destroyed another treasure of the Jewish community — the Byzantine-style synagogue of the Orthodox Congregation Shaarey Tefilah on Madison Avenue. That building was replaced by a more modern one at Market and Water streets, close to the waterfront.

"We didn't have much money," Levy said, "but we sure did a lot of good things."

I mention these things hoping to enhance a project undertaken by a group of residents, of whom Dr. Mona Shangold is a leader, to produce a written history of the Jewish community in Perth Amboy and of the cemeteries where the Jewish deceased were interred. Included in that committee is Ila Ginsberg Miller and her sister Joyce Yaffe, two of the three daughters of the late Lena Ginsberg, who ran the Crystal Antiques Shoppe at 289 High St. and who died in 2001 at 104. The other daughter is Dorothy (Dolly), widow of inventor Jerry Lemelson. Also on the committee is Joan Seguine LeVine, a writer in her own right, and her husband, Newton.

Robert Spector, a writer and a native son, has agreed to work on this project and has started to collect and collate information.

"Perth Amboy was a great place to live," said Levy.

It also was a great place to work, say I, looking back at my years at the paper then known as The Perth Amboy Evening News, working with a community and a city in flux. That was when we were in the middle of the town, on Madison Avenue.

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So I talked to several other Perth Amboyans, among them Stan Slobodien, now of Metuchen, to get the feel of the community. His grandfather and his grandfather's brother, he said, were two of the original 10 founders of Temple Beth Mordecai.

It was in Temple Beth Mordecai that I saw and heard Isaac Bashevis Singer, the great Jewish writer. My wife, Marcia, sat next to his wife in the audience.

Levy and Slobodien remembered Perth Amboy as a community that gave folks nicknames that were work as badges of honor.

Levy was known as "Mophead," because of his mane of wild hair. Other nicknames included "Moishe," "Meatball," "Tex," (he didn't come from Texas), "Hoof," "Little Red," "Big Red," "Little Witty," "Big Witty," "Shep," "Sonny," and "Hockfleish." That means chop meat, in Yiddish.

Slobodien himself was "Little Red" and his late older brother Howard, who became a doctor, was "Big Red."

They were part of the family that ran the Slobodien Shoe Store, one of a number of Jewish owned stores in Perth Amboy.

The Jewish kids used to socialize at the YMHA.

"We were all friends and never knew what each other's father did," says Fredda Robinson, who was Fredda Goldstein in the high school class of 1943. Her own father owned a theater.

Fredda is the widow of David Robinson, a World War II naval officer whose valor I have discussed in the past. Fredda and David raised their family in Metuchen.

She recalled Cohen's Delicatessen in Perth Amboy, which got so crowded with corned beef sandwich eaters there was no place to sit down.

Many of the Jewish families have moved to the surrounding communities, such as Edison, Metuchen, Woodbridge and Highland Park. Others have retired and/or moved to gated communities.

The business community attracted people from all over.

Yes, it was the Jewish community, but it was more.

It attracted people like Cam La Zizza, a colorful and multi-faceted banker (and musician and do-gooder on the side) who was so friendly with Jewish families that he was on the invitation list for bar mitzvahs and brisses, which he attended.

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And other non-Jews, like Jimmy Hardiman, owner of Seaman's Pharmacy on Smith Street.

Jimmy knew just about everybody in town, or so it seemed, if they stopped at his old-fashioned lunch counter on Smith Street. He knew Rabbi Max Davidson of the Conservative Temple Beth Mordecai, on High Street, who used to stop by before his Friday night service for a cup of coffee and a corn muffin. Hardiman loved to talk to him and was astounded by his wealth of knowledge.

Hardiman was like one of the family, and Seaman's was the place to meet. And it wasn't only the Jewish community I enjoyed. There was everybody else — just plain ol' Americans — Hungarians, Poles, Italians, Hispanics, African-Americans, and Irish.

The city had tom (Yiddish for flavor.)

It had its actor, Charlie White; it had its painter and humanitarian, Tom Ward. It had its politicians, George Otlowski and Eddie Patten. It had the built-in history, its location by the sea and a population that embodied Emma Lazarus' words in 1883 from her poem, "New Colossus," which honors the Statue of Liberty:

Give me your tired, your poor

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free—"

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore, Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Perth Amboy was a great place to be.

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