

— From a Dairy Farm in Salat, Lithuania — to a Kosher Meat Market on Hamilton Street in Houston, Texas

by Sheldon Ike Lippman

By 1913, both Joe and Lena Lewis had immigrated from Salat, Lithuania, to Houston, Texas, where they opened a kosher meat market on Hamilton Street. Many family members contributed to this story, a remembrance captured from hand-me-down family lore and documents tucked away in family albums. The last of Joe and Lena's six children died in 2018. The death of Ben (Buddy) Lewis and his wife Ruth marked the end of a generation of storytellers who knew the major characters in the family history. The great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren never got to meet Joe and Lena.

Leah Melamed and Hirsch Jassel Luria were married in January 1908 in the shtetl Salat, Lithuania.¹ Leah was born in Salat on December 24, 1887. Her parents, Isaac and Fruma Mira Melamed, had 17 children (12 survived to adulthood) of which Leah was the eldest. Hirsch was born in Pumpane, Lithuania,² on August 16, 1886. His parents, Meyer and Liba Luria, had 8 children.

Hirsch's mother, Liba Luria (nee Katz), and Leah's grandmother, Hannah Luria (nee Katz) were sisters. Hirsch's father, Meyer, and Leah's grandfather, Avrum Nachman Luria, were first cousins.



Young Hirsch and Leah

Beginning Married Life on a Dairy Farm

Hirsch lived in Salat with Leah after their wedding and most likely worked on the dairy farm with Leah's father, Isaac. These times were difficult; the economy of Salat did not make it easy to make a living. It became a routine necessity for Isaac to take his dairy products and hemp ropes, which he made, to sell in Riga,

Latvia, a distance of 100 kilometers, transporting his goods by wagon and traveling with a group of men who also sold their wares in Riga. Isaac and his fellow traveling companions would leave home after Shabbos and return on Friday the following week before Shabbos.

The history of Jewish people in this part of the world is rich in generations of pious shopkeepers and farmers, as well as renowned religious scholars. Yet, it is also darkly filled with thousands of stories of harassment, threats, and worse. Jewish families were being torn from their homes. By 1912, a young Hirsch and Leah and all the Melamed family, having been forced to leave their dairy farm, made a decision to go to America. Lithuania was no longer welcoming or safe.

Hirsch, Leah, and the Melamed family moved to Riga to await their time for passage to America. Leah and her sisters worked as wig makers for Hassidic women until the time came for them to depart.

Leaving Lithuania for America

Like in many families caught in this dark period of world history, that generation rarely talked in their later years about the inner strength required to leave home and family to find a bet-

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ter life in America or other parts of the world. On his own at age 26, Hirsch boarded the ship *Breslau* in Bremen, Germany, on May 2, 1912. The *Breslau* was headed to Galveston, Texas. Hirsch Jassel Luria disembarked in Galveston on May 24, 1912. The ship's manifest identified his profession as "butcher."³ Joe was headed to Houston where his cousin Aaron Luria had moved after his earlier immigration in 1906 through New York. Aaron Luria was now called Aaron Lewis. Joe also requested that his last name be changed to this new family name; his American name became Joe Harry Lewis.⁴

About one year after Joe's arrival in Houston, Leah Melamed Luria at age 27 boarded the ship *Cassel* in Bremen on June 17, 1913.⁵ The ship's manifest identified Leah as "housewife." Leah was reunited with her husband when the *Cassel* docked in Galveston on July 7, 1913.⁵ Her American name became Lena Heyman Lewis.

The oldest of the Melamed children, Lena had been the last of her 10 siblings to leave Europe and immigrate to America. However, Lena's

the last name changed from Melamed to Heyman.

Joe's sister Helena Luria, with her husband, Philip Morris, emigrated in 1913 from Lithuania and also settled in Houston. Helena was Joe's only sibling to immigrate to America. Five other siblings and their families perished in the Holocaust. One sister survived and lived in Barnaul, Siberia.

Beginning a New Life on Hamilton Street

Reunited, Joe Harry and Lena Lewis lived for a time at 1009 Rice Street in Houston, then moved into a home at 1914 Hamilton Street. It was at this address that they opened their meat market, at the time one of only two kosher meat markets operating in Houston. They also sold home-



Joe and Lena Lewis in front of their kosher meat market at 1914 Hamilton Street (circa late 1930s to early 1940s).



The Melamed family all immigrated from Lithuania to America where they became the Heyman family. Leah/Lena, the eldest, is seated second from left.

siblings all went through Ellis Island and ultimately settled in the Elmira and Syracuse, New York, area, all with

made kosher sausage. The Lewis family belonged to the orthodox Congregation Adath Yeshurun. Joe was a Torah

reader and gabbai in the synagogue. In a solidly Jewish neighborhood, the Lewis' home was also walking distance from the shul. In 1920, Houston had an estimated Jewish population of around 5,000 out of a general population of 138,000.⁶ Over time, Congregation Adath Yeshurun merged with the conservative Congregation Beth El to become Congregation Beth Yeshurun, where many in the Lewis family still are members.

Joe and Lena started a family. They had 6 children: Libby (July 29, 1915), Abe (April 8, 1917), Max (October 11, 1919), Sarah (June 21, 1920),

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Ben/“Buddy” (December 13, 1922), and Meyer (September 11, 1927). There were eventually 14 grandchildren (Lena called them “my dividends”). The 21 great-grandchildren and 10 great-great-grandchildren never got to meet Joe and Lena.



Lena with her eldest daughter Libbie and granddaughters, Lexie and Frances Scheinbrum of Waco, at 1914 Hamilton Street (circa 1955).

In Salat, before WWI there were 300 Jews (70 families). In 1921, there were 156 Jews (50 families). In 1923, there were 174 Jews; and in 1939, there were fewer than 100 Jews (25 families).

Pumpane was one of the first Jewish communities in Lithuania. In 1766, there were 583 Jews. In 1847, there were 694 Jews; and in 1897 there were 1,007 Jews. During WWI, Jews were expelled from Pumpane and sent to Russia. By 1921 there were 75 Jewish families. At the start of the Holocaust, there were about 50 Jewish families living in Pumpane. They were traders, craftsmen, and farmers. The yellow cheese industry was an important commodity in the community. The economy was volatile during and after WWI, and many people left for the United States and South Africa. The Jewish community in Pumpane had one synagogue. At the start of the 19th century, Christians accused Jews of killing a Christian boy. Rabbi Ysrael took the blame and was burned to death next to the synagogue. A stone marker was erected on the site in memory of Rabbi Yisrael of Pumpanai. [Nancy Schoenburg and Stuart Schoenburg (1996), *Lithuanian Jewish Communities*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc.]

In January 1928, 16 years after his arrival in the country, Joe petitioned to become a citizen of the United States of America. The Certificate of Citizenship

was issued on December 16, 1930, with the following “Personal description of holder: age, 44; sex, Male; color complexion, White; color of eyes, Gray; color of hair, Brown; height, 5 feet 6 inches; visible

distinctive marks, Mole under right eye; marital status, Married; race, Hebrew; former nationality, Lithuania.”

Hamilton Street was tree-lined with residential and commercial activities co-existing on the block. Houston at the time was centered at what is today downtown Houston. The Lewis’ Hamilton Street home was between Calhoun and Pierce Streets. At the front, ground level of the house was the entrance to the meat market. The family lived above the market. Wooden steps in the market led up to the family home. The driveway was topped with white seashells that crunched when driven or walked on. In the narrow yard behind the house were rows of chicken coops.



Grandchildren and grand-nieces and -nephews visiting 1914 Hamilton Street (1956). The ramp was built to accommodate Joe's wheelchair.

Thelma Fowler and her parents, Red and Maxine, at 1910 Hamilton Street, were next-door neighbors to the Lewis family for many years. Seven decades later, Thelma (who is affectionately known by family and close friends as “Keetie”) vividly remembers life on Hamilton Street, “At the corner of Pierce and Hamilton lived Ben and Hattie Horowitz to the left of the meat market.” The Fowlers were on the right and next to the Fowlers was a couple named Carl and Bit (Bit got her nickname because something had taken a bite out of her leg), and then the Greenbergs (the wife was Bertha). On the opposite side of Hamilton at the corner of Calhoun was Shillings Grocery and next door was the home of Charlie and Florence Sanders, with a Baptist church at the corner. The Fowlers and all the neighbors, Kosher eaters or not, purchased meat from the Lewis’ market.

The Lewis’ market was a small shop with only one refrigerated,

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Meyer, Joe and Lena's youngest son, with next-door neighbor, Thelma "Keetie" Hinze, at 1910 Hamilton Street (circa early 1940s).



Left to Right: neighbor Red Fowler, Joe Lewis, niece Jennie Morris Nachlas, Joe's sister Helena Morris, Lena Lewis, and son Buddy Lewis gather in the Lewis home at 1914 Hamilton Street (1956).

glass-front display case. A large taxidermied steer head hung on the shop wall. Joe and Lena followed strict kosher laws for processing the meats sold in their market. A rabbi-licensed *shochet* came to the market on Hamilton to slaughter the chickens. Keetie remembers "Miss Lillian" and Alex Haywood, who lived in the garage apartment behind the Lewis home, "They would pluck and dress the chickens in the proper kosher way." The kosher beef was slaughtered under kosher law at an off-site warehouse and brought to the market.

Many family members remember Joe as the quiet one and Lena ruling the household with a firm hand and a swift broom. Lena's broken English was heavily "punctuated" with her native Yiddish. Their son Buddy, in a conversation shortly before his death

at 95-years "young," recalled how he was frequently getting in trouble as a young boy and being chased by his mother and scolded in stern Yiddish. One of Joe and Lena's great-nephews, Marty Nachlas, recalls his mother Jennie (Morris) Nachlas

telling stories of her visits to Hamilton Street as a young girl, and particularly about her Aunt Lena's pet parrot. "It seems that when the phone rang, the parrot would screech, 'Miss Lewis, telephone'." The parrot also knew all the words to the popular song 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles' (which debuted in 1918)."

Dora Lee Grinburg, one of Joe and Lena's great-nieces, in a recent conversation recalled attending Passover seders at the home on Hamilton Street in the 1950s. "The many adult family members were packed around the large dining table with an overflow of kids sitting at tables in an adjoining bedroom." Once again, the family joker, Buddy, at one of these remembered seders would surreptitiously exit the dining room and re-enter on cue when the front door was opened for Elijah to the amusement of the young kids. But, as Buddy recalled, his mother was not amused!

Joe and Lena Lewis became well known in the Jewish community of Houston, not just through the Kosher market but also their Jewish faith and their regular attendance at Shabbat services. Together Joe and Lena welcomed visitors to their home, particularly young Jewish service men. A young Rabbi William S. Malev wrote a tribute to the Lewis family in *The Message*, May 28, 1948.⁷

As I was about to leave Jamaica for Houston in November 1946, I got a message to deliver.... Charlie Blumenfeld [wrote], "When you get to Houston, don't forget to pay my respects to one of the grandest men I have ever known, Joe Lewis. He took me in, and befriended me; and I spent many happy evenings at his home and at his table. Were it not for him, I would not have been able to observe the dietary laws and keep my faith in Judaism. He

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The Lewis Family: Meyer, Max, Sarah, Abe (back row), Joe, Libbie, Lena, and Buddy at Sarah's wedding, Congregation Adath Yeshurun, November 10, 1946.

and his family are real Jews in the finest and fullest sense of that term.”

Rabbi Malev, who became the head rabbi at Congregation Beth Yeshuran, also wrote:

Curiously enough, my first official act when I brought my family to Houston was to officiate at the wedding of [Joe's] daughter Sarah to Leslie Lippman. The gathering at the synagogue that day was a slight indication of the high regard and the esteem which all of Houston felt for this grand family.

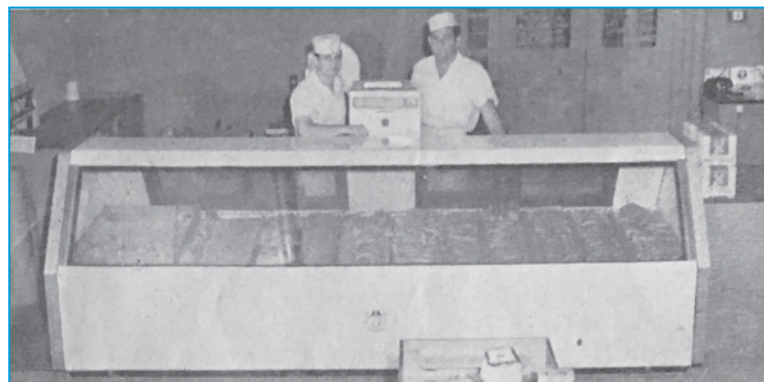
Sarah would regale her children with stories about the 1,000 guests that she invited to her wedding, “We were in business. I had to invite all our customers.”

When World War II struck, the four Lewis boys served in the U. S. Army. While they were away, Lena and daughters Libby and Sarah contin-

ued to run the meat market. boys returned from their service, they continued helping their father in the meat market. By the 1950s, Joe was confined to a wheelchair and gradually lost his ability to speak. The front steps to the house on Hamilton Street were fitted with a ramp to push Joe up and down in his wheelchair. He soon retired from the kosher meat business, but the business that he worked at for over 30 years continued to serve the Jewish community of Houston.

Three of the Lewis boys—Abe, Buddy, and Meyer—decided to relocate the meat market, following the move of many Jewish families to new neighborhoods in Houston. Their modernization of the market was described in a meat-industry newsletter article titled “Lewis Brothers Use 1951 Ideas to Merchandise Kosher Meats.”

The typical Kosher meat market is small compared to the larger meat markets and super markets in which non-kosher meats are sold. The typical



Meyer and Abe, and Buddy (not shown) opened the new Joe Lewis and Sons Kosher Meat Market on Blodgett Avenue in 1950.

ued to run the meat market.

Saying Goodbye to Hamilton Street

Life took a tragic turn for Joe and his family in the early 1940s. Joe developed Parkinson's disease that slowly crippled him over more than two decades. When the Lewis

Kosher meat market is in a congested business area, frequently in the heart of a large apartment district.

One market which departs from this normal pattern is the Joe Lewis and Sons Kosher Meat Market at 3301 Blodgett Avenue.

This new market is in a suburban residential area; it is housed in its own new and individual building; it provides parking space for its customers and, though not large (36' x 60'), it is laid out like a self-service super market.

The sons observed that much of the Jewish population in Houston was moving into new suburban areas; they also observed that when kosher specialties and delicacies are made available, non-Jews frequently will buy them.

The new market served the Riverside Terrace and Southwood areas of Houston. The business expanded beyond the kosher meat and home-made sausage manufacturing of Joe's Hamilton Street store:

[The brothers] felt that Kosher meats could be merchandised like other meats; that a modern market would have as much appeal to the Orthodox

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Jew as to the millions of other American women who have shown a preference for modern design and layout in their food markets.

Eventually, when the Blodgett Avenue location closed, the Lewis brothers continued to follow in their father's profession. Houston's Jewish population continued to move to new neighborhoods like Meyerland. Max opened M&M Kosher Meat Market on Stella Link Road. Abe would eventually come to work with Max. Meyer continued butchering for other Houston super markets. Buddy capitalized on his outgoing personality to become a successful wholesale liquor salesman.

And like their father, the sons continued to be active in their synagogues and Jewish life in Houston.

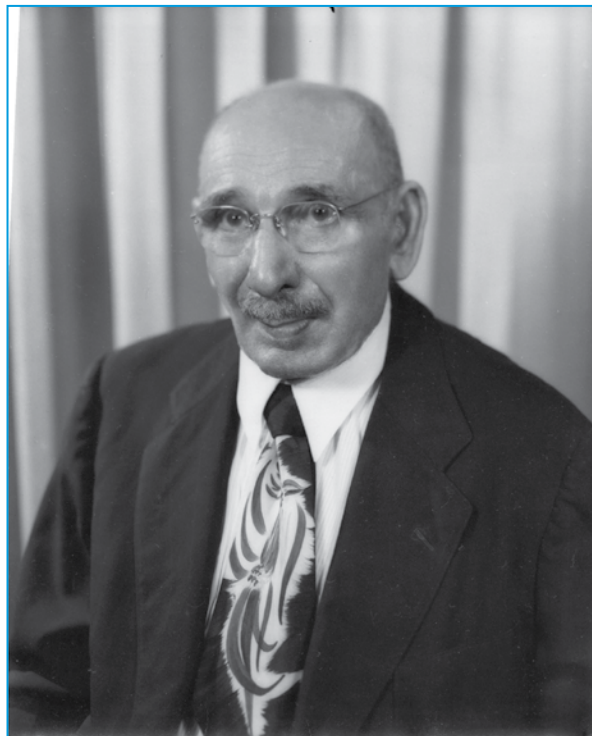
Joe and Lena moved from Hamilton Street to a home on Woodfin Street in 1959. For the 14 grandchildren who were old enough to remember being with their grandfather, Joe was always

seated in a wheelchair at the kitchen table, unable to speak, a yarmulke on his head, and a prayer book at his trembling fingertips. Joe died September 1, 1963.

And having spent more than two decades taking care of her invalid husband at home on Hamilton Street and Woodfin Street, Lena moved to the Jewish Home for the Aged on Chimney Rock (in Bellaire, Texas). For a woman who had spent most of her life wearing an apron and feeding her's and other's families, Lena became somewhat of a noted ceramic artist among her family and friends. She learned to make ashtrays and planters out of clay, usually painted bright orange; these works can still be found in practically every home of her family and friends.

But the real treasure of this pottery are her initials on the bottom of each—"LL"—the only English that Lena Lewis learned to write during her 57 years in America. Lena died on January 14, 1970. Joe and Lena are buried side by side at Beth Yeshurn Cemetery (Allen Parkway, Houston).

Postscript: Hamilton Street can still be found on a Google Map search. The tree-lined street and meat market are long gone. The block between Pierce and Calhoun (now named St. Joseph's Parkway) is a looping intersection of Interstate Highways 69 and 45.



Joe Harry Lewis (1961).

Endnotes

- ¹ Salat is the Yiddish name for Salociai, Lithuania.
- ² Pumpane is the Yiddish name for Pumpenai, Lithuania.
- ³ Galveston immigration database: <http://www.galvestonhistory.org/attractions/maritime-heritage/galveston-immigration-database>.
- ⁴ One of Joe and Lena's grandsons, Michael Lewis, supplied much of the family research for this article.
- ⁵ Galveston immigration database: <http://www.galvestonhistory.org/attractions/maritime-heritage/galveston-immigration-database>.
- ⁶ Table XV, Jewish Population of Cities in the United States Having 1,000 or More Jewish Inhabitants, in "Statistics of Jews," H. S. Linfield, Department of Information and Statistics of the Bureau of Jewish Social Research, in *American Jewish Yearbook*. http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1925_1926_7_Statistics.pdf
- ⁷ *The Message* was, and still is, a monthly publication of Congregation Beth Yeshuruan, Houston, Texas.
- ⁸ *Meat Merchandising*, December 1951.



Lena Heyman Lewis (1961).