

# Texas Jewish Historical Society

Preserving Jewish Heritage in Texas  
Est. 1980



July 2014 News Magazine

## Keeping Tabs on Temple's Tablets

by Ken Herman

Reprinted with permission from *Austin American Statesman*, October 16, 2013

Congregation Agudas Achim (of which I am a member) has had three buildings since its founding 99 years ago. The first was built in 1931 at San Jacinto Boulevard and East 10th Street, where a federal building now stands.

In 1963, the congregation moved to a new building on Bull Creek Road, since replaced by the current Agudas Achim building on the Dell Jewish Community Campus in Northwest Austin. The old downtown building was demolished, including the 2,300-pound Ten Commandments tablets that sat atop the building over the entrance.

Or at least that's what everybody thought was the fate of the tablets. The truth was revealed last year at an event honoring the late Jim Novy, a major figure in Austin Jewish history. Among the attendees was Morris Shapiro, Novy's son-in-law, and he had something to report when



*Congregation Agudas Achim's downtown building, which was demolished in the early 1960s. The Ten Commandments tablets that were atop the building are now in the courtyard of the synagogue in Northwest Austin.*

folks looked at photos of the long-gone downtown synagogue. Because he is such a good storyteller, let's let Shapiro, 88, tell the story, which he did as we sat in his home near Westlake High School.



*In October, 2013, the tablets were installed at Congregation Agudas Achim on Hart Lane.*

I'll do my best to translate the Yiddish.

"I'd gone to that shul when I lived in Lampasas when I was a teenager. We used to come into Austin for the High Holy days," Shapiro said of the downtown synagogue.

Fast forward to the early 1990s when its demolition was imminent. Shapiro recalled being at his desk in Austin Metal and Iron, founded by his father-in-law in 1913, on East Fourth Street.

"I was sitting there thinking about it and I was thinking, 'Is there anything out of that old building that we want to save?'

and I couldn't think of anything", he said. "Then it dawned on me. I remembered when you went up to the front entrance to the place there a real nice long flight of steps....and you'd look up and here were these beautiful Ten Commandments (made) out of stone. And I thought, I wonder if anybody told them to save those", he said. "So I got out and got to my car and drove there and, sure enough, they were about ready to wreck the front part of the building, and I told Pee Wee, I said, 'Pee Wee, I want those Ten Commandments there'. He said, 'What are you going to do with them?' I said, 'We're going to have a new synagogue somewhere and when we do, we'll use those.'"

Pee Wee (Pee Wee Franks, a demolition specialist and Austin Metal and Iron customer) complied and Shapiro became the keeper of the Ten Commandments. But after deciding the old tablets would not mesh with the modern design of the new building on Bull Creek Road, he had them taken to a warehouse at his business. And there they sat for a half-century.

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# Message from the President

by Debra Winegarten

What a warm welcome TJHS received from the people at House of Jacob in Wichita Falls when we were there in June.

Almost forty of us descended on this small, dusty town. Sally Drayer and Samylu Rubin worked tirelessly over the past several months to ensure

the meeting went smoothly and the local arrangements were in place. I entrusted Sally and she did an amazing job. Friday night, we joined in a Kabbalat Shabbat service at the shul, followed by a kosher brisket dinner, prepared by the congregation. Satur-



day morning, we climbed aboard a trolley and visited the Jewish section of Rosemont Cemetery, where I instituted a new tradition of saying Kaddish when we visit these sacred sites. We dedicated the prayer in memory of Mitzi Chafetz's mother, since this was her

Yahrtzeit.

We then descended on the Museum of North Texas, where the county archivist gave a talk on some of the Jewish citizens of Wichita Falls. After looking around at the many collections the museum had, we walked to the building

that was the site of the original Zale's Jewelry Store, which is undergoing a renovation. We boarded the trolley to take the "Oil Barons Tour" to view the magnificent mansions in the old part of town. The Saturday night program was a personal view of the community, with remarks by House of Jacob President, W.B. Marks, and long-time resident, Joan Schwartz. Gordon Cizon also shared some of his memories living in Wichita Falls and working with the Zale family. Vickie Vogel then enchanted us with a slide show of the recent TJHS trip to Cuba.

I want to thank the Board for its cooperation as I presided over my first Board meeting Sunday morning. Vickie Vogel received a grant in the amount of \$250 for the printing and distribution of a book for the cemetery in Hallettsville, Texas. A grant of \$25,000 was awarded to help with the moving and restoration of Brenham's B'nai Abraham synagogue building to Austin. B'nai Abraham is the oldest Orthodox shul in Texas and will have a new life again. I am proud that we are a part of this worthwhile endeavor.

If you have not joined us for a meeting, or even if you have, you MUST do everything in your power to come to Austin October 23-25. TJHS is co-hosting a meeting with the South-

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## The Texas Jewish Historical Society July 2014 Quarterly News Magazine

The Texas Jewish Historical Society News Magazine is published four times annually. Stories about Texas Jewish history, oral histories, and requests for assistance with research are welcome, as are photographs and historical documents. Please provide color photocopies or scans at 300 dpi or greater in .gif, .tif, or .jpg format, and send electronically to Assistant Editor Davie Lou Solka at [davielou@solka.net](mailto:davielou@solka.net) or by mail to 3808 Woodbrook Circle, Austin, TX 78759, 512-527-3799. Be sure to include your name and contact information.

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**Visit us on the web at [www.txjhs.org](http://www.txjhs.org).**



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# Lyndon Johnson was Scheduled to Visit my Austin Shul the Day After Kennedy Died

by Cathy Schechter

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On November 22, 1963, the women of Congregation Agudas Achim Sisterhood in Austin, Texas, were working in their new kosher kitchen, mixing potato salad for the several hundred people expected to turn up at the dedication of their new synagogue the next day—a group that was to include Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson.

The women didn't have enough mixing bowls, so they wound up using the synagogue's brand-new plastic trashcans to prepare the potato salad, a detail their honored guest would never need to know.

Of course, Johnson never made it to Austin. Instead of holding a joyous celebration, the congregants gathered to mourn the death of President John F. Kennedy and pray for their old friend, Lyndon, who had just been sworn in as President on Air Force One, standing next to the blood-splattered and shocked former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy. No one expected that he would reschedule his visit—but, ever the consummate politician, Johnson decided to keep his promise, and on December 28, the new President arrived at the new Agudas Achim building.

The synagogue owed its new location on Bull Creek to Johnson's intercession in a real estate deal. It's



*Jim Novy introduces President Lyndon Johnson at the dedication of Congregation Agudas Achim's new building on December 28, 1963. Johnson and Lady Bird are seated to the left of the dais. From the dedication program. (Courtesy of Congregation Agudas Achim Archives.)*

highly probable that no American president has ever been as intimately involved in the construction of a Shul as Johnson was in this one. In October 1963, as vice-president, he loaned his Lincoln Continental convertible to congregant Morris Shapiro, who drove the Torah scrolls the three or four miles from Congregation Agudas Achim's downtown location to its new suburban home amid a parade of marching Jews.

The connection between Johnson and Agudas Achim was Jim Novy, a Polish-born immigrant who wound up in Texas under the Galveston Plan and made a small fortune in scrap metal. One of Johnson's earliest political allies in Austin, Novy, pillar of Austin's Orthodox congregation, was instrumental in building the synagogue. For many Austin Jews, their relationship with Johnson had been so close that he

was almost too familiar; Milton Simons, who was Agudas Achim's president in the autumn of 1963, recalled that some of the congregants knew the vice president so well they refused to pay to hear him speak at the synagogue dedication.

The assassination changed that: When the dedication was rescheduled, a gully wash of people from all over the country wanted in, offering what Simons described as "enough money to pay the mortgage," just to come to

Austin to hear the new President talk to the Jews. In the end, it was Novy who kept the strangers out. As far as he was concerned, Austin Jews were LBJ's Jews, and even "the people too cheap to buy tickets," in Simons' estimation, should be there to hear the new president's first non-official public remarks as president.

I first encountered the story of the synagogue dedication in 1988, while writing a book about Texas Jews. In 2000, when Agudas Achim moved to its current location at the Dell Jewish Community Campus, I volunteered to produce a video to mark the occasion and interviewed congregants who attended the 1963 event, many of whom have since passed away.

Early one morning after the

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sh'loshim for Kennedy were over, Novy received a call from President Johnson. "He told Daddy, 'I said I would be there, and I'm going to be there,'" Novy's daughter, Elaine Shapiro, said. With only a week's notice, the members of the congregation hustled once again to prepare. The shul's decorations committee set the stage for the possibility that there might be television cameras in attendance. The Sisterhood catering team thawed out the barbecue and remade the potato salad and Jell-O mold. Shirley Rubinett remembered that the Secret Service sent taste-testers, and the president was supposed to eat only what they approved. But, in the end, she told me, "He ate whatever he wanted, he gobbled it down, he was hungry."


Almost every person I spoke with said that the most memorable image of the evening was entering the synagogue vestibule and seeing a red telephone on the table—a cultural icon preserved in the congregants' collective memory as the infamous "red phone" connecting Washington and Moscow, though it could not have been. Ann and Saul Ginsburg's son, David, played "Hail to the Chief" on the spinet piano. The suave and articulate Dr. Polsky emceed the evening, and Jim Novy introduced the president with a litany of stories of all the times Johnson had helped him and the

Jews. "I've always called on President Johnson to give us a help," Novy told the crowd, "and there was never a time that I asked that he wouldn't take care of Jewish problems." In fact, Novy's introduction that night gave rise to the persistent Internet rumors that Johnson was a righteous gentile who saved hundreds of Jewish lives before and during World War II, though exhaustive searches by Johnson Library archivist Claudia Anderson have turned up no primary-source proof to substantiate the rumors.

After the community poured out its affection, President Johnson rose to speak. In his remarks—captured on a 33 1/3 LP for congregants to keep as a souvenir—he revealed the reciprocity of the trust and respect he felt, as well as the strength he drew from them. He combined a tribute to his home community and the Jewish people with remarks that foreshadowed his War on Poverty, which we Texans chose to hold in our memories in a more elevated place than the missteps in Vietnam that ultimately doomed his leadership. And he offered his personal tribute to Jim Novy: "If we have leaders like this good man who spent so many of his hours in the years past trying to build temples like this, temples where men can worship, temples where justice reigns, temples where the free are welcome, temples where the dignity of man prevails, then American will truly

be worthy of the leadership we claim, and the rest of the world will follow us where we lead."

When Novy died in 1971, Johnson—by then out of the White House and back in Texas—sat alone in the back of the sanctuary, without Secret Service or aides or hangers-on, wearing a *kippah*. Shortly after, Johnson also died of heart disease. It would seem that the partnership forged by the two men and the benefits yielded to Congregation Agudas Achim had come to an end.

But there is a postscript to this story: During the later years of the Johnson presidency, Encyclopedia Judaica approached Jim Novy to see if he could persuade the president to help fund them. Through Novy's influence, they were able to obtain an interest-free two million dollar loan to conduct the research needed to replace the old Jewish Encyclopedia with a version that reflected both the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel. In return for the favor, Novy asked for 100 sets of the encyclopedia to sell as a fundraiser. The proceeds arrived after the deaths of both Johnson and Novy, but Dr. Byron Smith, a former shul president, hid the money from anyone who wanted to use it for operating expenses, and used it to pay down the Bull Creek building mortgage, years in advance. LBJ was always one of us. 

## We Need Your Stories!

We are currently looking for stories with ties to Texas Jewish history! Any kind of story about your family history or your Temple's history can fill the pages of our quarterly news magazine. Write your story, and if you have questions or need help, call our

assistant editor.

Everyone has a story to tell, long or short. Your history is of interest to members across Texas and the nation! And you will be able to see your family's history in print. It is a wonderful keepsake and a valuable piece of genealogy for fu-

ture generations.

So what are you waiting for? Send your article to our assistant editor, Davie Lou Solka, at [davilou@solka.net](mailto:davilou@solka.net), mail it to 3808 Woodbrook Circle, Austin, TX 78759, or call her at 512-527-3799.

# An Invitation to All Members

Dear Members of the Texas Jewish Historical Society,

As your new President, I am extending a personal invitation to you to come to visit me in Austin in October. When I took the reins of this amazing organization in March, I promised that there would be changes. I vowed that with the board's help, I would streamline our grant process, pull us into the 21st century, and start to put to good use some of the generous funds our members have entrusted us with over past years.

Little did I imagine when I spoke those mighty words that at the first board meeting over which I presided, we would take bold, decisive action. In the morning prayers, we pray *Baruch sheh-amar v'haya ha'olam*—"And HaShem created the world with God's word."

And so it is with our organization. At the board meeting in Wichita Falls, we were given the opportunity to put some of our money into motion. The purpose of the Society is, in part, "to collect, preserve...materials having reference to the settlement and history of Jews in Texas..." We were asked to contribute \$25,000 to support moving B'nai Abraham, the oldest Orthodox shul in Texas, from Brenham to Austin, where it will be renovated and become home once again to an active Orthodox community, and a highly visible landmark of Jewish continuity in Texas.

There was a lively debate at the board meeting as to whether this was an appropriate use of TJHS funds. The overwhelming group consensus was that by this action, we made a loud statement that we are actively involved in preserving Texas Jewish history. Why is this important?

We are not just a bunch of arm-chair historians, mining dusty attics for buried documents; we are actively participating in making and preserving

the history of our ancestors for future generations.

And I want YOU to come to Austin and be a part of this historic event. You will find in this News Magazine a registration flyer for our October 23-26 meeting. This conference meeting will be a joint adventure with the Southern Jewish Historical Society. The culmination of our meeting on Sunday afternoon will be the dedication of the 121-year-old B'nai Abraham synagogue on the campus of the Dell Jewish Community Center. I request as many members of our organization be present as possible, because it is YOUR vision and YOUR money that are helping make this dream a reality.

We have an action-packed weekend planned with the maximum amount of intellectually stimulating fun events we could jam into a 72-hour period. Speakers are joining us from England, Germany, California, and Brandeis University. You will hear from Don Carleton of the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, Robert Abzug

from the U.T. Shusterman Center for Jewish Studies, and documentary filmmakers from Texas and Washington, D.C. You will be treated to lunch and a panel discussion in the atrium of the LBJ Library and a tour. At the Ransom Center, special Judaica items will be on exhibit just for us.

Did I mention food? Kabbalat Shabbat followed by a kosher barbecue brisket dinner; a Havdalah dinner cruise on Lady Bird Lake, complete with viewing of the largest urban bat colony in the US; a bagel bar Sunday morning to feed us between board meetings; and a book-and-author panel—such treats.

If you only make one meeting in 2014, come to Austin October 23-26. I want to meet you in person. I want to hear your ideas. I want to celebrate these accomplishments with you. Don't wait—register right now. We've even made it possible for you to register online. I'll see you in Austin in October.

Debra Winegarten 

## Contributions

The following donations have been received by the Texas Jewish Historical Society:

### In Honor of

Jan & Charles Hart and Davie Lou & Jack Solka, for their presentation to the San Antonio Jewish Genealogy Society

Solomon Ellis Lieb, great-grandson of Bernadine & Sanford Belkin

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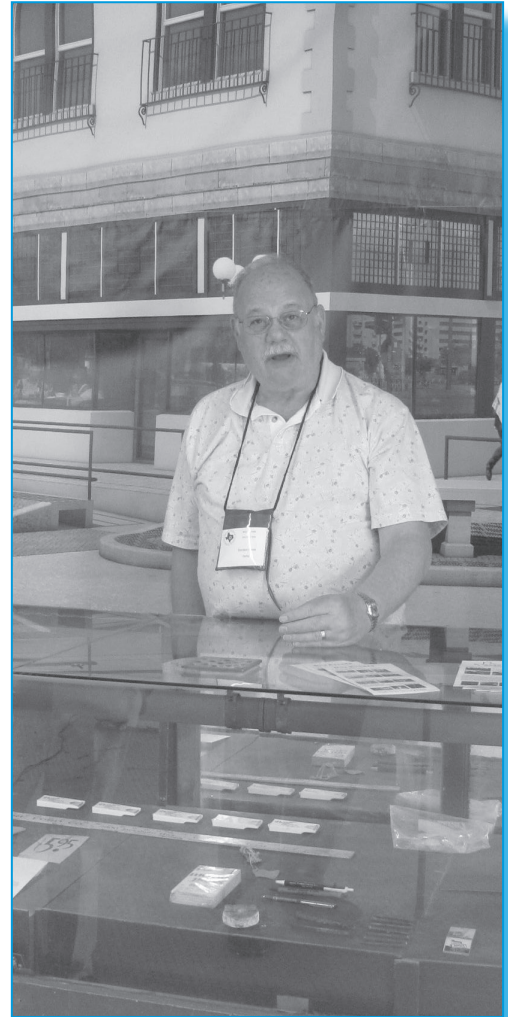
# TJHS Summer Meeting



*This is part of the group on the trolley. First row, Nancy Hoffman and Dolly Golden; second row, Libby Ann and Fred Greene; third row, Amy Milstein and Debbie Winegarten; fourth row, Rusty and Mitzi Milstein; fifth row, Louis and Joan Katz.*



*TJHS members in front of the trolley.*



*Gordon Cizon stood behind an original counter in Zale's Jewelry Store.*



*Left to right are Gary Goldberg, Jeri Hutchinson, Rabbi Danny Kislin, Miriam Kislin, Joan Schwartz, W.B. Marx, Noel Marx, Cheryl Sigel, and Jay Sigel.*



*Sally Drayer was the Meeting Weekend Chair.*

# Wichita Falls, June 20-22, 2014



*The Reform Temple Israel, which is now a Meals on Wheels building.*



*Rusty Milstein, Barbara Rosenberg, Louis Katz in front of a wedding exhibit at the Museum of North Texas.*



*Jeri Hutchinson and Rabbi Danny Kislin led Havdalah.*



*Rabbi Murray Berger explained the writing on headstones. Nancy Hoffman is on the right.*



*Ship exhibit at Museum of North Texas History.*



*Jewish section of Rosemont Cemetery in Wichita Falls.*

# Cuba: A Retro Isle with Vintage Cars & a Spark of Jewish Revival

by Hollace Weiner

When the United States launched a trade embargo against Cuba in 1961, there were 150,000 American cars on the road. All 150,000 of them are still on the island, many in mint condition. Cuba's Jewish population has not been as stable.

Before the Cuban revolution, the Caribbean island's Jewish community numbered 15,000. Havana was home to five synagogues, at least six Jewish

Castro seized businesses and private property, more than 95 per cent of the island's Jews fled, mainly to Florida. By 1990, the number of affiliated Jews in Cuba had dropped to 600.

"Sixty years without a rabbi," observed Adela Dworin, president of Havana's Jewish Community. "If you wanted to be a member of the Communist Party" and advance up the

rungs of government and society, "you could not be part of any religion."

The last two decades have brought change. The collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's communist ally, in December 1991 led to the reversal of religious restrictions. After Pope John Paul II visited Cuba in 1998, Christmas celebrations began to proliferate. Fidel Castro, wearing a yarmulke, attended a Hanukkah party after being advised it commemorated an ancient revolution of oppressed people.

Gradually, the number of affiliated Jews in Cuba has grown from 600 to 1,200—including 80 non-Jewish spouses who converted last year. Children learn Hebrew prayers. There are five or six bar and bat mitzvahs a year. Young adults lead services, although more than a dozen a year make aliyah to Israel. "We have very few newborns. If three or five, we try to bring a mohel from Argentina," Dworin said. "Sometimes it is not after eight days; it's after ten years."

The capital city, with its once-elegant Spanish colonial buildings, is today home to three Jewish institutions—a Sephardic Jewish Center with a synagogue, gym, and senior daycare program; an Orthodox synagogue, Adath Israel de Cuba Comunidad Hebrea; and a Conservative synagogue known as El Patronato.

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*TJHS travelers at the United Hebrew Congregation Cemetery in Havana.*



*TJHS travelers interact with domino players at the Sephardic Center community room.*

parochial schools, several rabbis, a mohel and a kosher butcher. As Fidel



*Mitzi and Rusty Milstein selected a kippah from among those made at the Sephardic Center.*



*The back of Hotel Nacional de Cuba, which overlooked the Gulf of Mexico.*



“We have good relations with the government,” Dworin said, echoing sentiments voiced by Mayra Levy, a physician and president of the Sephardic Center, and by Yacob Berezniak, the bearded, yarmulke-wearing leader of Adath Israel de Cuba.

These three Jewish leaders greet more than 50 mission groups a year from American Jewish communities. The TJHS, with approval from the U.S. Treasury Department, organized just such a trip to Cuba April 28 through May 5. Forty travelers embarked on this Caribbean journey, bringing medicines, hygiene products, clothing, small batteries, and other items that residents do not have easy access to.

Travelers on the Texas Jewish Historical Society mission trip, coordinated by Vickie Vogel who heads the Society’s Travel Committee, met at Miami’s International Airport, boarded an American Airlines charter plane, and 45 minutes later landed at Havana’s Jose Marti Airport.

The airport parking lot was decidedly retro, filled with colorful, well-

maintained cars from the ’50s. Somewhat disconcerting, however, were the tropical trees with dead limbs, evidence of the island’s crumbling public works sector. Elsewhere, fountains in public parks were dry, because the pumps were broken, we were told. At the Palacio de Bel-las Artes Museum, the air conditioning was broken. The curator worried aloud that the humidity was damaging oil paintings dating from the 17th century.

“Don’t try to understand Cuba,” the museum curator advised us. It is sometimes “surreal” and “il-logical,” yet endlessly fascinating. We stayed at the Hotel Nacio-nal de Cuba, a faded, 1930 landmark with an impressive cigar shop. A World Heritage Site, the hotel was the loca-tion of a 1946 Mafia summit meeting dra-matized in the movie “The Godfather Part II.” On arrival, we were greeted with refreshing mojitos and a view of the Caribbean.

Yacob Berezniak, the island’s Orthodox leader, recalled that before the revolution, his congregation, Adath Israel, thrived with 2,000 members. It had

*Rabbi Jimmy Kessler pre-sents a gift from TJHS at Adat Israel, the Orthodox Synagogue in Havana.*

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just completed a new building in 1959, the year Fidel Castro came to power.



*Adela Dworin, President of El Patronato, and Dolly Golden.*

“Between 1960 and 1990, there was a big assimilation process,” related Berezniak, who studied at a yeshiva in Israel. Participation dwindled. He is pleased to report that his shul today has 450 congregants, with morning and afternoon minyans that draw 50 to 70 worshippers. The congregation, which has a spring-fed mikveh, serves

free meals on Shabbat, possesses eight torahs and has an excess of prayer books—which the congregation received from “the synagogues that disappeared.”

Although Havana has public transportation, Adath Israel provides rides to the shul for seniors. “The bus in Cuba is a problem,” he explained. “You wait for hours to take the bus... It’s like mission impossible.”

Berezniak says that his congregation has a good relationship with the government, adding, “It is said that

the mother of Castro was descended from Marano Jews from Spain.” The Castro regime has always allowed one kosher butcher to operate. However, “The people cannot afford the meat.” The average monthly salary in Cuba is the equivalent of \$20. Ration cards allow two pounds of meat per person per month. The Cuban diet is mostly chicken, beans, and rice. Though fish abound in the waters surrounding the island, there is no off-shore fishing industry because of concerns that fishing vessels might head for Miami.

When there is a death in the Jewish community, Adath Israel guarantees a minyan at the grave. Part of the ceremony involves an ancient tradition of sprinkling parts of the body with dirt from Israel. Why? “So when they wake up they can see the land of Israel,” he explained. Importing Israeli soil involves a circuitous route, because in 1970, Fidel broke diplomatic relations with Israel. “It goes from Israel to Panama and from Panama to Cuba,” Berezniak explained.

Despite such obstacles, Berezniak is optimistic about the future of Judaism in Cuba. “Before 1959,” he recalled, “the Sephardi and the Ashkenazi were separate. Not anymore. We pray together... It’s a miracle.”

Mayra Levy is president of Cuba’s Sephardic Center, which follows the Conservative ritual and welcomes both Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews. The center operates a senior daycare program, a fitting way to repay the elderly who kept Judaism alive during the decades when religious practice languished. During those lean years, she joked, a “Cuban minyan” consisted of “men, Torahs, and God.”

Levy, a physician, is higher paid than most Cubans, earning the equivalent of \$30 a month. Although education and healthcare are free, she concedes that many “things here are upside down.” For example, “our medicines are not the most up to date . . . . In the hospital, the bed has no sheet. The family has to bring the sheet, the pillow, the food. Infrastructure is absent.”

Levy understands why young people want to leave the island, but she has never doubted her decision to remain. It was to “keep our heritage,” she said, and to help humankind by becoming a physician. “Life is not white and black,” she said. “You have all the degrees of gray in the middle.”

She grew up in an era of travel restrictions, when individuals who fled were cut off from their families. “If you leave, you close the gate. For years, you will never see your mom or your family.”

Her husband, for example, was fourteen years old when his mother left the island. “Eighteen years later, he saw her. He didn’t recognize her. She didn’t recognize him. You have to think very hard if you are going to abandon your wife, your mother. You

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*The front of Casa de la Comunidad Hebrea de Cuba (El Patronato).*

"I said, 'Put them somewhere where they're going to be safe,' and I forgot about them, to tell the truth, Shapiro recalled of how the Ten Commandments wound up out of sight and out of mind in the warehouse. They popped back into his mind last year at the event, where he saw the old photos of the old synagogue.

"I've got something that y'all would probably like to have," he told others at the event. "They thought I was *meshugge*," Shapiro told me. *Meshugge* means crazy. "The congregation was dumbfounded," wrote Marshall Sack, a co-chair of the synagogue project planning Agudas Achim's centennial events. "There are only a few members of the synagogue who even remember the old synagogue, let

alone the tablets."

Shapiro said his revelation sparked "a whole process." "You'd have thought they were moving the Washington Monument. They had a delegation and a committee—everything's a committee—to come look at it and to make arrangements," he said.

Plans were made and the tablets were moved from the warehouse. "They made a big *geschichta* out of nothing. They could've gotten a quilt and little low trailer and everything, but..." Shapiro said of moving day. (A *geschichta* is a saga or big-to-do. Disclaimer: The Austin American-Statesman cannot be responsible for injuries incurred in attempting to pronounce *geschichta*.)

Shapiro, no longer an Agudas Achim member (someday I'll tell you about synagogue politics), said he had debated whether to give the tablets to the synagogue but quickly decided it was the right thing to do. "*Zei gezunt*," he said. (That one means "be well" or "farewell" and can be used when one decides to move on from a dilemma.)


Shortly before visiting Shapiro, I went to sculptor Gilbert Beall's Hancock Drive studio to watch him working on the limestone tablets. In addition to rehabbing and restoring the lettering, he has carved the Ten Commandments into the formerly

blank backside of the tablets. There is something spiritual about watching a man carve the Ten Commandments into stone (see my video at [mystatesman.com](http://mystatesman.com)).

"The letters (on the front) were hand-carved so I've kind of copied the guy's style on the other side. He has a nice flow to his letters," said Beall. The tablets will be installed in a courtyard at Agudas Achim, which will host "Bringing the Tablets Home" events.

"There they sat for decades, largely forgotten," the synagogue said in a statement about the tablets, "much like the Ark of the Covenant in the vast government storeroom in 'Raiders of the Lost Ark.'"

So that's the story of how Morris brought the Ten Commandments to the people of one Austin congregation. I asked him what he charged for all those years. "*Bupkis*," he said with a warm laugh of a man who knew he had done the right thing.

*(Editor's note: The tablets were installed at the "Bringing the Tablets Home" weekend, which was held October 18-20, 2013. They now reside in the courtyard of Congregation Agudas Achim, where attendees at the TJHS/SJHS meeting will attend Shabbat Eve services at their meeting in Austin on October 24, 2014—exactly one year after the installation.)* 


### Cuba, continued from page 10

have to be very hard of your heart and your mind to leave."

Levy recalled that her parents had the opportunity to flee. "I remember people knocking on my door and saying, 'Levy, let's go. We're making aliyah.'"

Her family stayed put, and for good purpose, she believes. She is witnessing a revival of Judaism on the island and at the Sephardic Center. Things are happening that were unthinkable 30 years ago. The gallery of the Sephardic Center has an absorbing exhibit—in Spanish and English—about the Holocaust and the history of Jewish Cuba. The exhibit title reads: "From a Culture of Survival to a Culture of Community."


May it be God's will.

*(Editor's Note: Another trip to Cuba is planned for June 8-15, 2015. If you are interested, contact Vickie Vogel at [vickvogel@yahoo.com](mailto:vickvogel@yahoo.com).)* 

### President's Message, continued from page 2

ern Jewish Historical Society. Hollace Weiner, Bryan Stone and Sally Drayer, along with the local arrangements committee chaired by Davie Lou Solka, have prepared an incredible three day week-end conference. Plans include Shabbat Eve dinner at Congregation Agudas Achim, followed by dinner and a presentation by Sam Gruber, a leading expert on synagogue restoration, a tour of the LBJ Library, the TJHS collection at the Briscoe Center of American History, and Jewish artifacts at the Ransom

Center. In addition, there will be panel presentations on various aspects of Texas and Southern Jewish history, a dinner cruise on Lady Bird Lake for Havdalah and viewing the bats, and culminating Sunday afternoon with the dedication of the B'nai Abraham synagogue.

The registration form for this fabulous week-end is included in this issue. The complete program is on TJHS website – [www.txjhs.org](http://www.txjhs.org). Fill out the form and mail it today! I'll see you in Austin in October! 

# Encyclopedia of Texas Jewish Communities

*The Texas Jewish Historical Society awarded a grant to the Institute of Southern Jewish Life to research and publish the histories of Jews in Texas towns. These histories are available on the Institute's website and are called "Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities." We will adapt one of these histories in each issue of our News Magazine. Thanks to the History Department of the ISJL for permission to do so. To see other towns, go to the Institute's website, [www.isjl.org](http://www.isjl.org), click on the "History Department" and look for "Encyclopedia" in the drop-down menu.*

## Austin

For over a century, Austin was home to a small Jewish community that was often overshadowed by Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and even Waco. Austin was a relatively sleepy capital city, known more for its laid back atmosphere than as a bustling center for commerce. Since the 1980s, this has changed as Austin has emerged as a center for high-tech industry. As Austin has grown, so has its Jewish population. Since 1968, Austin's Jewish population has increased, making it one of the fastest growing Jewish communities in the country. By the 21st century, Austin had become a diverse and vibrant center for Jewish life in the southern Sunbelt.

Originally named Waterloo, the small village on the banks of the Colorado River was selected to be the capital of the Texas Republic in 1839, and was renamed to honor the father of Anglo settlement in Texas, Stephen F. Austin. Austin's first Jewish resident, Phineas DeCordova, became one of its most influential. The half-brother of land agent, Jacob



*An 1876 photograph of Congress Avenue in Austin, looking north from between 5th and 6th streets. The 1853 capitol building is in view.*

*Photo courtesy Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Austin, Texas.*

DeCordova, Phineas came to Galveston from Jamaica in 1848. He joined Jacob in a land business, working to attract European immigrants to Texas through their publishing of the *Texas Herald and Immigrant Guide*. Phineas DeCordova moved to Austin in 1849 after Governor Peter Bell invited him to work with the state government to attract immigrants to Texas. DeCordova opened a land company with James McKinney, and later befriended

the Western District of Texas, while also becoming Grand Master of the Odd Fellows of Texas, the first Jew to hold that position in the United States.

With only a handful of Jews living in Austin, a growing number of the Jewish immigrants settled in the small central Texas town. B. Melasky left Poland in 1856, and settled in Texas by 1859. He spent some time in New Braunfels and San Marcos, and then enlisted in the Confederate

Governor Elisha Pease, managing his estate and land holdings. DeCordova was a politically active Democrat and served as a city alderman and on the Texas State Democratic Executive Committee. He supported the Confederate cause, serving as a state senator and as secretary of the Texas Military Board during the war. After the war, DeCordova served as a U.S. Commissioner for

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cause at the start of the Civil War. After the South's defeat, Melasky moved to Austin, where he opened a clothing store on Congress Avenue with Abraham Biberstein. Later known as Melasky & Son, the store was a quick success and by 1870, he owned \$10,000 worth of personal estate. Henry Hirschfeld was born in Posen in 1834 and settled in Texas in 1850. After the Civil War, he moved to Austin and opened the Capital Clothing House in 1865. He married Jennie Melasky in 1868. After enjoying economic success with his store, he sold it in 1886 to focus his time on real estate and investments. Hirschfeld was one of the founders of the Austin National Bank in 1890, and served on its board until his death in 1911. He was a charter member of Austin's first Masonic Lodge. During the Reconstruction era, about fifteen Jewish families lived in Austin, with most being German immigrants who owned retail businesses.

Although Austin's small number of Jews tried to organize early, it took them several attempts to create a successful congregation. Land for a cemetery was purchased in 1866, and in 1872, the Hebrew Benevolent Association was organized with B. Melasky as its president. The group tried to raise money for a synagogue, but was unsuccessful, prompting them to disband. In 1874, Rev. J.M. Chumaceiro of Charleston, South Carolina, visited Austin to try and organize a B'nai B'rith chapter. Austin Jews decided that a congregation was a higher priority and created B'nai Shalom Congregation with Henry Hirschfeld as its president. Though the congregation collected over \$1,300 in pledges toward a synagogue, the group had disbanded by the end of 1875. At that time, a lodge of B'nai B'rith successfully began with Henry Hirschfeld serving as its first president.

In September 1876, Austin Jews



*Photograph of the intersection of 6th and Congress Avenue looking east towards the Driskill Hotel, date unknown.*

*Photo courtesy Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Austin, Texas.*

again tried to establish a congregation. This time the effort was encouraged by the local newspaper, which said that several other Texas cities had Jewish congregations, and "we can see no reason why Austin should not keep company with them." That day, thirty Jews gathered at the Odd Fellows Hall and established Beth Israel, Austin's first lasting Jewish congregation. The two most prominent Jews in town, Henry Hirschfeld and Phineas DeCordova, were its first president and vice-president, respectively. B. Melasky lent his Torah to the congregation and the group quickly raised \$2500 to build a synagogue. One of their first debates was whether to solicit non-Jews, but the group narrowly voted to restrict their fundraising to the Jewish community. They bought land for a building in 1877, but had a difficult time raising the money.

That same year, Dr. Gluck was hired to lead the High Holiday services that were held at the Odd Fellows Hall. He remained in Austin for three more months, and during that time,

started a Sunday School, which was run by Sigmund Philipson. Dr. Gluck returned in the spring of 1878 and led the congregation's first Confirmation service. He invited Austin's mayor and aldermen to attend in an effort to show these leaders that Jewish worship was not strange or foreign. B'nai B'rith leader Charles Wessolowsky visited Austin in 1879, and found thirty-five Jewish families who were doing well economically. He encouraged them to build a synagogue building.

By 1881, the group had become inactive and it looked as though Beth Israel might not continue. The following year, Rev. Chumaceiro returned to Austin and inspired them to revitalize the congregation and move forward with a building campaign. The members decided to reopen the religious school, hire a rabbi for the High Holidays, and begin to raise money for a building. They held Purim Balls to raise funds, and when members traveled north for business, they solicited contributions from wholesale suppliers

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# From Our Archives

*This column is based on information in the TJHS Collection, housed at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas campus in Austin. It has been supplemented with online research. If you have corrections or additions, please submit them in writing to the TJHS editor at [editor@txjhs.org](mailto:editor@txjhs.org). We want our archives to be as complete and accurate as possible.*

## From Bardejov to Belton by Vickie Vogel

In 1993, Don Teter conducted an oral interview with Gloria Novak at her home in Houston. Below is Gloria's story as told to Don.<sup>1</sup>

Sam (Shlomo Zalman) Neuman (Gloria's maternal grandfather) was born in 1879<sup>2</sup> or 1881<sup>3</sup> in a town in Hungary called Barfast (or Bardier) which later became a part of Czechoslovakia, sometimes listed as Bardejov, Slovakia.<sup>4</sup> His father was Menachem Neuman<sup>5</sup> and his mother was Miriam Esther Riff Neuman.<sup>6</sup> He came through New York before World War I and traveled to Belton, Texas, where he became a fruit peddler<sup>7</sup> with a mule and wagon. Tragedy turned into opportunity when a train struck and killed his mule. The railroad paid him enough compensation to open a store in Belton. His wife and five children were then able to join him in Texas in 1921, after being apart for seven years.

Sam's wife Geitel (Gisele) was born July 26, 1878,<sup>8</sup> in Austria/Hungary.<sup>9</sup> She died at home on Central Avenue in Belton May 2, 1923, of peritonitis. Her obituary in the *Belton Journal* said her children returned



*Sam and Eva Neuman, 1930. Photo courtesy Cheryl Colen.*

home from school and found her unconscious, and medical skill could not save her. She died the next evening.

"Mrs. Neumann [sic] was gentle and womanly in character and was a devoted Jew in belief and faithful to all the teachings of that belief."<sup>10</sup> Her

tombstone says that she was plucked from life in her young days.<sup>11</sup>

The five children were Ben (Benno), Max, Issac (or Issak), Annie<sup>12</sup> and Gloria's mother, Lillie.<sup>13</sup> Lillie had a twin sister who had died in Europe. The family worked in the store with Sam, with the children attending Belton schools.

After Geitel died, Sam returned to Europe and married a first cousin, Hava Broder, whom the family in Belton called Eva. Sam died in 1932, and was buried in Waco at Agudath Jacob Cemetery.<sup>14</sup> Since Sam died before his and Eva's son was born, the baby was also named Sam.<sup>15</sup>

When Sam Neuman died, his unexpected death was news in several local places because of his prominence in Central Texas business circles. He died unexpectedly in Marlin where he had gone to "take the health baths and to rest for a few

days" before leaving for the New York markets to buy stock for his stores. He had been "in good health up to the time of the attack, and his death came as a great shock to his family and friends..."<sup>16</sup>

"Mr. Neuman, starting with a  
*continued on page 15*



*Annie, Max, Lillie, Chava, and Sam Neuman in their Belton store, 1929.  
Photo courtesy of Cheryl Colen, great granddaughter of Sam Neuman.*

small stock of dry goods and small capital, by close attention to business and fair dealing with his patrons, prospered during his residence in his adopted land, and at the time of his death was operating stores in Belton, Killeen, Georgetown and Burnet. For

Street.”<sup>17</sup>

Sam’s oldest son, Ben, had a store in Georgetown, about 30 miles from Belton, where Lillie and her husband, Charles Sol Novak, opened a store. Ben also had a large ranch with horses outside

Temple. Annie married Will Feigenbaum, and in 1937, they opened Feigenbaum’s Famous Store<sup>18</sup> in La Grange. Issak married Jenny Markowitz of Beaumont and they opened a store in Bay City. At one time, Max had a store in Bastrop, and after World War II, he had a store in Belton.

Issak’s tombstone reads Isaac Neuman, born 1910, died 1975. His establishment in Bay City, Neuman Department Store, opened in 1938. Born in Czechoslovakia like all Sam and Geitel’s children, he moved from Belton to Burnet, where he worked with his father in the dry goods store. Isaac was a board member of Shearith Israel in

a time he had two stores in Belton. Some months ago he consolidated his Main Street store with his original place of business, corner Central Avenue and East

Wharton and is buried in the Shearith Israel Cemetery there. He was a member of the Shriners, the Rotary Club, the Masonic Lodge 865, and Scottish Rite Temple in Galveston. Isaac and his wife, Jennie, had a daughter, Mary Beth. When Isaac died, siblings Max, Annie and Lillie were all living in Houston; Sam was in San Antonio.<sup>19</sup>

Gloria Novak’s paternal grandparents were Isadore (1880-1919, possibly from Bialystok) and Bessie Stein Novak (1889-1918), who settled in St. Louis. They died within a year of each other of the flu pandemic. Their son, Charles Sol Novak, age 6, went to live with an uncle. He had an older brother, Jack, and an older sister, Ann. Ann stayed in St. Louis. Gloria does not know what happened to Jack. The uncle, a produce peddler, had three sons



*Sam Neuman, 1928. Photo courtesy Cheryl Colen*



*Miriam Esther Riff Neuman in Bardejov, Slovakia, mother of Sam Neuman, c. 1836.*

*Photo courtesy of Cheryl Colen.*

and a daughter when Charles joined the family. Charles ran away when he was about thirteen and ended up in New York before working his way

*continued on page 16*

down to New Orleans where he worked for the gas company. He later came to Houston and worked for Schwartzberg's Delicatessen. He was somehow introduced to Lillie who was living in Belton. They entered into a "business arrangement" and were married.

Gloria was born in Temple, eight miles from Belton, at Scott and White Hospital. The family had the store in Belton until she was 4 or 5 years old, when they sold it and opened a restaurant in McGregor, Texas. That venture, however, was short-lived. Before World War II, they moved to El Campo and opened a small dry goods store, staying there through the war. Once Gloria was old enough for Sunday School, the family would join the synagogue in the nearest big town. She attended in Wharton, 13 miles from El Campo. Charles wanted to live in a bigger town, so they bought a house in Houston, but things didn't work out. They next opened a store in Gonzales, which had a mill and was known for chickens and produce. The store was reasonably successful, but then drought came.

While in Gonzales, Gloria attended Sunday School in either Austin or San Antonio, equidistant from Gonzales. She was confirmed in San Antonio at Adath Emeth or Agudas Achim. They were members of both at one time or another.

When Gloria was 17 and a senior in high school, they left Gonzales. Her father bought a liquor store in El Campo. Gloria decided to finish high school in El Campo, since that was the class she had started school with. After a couple of years, the family moved to Rosenberg, where her brother started school. When the Feigenbaums decided to sell the La Grange store, the Novaks bought it. After four or five years, they returned to Houston where Charles entered the real estate



Immigration documents of Benno Neuman, 1920-1921.  
Photo courtesy of Cheryl Colen, Ben's granddaughter.

field. After attending UT and UH, Gloria started teaching. She remained in Houston.

El Campo was a more liberal town than Gonzales, in Gloria's experience. Jews were accepted. Gonzales was more reserved in its acceptance. You were known as "the Jew girl" or "the Jew family."

"It was always Jew instead of Jewish," she recalled. "And certain things in Gonzales you were part of, and the same time they left you out of other things. You never really became part of the community. At least I always felt that way."

Gloria points out there were other Jewish families there (she remembers the Taubs and the Stones), and they were more assimilated within the community than the Novaks ever became. When Gloria was there, she was the only Jewish student in the high school.

Gloria remembers there was a

B'nai B'rith organization covering Luling, Lockhart, Seguin, and possibly Cuero and Gonzales. In the summers, there would be a picnic in the park in Seguin. Her parents would not let her date non-Jews. Gloria was accepted in her peer group, and was in many organizations.

Her brother, Irwin Sam Novak, started school in Rosenberg and continued in La Grange and Westbury High School in Houston. He became a doctor, practicing in Houston. When they lived in Rosenberg, Mom and Dad took him to the M and M meat market owned by Max Lewis where Irwin "got his Hebrew lessons off of the meat chopping block."<sup>20</sup> Irwin recalls riding the bus alone from La Grange to Austin when he was 11 to study Hebrew at Agudas Achim.<sup>21</sup>

The Novak name was initially Wolinsky. "The story is that name came from stolen

papers of the family before they came to this country because the Jewish name couldn't get them over. Whereas Novak is probably a shortcut from another name. But the family name was Wolinsky originally."

Gloria had one daughter, Pamela Starr, who became a paralegal and lives in Atlanta. Gloria and Irwin, who recently retired from his medical practice, still live in Houston. Ben's daughter, Gay Winter, lives in Alabama, and her daughter, Cheryl Colen, who provided the photos for this article, lives in Dallas.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise state, all information is from Box 3A171, Communities: Goliad - Houston, Texas Jewish Historical Society Records 1824-2009, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin. Oral history by Don Teter

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# Photograph a Texas Jewish Cemetery Today

The Texas Jewish Historical Society has undertaken a monumental project to photograph all known Jewish burials (headstones) in the state of Texas, and then put these photographs on our web site for future genealogical research by any one worldwide.

You have asked, "How can I get involved in this project and help?" There are several ways that YOU can become involved.

If you are becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah or know someone who is, photographing the headstones in your local cemetery is a wonderful mitzvah project and would be a service to the synagogues that use that cemetery as well.

**Boy Scouts** who are working

toward their Religion Merit Badge or the Ner Tamid Award would find this to be a strong and fulfilling project to help attain their goal.

Hebrew School and Sunday School classes are often looking for projects

that connect students, parents, and teachers. This also allows the students to learn the history of their congregation from the stories of those they are photographing.

Youth groups in the synagogue community can make an inclusive community-wide project out of this by choosing a large

cemetery and getting various groups to participate, allowing for interaction among the groups.

We have a lot of work ahead of us.



**We need your help!** There are 141 local Jewish cemeteries in Texas that have been identified. Just a few are:

Austin (6); Columbus (3); Corpus Christi (3); Dallas (18); El Paso (3); Fort Worth (3); Galveston (5); Houston (15); San Angelo (3); San Antonio (7), including military (all photographed by one man); Tyler (3); Waco (3); all other towns have either one or two known Jewish cemeteries in them.


So please take *Roch Monis* on your Texas Jewish Historical Society and help us fulfill the dream of being one of the first states to have this vital information available on line.

If you need a camera, we have them available to loan along with SD cards. For more information and instructions on how to photograph a cemetery, please contact Gordon Cizon at [gcizon@swbell.net](mailto:gcizon@swbell.net), 214-361-7179, or 214 868-6543. 

*From Bardejov to Belton, continued from page 16*

- 1993, tape transcribed by Ruth Ginsburg Jan 1994.
- <sup>2</sup> Tombstone at Agudath Jacob Cemetery, Waco. <http://findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=neuman&GSfn=sam&GSbyrel=all&GSdyrel=all&GSst=46&GSctry=4&GSob=n&GRid=95691518&df=all&>
- <sup>3</sup> United States Census, 1930, index and images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/pat/MM9.Apr2014>), Sam Neuman, Belton, Bell, Texas, United States, citing enumeration district (ED)0002, microfilm publication T626, roll 2290.
- <sup>4</sup> Gloria Novak, telephone conversation with author, April 17, 2014.
- <sup>5</sup> Translated by Rabbi Jimmy Kessler, telephone conversation April 21, 2014. [http://image2.findagrave.com/photos/2012/232/95691518\\_134551444424.jpg](http://image2.findagrave.com/photos/2012/232/95691518_134551444424.jpg).
- <sup>6</sup> Telephone conversation Cheryl Colen, granddaughter of Ben Neuman,

- May 16, 2014.
- <sup>7</sup> Dr. Irwin Novak remembers he sold clothing from the wagon, rather than fruit. Telephone conversation with author, April 17, 2014.
- <sup>8</sup> Tombstone at <http://findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=pv&GRid=95691468&PIpi=65707131>.
- <sup>9</sup> Central Texas Genealogical Society, [http://www.ctgs.org/CTGS%20-%20Books/Fall%20and%20Puckett/Page%20\\_419%20.pdf](http://www.ctgs.org/CTGS%20-%20Books/Fall%20and%20Puckett/Page%20_419%20.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> Belton Journal, May, 1923, with thanks to Director Kim Kroll and Julie Neal of the Lena Armstrong Public Library in Belton for locating the obituary, and other assistance.
- <sup>11</sup> Translated by Rabbi Jimmy Kessler, telephone conversation April 21, 2014. <http://findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=pv&GRid=95691468&PIpi=65707078>.
- <sup>12</sup> Transcribed as Ivan in the oral history. Correct name is Issak, re Irwin Novak. Annie to family, her name was actu-

- ally Anna or Anni. Telephone conversation Dr. Irwin Novak and Gloria Novak, op cit.
- <sup>13</sup> Immigration listed Lillie as Minni. Telephone conversation Gloria Novak, op cit.
- <sup>14</sup> [http://image2.findagrave.com/photos/2012/232/95691518\\_134551444424.jpg](http://image2.findagrave.com/photos/2012/232/95691518_134551444424.jpg).
- <sup>15</sup> Sam Neuman lives in San Antonio. Dr. Irwin Novak, op cit.
- <sup>16</sup> Unnamed newspaper, "Neuman Dies in Marlin Thursday," July 16, 1932, from Gloria Novak.
- <sup>17</sup> Unnamed newspaper, "Sam Neuman Dies Suddenly in Marlin this Morning; Burial in Waco," from Gloria Novak.
- <sup>18</sup> L. David and Vickie Vogel, "Jewish Merchants of La Grange," 2008, unpublished.
- <sup>19</sup> "Neuman Dies at 65," unnamed newspaper reprinted at <http://findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=pv&GRid=75944051&PIpi=92233726>.
- <sup>20</sup> Box 3A171, op cit.
- <sup>21</sup> Dr. Irwin Novak, telephone conversation, op cit. 

and Jewish organizations there. Non-Jews were also asked for donations and \$640 was collected from them. In 1884, Beth Israel dedicated its first synagogue building at 11th and San Jacinto Streets. The Hebrew Ladies Aid Society donated \$120 to buy an ark. For the first year, the Temple did not have permanent seating and in 1885 they purchased pews for the sanctuary. The Ladies Auxiliary Society was established in 1892, and later became the Temple Sisterhood.

In 1883 and 1884, a rabbinic student from Hebrew Union College was brought in and Isaac Mayer Wise's Reform Minhag America prayer book was used. Although Reform, members wore yarmulkes. In 1885, a rabbi was advertised for in the *American Israelite* newspaper asking for "an American Hebrew minister who can deliver English sermons," run the Sunday school and direct the choir. Rabbi A.R. Levy was hired, but stayed one year. Five years later, he returned and stayed for nine years. In 1907, Beth Israel joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations with fifty-one members and thirty-five students in the Sunday School. Rabbi David Rosenbaum came to Beth Israel in 1911, and convinced the congregation to adopt the new Reform Union Prayer Book, but he continued to wear a yarmulke to keep more traditional members happy.

By 1890, there were an estimated twenty-six Jewish-owned businesses in Austin. Eleven of these were dry goods, clothing or general stores, four were grocery stores, and four were saloons or liquor businesses. Many businesses were partnerships selling cigars, books, jewelry, junk and crockery. Morris Bernhaim and Joseph Jacobs owned a dry goods store, while Simon Goldstein and Sigmund Philipson owned a cigar business.

Joe Koen left Russia in 1883.

He originally planned to settle in San Antonio, but on his way there, he stopped in Austin and liked it so much that he decided to open his jewelry and watch repair shop there. In 1888, he moved the business to E. 6th Street. His son, William, joined the business in 1918. Joe Koen & Son Jewelers is still run by the fourth generation Koen family. Joe Koen was a leader in the Austin Jewish community and served Beth Israel as president from 1899 until 1944. His son was president from 1946-48, and his granddaughter, Carolyn Koen Turner, became the first female president in 1984. His great-grandson, Brian Turner, was president of Congregation Beth Israel 2011-13.

Due to a wave of Russian and Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Austin's Jewish population grew from about 200 people in 1907 to 575 people in 1937. Leopold Cohen and his brother, Israel, came to Austin after the 1900 hurricane in Galveston, and became dry goods merchants and active leaders in the Orthodox community. Another set of brothers, Louis and Jim Novy came from Poland through the port of Galveston. Louis lived in Dallas, Ennis and Temple before moving to Austin in 1917. He managed the Hancock Opera House, later changing its name to the Capitol Theater. Jim began a scrap metal business before branching out into several different enterprises. In the 1930s, Jim Novy befriended a young local politician named Lyndon Johnson and established a relationship that would later provide big dividends for Austin's small Jewish community.

Initially, these more-traditional minded immigrants were part of the Reform congregation, Beth Israel. In 1901, Orthodox services for the High Holidays were held at the Knights of Pythias Hall, led by Rabbi Ben Nathanson of San Antonio. Daily min-

yans were held at people's businesses and homes. Despite this, the Orthodox group still worshipped at Beth Israel for Shabbat. By 1914, they decided to form their own congregation, Agudas Achim. High Holiday services for that year were held at the home of Ike Frank, and for the next several years, various rented halls were used. One year, thanks to Beth Israel President Joe Koen, services were held on the floor of the Texas Senate. Orthodox Jews from surrounding towns would come to Austin for Agudas Achim's services. By 1921, the congregation had twenty-five members.

In 1924, Agudas Achim was formally chartered and a small house at 7th and San Jacinto Streets was converted into a synagogue. Israel Cohen was the first president, serving from 1924 until his death in 1936. Bernard Tanenbaum was hired in 1929 to be the *chazzan* and Hebrew teacher. While the children of the congregation learned Hebrew from Tanenbaum on weekday afternoons, they went to Sunday School at Beth Israel.

The small house used by the congregation was inadequate by 1930 and land was purchased at 10th and San Jacinto Streets. A new building was dedicated the following year. Rabbi Harold Katz was hired and Agudas Achim continued to remain Orthodox. The synagogue contained a *mikva*, but it was rarely used. Most members kept kosher and walked to synagogue.

There were social and class divisions between the Reform members of Beth Israel and the Orthodox immigrants of Agudas Achim. There was not much social interaction between these two segments of the Austin Jewish community. While both groups were predominately merchants, Beth Israel members tended to own higher-end stores on Congress Avenue, while Agudas members tended

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to own smaller businesses on East Sixth Street. Jews of both congregations lived among non-Jews; there was never a predominantly Jewish enclave in the city. Austin Jews suffered little explicit anti-Semitism.

The University of Texas has had a profound impact on the local Jewish community since the early 20th century, when a handful of Jewish faculty members worked at the school. Dr. Hyman Ettlinger, a Harvard-trained mathematician, came to UT in 1913. He wrote a popular calculus textbook and chaired the school's Math Department for twenty-five years. He was active in the Austin Jewish community and taught Sunday School at Beth Israel. He also served as secretary of the congregation from 1927 to 1945. When Beth Israel did not have a rabbi for a year in the 1920s Ettlinger led services each week. There were a small number of Jewish faculty members at UT, most of whom were involved in the Jewish community. After World War II, the Jewish faculty grew significantly. Harry Leon and his wife, Ernestine, taught in the Classics Department. He chaired that department from 1947 to 1967, and taught the first Hebrew class at UT.

Ettlinger helped form the UT Menorah Society soon after he arrived in 1913, when there were only thirty Jewish students at the university. By 1917, there were sixty-six Jewish students at UT. The Menorah Society was succeeded by Hillel, which constructed its first building near campus the following year. Beth Israel's spiritual leader also served as rabbi for Hillel. By 1945, Hillel had grown enough to support its own rabbi and director. The Jewish population of UT grew steadily over the 20th century, and by 1927 there were three Jewish fraternities and one sorority. These numbers increased in the 1930s, along with the number of Jewish students. There were 325 Jew-

ish students attending the University in 1933. In the 1950s and 1960s there were four Jewish fraternities and three Jewish sororities on campus. In 2006, Hillel dedicated a new building, the Topfer Center for Jewish Life, named for former Dell Vice-Chairman Mort Topfer and his wife, Bobbi, who gave the lead gift. It serves the more than 5000 Jewish students who now attend the University of Texas.

There were many non-religious Jewish organizations in Austin. In 1906, the Harmony Club, a short-lived social club, was established. The Workers of Zion was established in the early 1900s, with Lydia Littman leading the group. They were affiliated with the National Federation of American Zionists. The Hebrew Benevolent Society was established in 1907, and in 1924, the society became a part of the Federation of Jewish Charities, which consolidated all Jewish charitable giving in the city. It later became known as the Austin Jewish Federation. The Ladies Guild was founded in 1915, and four years later became a part of the National Council of Jewish Women.

During World War II, a number of Austin Jews served in the armed forces. Beth Israel and Agudas Achim lent Torahs to Bergstrom Air Base in Austin and Fort Hood in Killeen. Special events were held for Jewish soldiers sponsored by the Jewish Welfare Board. After the war, the Austin Jewish community enjoyed a period of growth. Beth Israel grew from eighty families in 1945 to 203 by 1962. New religious school rooms were added in 1974. Bertram Klausner became rabbi of Beth Israel in 1947, and he served as president of the Austin Ministerial Alliance in 1949. During his tenure, Bar and Bat Mitzvah services were introduced for the young people.

In 1948, Agudas Achim officially joined the Conservative movement, and Benson Skoff, a rabbi ordained by

the Jewish Theological Seminary, was hired. By the end of the 1940s, there were 137 families in the congregation. It was at this time that Agudas Achim left the combined Sunday School with Beth Israel and began its own. The congregation embraced gender equality fairly early and in 1976, Naomi Worob became the first woman to serve on the Board, with Marilyn Stahl becoming the first female president in 1976. By the 1980s, women were allowed to read Torah and receive *aliyyot*.

By the 1950s both congregations began discussing moving out of downtown Austin to the northern suburbs of the city, where most of their congregants lived. Beth Israel built a new Temple on Seiders Avenue, now Shoal Creek Boulevard, and it was dedicated in 1957. A sanctuary was not built until 1967. In 1962 Rabbi Louis Firestein was hired and he stayed until 1987, becoming the longest serving rabbi in the congregation's history. Agudas Achim bought land on Bull Creek Road in 1958 for \$19,500. Their old building was sold in 1962 to the U.S. government for \$144,000 for a new federal building.

Jews still owned several downtown stores on Congress Avenue and East 6th Street in the 1960s. Some of these included Snyder's, Slax, Jack Morton's, Laves', Goodfriends, Yaring's, Kara-Vel, Central Auto Supply and Joe Koen & Son. Harry Smith began Economy Furniture, and his sons, Milton, Phil, and Elmer, joined the furniture manufacturing company. By the 1940s, Phil and Elmer had moved to Waco, and Milton and his wife, Helen, ran the business. Milton was a leading figure in the Austin business community, serving many years on the board of Capital National Bank. He also helped organize and served as chairman of the Dallas Furniture Mart. He and Helen were among the founders of the Community Relations

*continued on page 20*

Council of Austin and both served on many boards in Austin.

Jeff Friedman was elected mayor in 1975, when he was thirty years old. Sherri Greenberg represented an Austin district in the state Legislature from 1990 to 2000, while Elliot Naishtat has represented Austin in the Legislature since 1990.

By the 1980s, the Austin Jewish community began to change, as a new breed of Jewish businessmen would transform Jewish life in Austin. Michael Dell had always been interested in computers and dropped out of college in his freshman year to devote himself to his start-up company, Dell Computer, which would help usher in a high-tech renaissance in Austin. Austin became a center of the high-tech industry in the 1980s and 1990s. What had been a medium-sized artsy college town became a booming metropolis and its Jewish community became one of the fastest growing in the country. Between 1980 and 1990, Austin's Jewish population grew from 2,100 to 5,000. By 2002, an estimated 13,500 Jews lived in Austin, and estimates in 2010 put the total number at 18,000. Today, the numbers continue to grow.

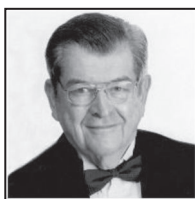
In 1992, Michael and Susan Dell purchased a 40-acre parcel of land in northwest Austin as part of a plan to create a unified campus for the city's Jewish community. Both Beth Israel and Agudas Achim were invited to move to the campus, which would also house a new and enlarged Jewish Community Center and Austin Jewish Federation. The Dell Campus opened in 2000. Congregation Agudas Achim decided to build a new synagogue on the Dell Campus and dedicated it in 2001. Rabbi Neil Blumoff is the current rabbi at Congregation Agudas Achim. Congregation Beth Israel

members voted to move to the Dell campus, but the deal fell through when congregation leaders could not come to an agreement with the Dell Campus Committee. Instead, Congregation Beth Israel decided to add to its current building. Since 1991, Rabbi Steven Folberg

has led Congregation Beth Israel. The decision not to relocate led some Congregation Beth Israel members to break away and form another Reform congregation, Congregation Beth Shalom. By 2010, Congregation Beth  
*continued on page 21*

## In Memoriam

**Joseph Sheinberg**, TJHS member,



died on May 19, 2014, in Corpus Christi. He was born on December 18, 1923. At his death, he

was survived by his wife, Ruth; his daughter and son-in-law, Lisa and Scott Bibeau; his son and daughter-in-law, Andrew and Leigh Sheinberg; and two grandchildren.

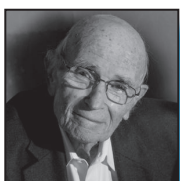
**Ruth Sheinberg**, TJHS member, died on June 18, 2014, in Corpus Christi. She



is survived by her daughter and son-in-law, Lisa and Scott Bibeau; her son and daughter-

in-law, Andrew and Leigh Sheinberg; and two grandchildren.

**Jarrell "Tank" Rubinett**, TJHS member, died on March 29, 2014 in Austin. He was 88 years old.



He is survived by his wife, Shirley; his son and daughter-in-law, Gordon and Susan Rubinett; his daughters and sons-in-law, Benita and Larry Elsner and Lynn and Rick Levy; and six grandchildren.



**Jo Sharon Miller Mintz**, TJHS

member, died on March 28, 2014, in Houston. She was born on December 28, 1946. She is

survived by her husband, Dr. A. Aaron Mintz and Aaron's children, Steven, Richard and Beverly and their families.

**Leah Lichtenstein Pollman**, TJHS



member, died April 10, 2014, in Dallas. She is survived by her daughter, Cheryl Pollman; her daughters and sons-in-law, Janet and Terry Kafka

and Marcie and Michael Brown; and five grandchildren.

**Gladys Schaffer**, TJHS member, died March 27, 2014, in Laredo. She was a long-time resident of Corpus Christi before moving to Laredo. She was born August 22, 1915 in Lockhart, Texas. She is survived by her daughter and son-in-law, Marcia and Russell Deutsch; her son Richard Schaffer; four grandchildren and their spouses; and eleven great-grandchildren.

**May their memories  
be a blessing.**

# Honor or Memorialize a Friend or a Loved One With a Donation to the TJHS Endowment Fund

When you honor or memorialize a friend or a loved one with a donation to the Texas Jewish Historical Society's Endowment Fund, you help support important programs. Send the honoree's full name, type of honor (memorial, congratulations, or occasion—birthday, anniversary, award, new child or grandchild, etc.) and your name, along with a check in the amount of your choice, to

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**P. O. Box 10193**  
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Your support of the Texas Jewish Historical Society's programs is greatly appreciated and will be recognized in an issue of the quarterly news magazine. Thank you.

The Texas Jewish Historical Society gratefully acknowledges your gift to its Endowment Fund in the amount of

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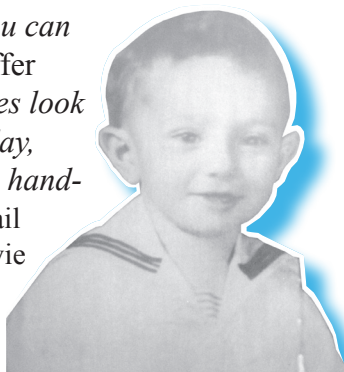
*Your gift will further the efforts to record, preserve, and disseminate historic information about Texas Jewish culture.*

## - Can You Guess - This Member?

No one came forth to Guess this Member, so we will give you another look – in addition to the clue of *Someone on whom you can*

*depend*, we'll offer this one—he does look a little older today, but is still pretty handsome/cute? Email your guess to Davie Lou Solka at [editor@txjhs.org](mailto:editor@txjhs.org) any time beginning **Friday,**

**August 1.** Entries received before that date will not be considered. Previous winners and family members are not eligible to participate. Good luck! 🇺🇸



## Austin, continued from page 20

Shalom had 390 member families with Rabbi Alan Freedman as their rabbi. They dedicated a building on the Dell campus in 2014.

In addition to Congregation Agudas Achim, Congregation Beth Israel, and Congregation Beth Shalom, there are seven Jewish religious organizations in Austin – Beth El, a Conservative congrega-

tion; Kol Halev, an Independent/Progressive congregation; Shalom Rav, a Reconstructionist congregation; Shir Ami, a Reform congregation in Cedar Park; Tiferet Israel, an Orthodox shul; and two Chabad centers.

Today, the Dell Campus is the center of Austin's Jewish community. It is the home of the Jewish Community Center, the Austin Jewish Academy Day School, the Austin Jewish Federation, and four congregations. Befitting of a high-tech center, Austin is at the cutting edge of American Jewish life and is poised to become one of the largest and most significant Jewish communities in the South. 🇺🇸

## Correction

The caption under the photo of Enid Klass in our last issue (April, 2014), indicated that the silver mesh bag she was carrying was from 1902. The correct date for the bag was 1920. We are sorry for this error.

## Welcome New Members!

**Joel & Anne Batalsky**  
6643 Velasco Ave.  
Dallas, TX 75214  
214-908-3708  
joelbat@aol.com

**Marcy Ann Berman**  
3915 Azure Ln.  
Addison, TX 75001  
972-308-6262  
214-697-3377 Cell  
marmarlaw@yahoo.com

**Congregation Beth Israel Library**  
**Judy Weidman, Librarian**  
5600 N. Braeswood Blvd.  
Houston, TX 77096  
713-820-6410  
713-771-6221 Cell  
jweidman@beth-israel.org

**Charles "Charlie" Gerson**  
9137 E. Diamond Dr.  
Sun Lakes, AZ 85248  
480-829-8220  
480-529-6411 Cell  
azcig@q.net

**Pearl Katz**  
3404 Rogers  
Fort Worth, TX 76109  
817-923-7219

**Lynna Kay Shuffeld**  
P. O. Box 16604  
Houston, TX 77222-6604  
713-692-4511  
713-560-8152  
lksfriday@sbcglobal.net

**Larry & Pamela (Moller) Simpson**  
2900 10th Street  
Wichita Falls, TX 76309  
940-732-5262  
940-767-2392  
lsimpsonfinancial@gmail.com

**David Weber**  
P. O. Box 671323  
Dallas, TX 75367  
214-883-5737  
214-368-8823 Fax  
eyezone@sbcglobal.net

## Directory Changes

New email address for David Seligman:  
david.seligman1@gmail.com

*TJHS will be updating the Membership Directory this summer. Please check your listing and if it needs correcting, contact Marc Wormser at c2aggie@gmail.com.*

**The deadline  
for the No-  
vember 2014  
TJHS News  
Magazine is  
Friday, Octo-  
ber 17.**

## Please Note:

*If you are sending a  
check to the Texas  
Jewish Historical  
Society, please indicate  
the purpose of the  
check—dues, gift,  
contribution, etc.*

## Save the Date

### September 18, 2014

Reception for opening of  
*Howdy Ya'll and Shalom  
Ya'll*—TJHS traveling ex-  
hibits—at the Gallery at the  
J at the JCC in Austin. *Exhibit  
will be on display  
September 9 - October 26, 2014.*

### October 23-26, 2014

Board meeting held jointly  
with the Southern Jewish  
Historical Society Annual  
Conference—  
Austin, Texas

### November 14-16, 2014

Weekend honoring Rabbi  
James Kessler, founder of  
TJHS, on his retirement  
from Congregation B'nai  
Israel—Galveston, Texas

### January 23-25, 2015

Board meeting—  
Galveston, Texas

### March 20-22, 2015

Annual Gathering (joint  
meeting with Dallas Jewish  
Historical Society)—  
Dallas, Texas

### June 8-15, 2015

TJHS Mission to Cuba



# TJHS Board of Directors 2014-2015

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(Austin)

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## TJHS Traveling Exhibit

The Texas Jewish Historical Society has compiled two museum-quality photo exhibits, with explanations, depicting early Jewish life and contributions. Both exhibits highlight the lives of Jews in Texas since the early part of the century.

Each exhibit is comprised of approximately thirty-six photographs that can be either self-standing with an easel back or hung on a wall. There is no charge for the exhibits, and they will be shipped, prepaid freight via UPS in waterproof boxes, to

your location. The only expense to the borrower will be the shipping of the exhibit back via UPS ground.

The exhibits have been displayed in various locations in Texas and other parts of the United States, including Rhode Island and California. They are an excellent program for schools, congregations, and other organizations. To schedule the exhibits, please contact Jack Gerrick at 817-927-8765 or email him at [texbed@charter.net](mailto:texbed@charter.net).



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**Historical Society**  
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☐ **YES!** Count me in! My dues are enclosed. ☐ Please **update** my information

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E-mail address(es): \_\_\_\_\_ Website: \_\_\_\_\_

*Contributions to the Texas Jewish Historical Society are tax deductible within the limits of the law.*