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A Good Match: J.B. Daiches Photo Collection and Fort Worth's Beth-El Congregation Archives

by **Hollace Weiner**, Archivist at Beth-El Congregation Archives, Fort Worth

There were no descendants to claim the photos and playbills that belonged to Jerome "J.B." Daiches, 88, a Dallas builder and lifelong bachelor who left several cartons of dusty, disorganized pictures when he died in December, 2010. After distant cousins and close friends picked out a few snapshots as keepsakes, the executor of the estate, Jimmy Alexander, contacted Fort Worth's Beth-El Congregation Archives. One Sunday afternoon, I met with Jimmy, a longtime TJHS board member, sifted through the musty boxes and broken picture frames stored in his Dallas law office, and surprised him by announcing that the Beth-El Congregation Archives would take practically everything.

The Daiches Collection, rich with images dating from the late 1800s into the 21st century, helps illustrate the story of the Fort Worth Jewish community.

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Louis Daiches Jewelers opened this Fort Worth store in 1940 at 614 Houston Street. Photo by W.D. Smith. Courtesy J.B. Daiches Collection, Beth-El Congregation Archives.

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Although J.B. Daiches moved to Dallas as a young man, he was a Fort Worth native, went to Sunday school at Beth-El, and kept a picture of the Confirmation Class of 1936, in which he was a student. Beginning in 1948, Daiches acted on stage with the city's B'nai B'rith Little Theatre, which described him as "one of the more eligible bachelors of the group." J.B.'s father, Louis Daiches, and his cousin, Joe, were among the competing jewelers whose names once adorned downtown storefronts. His mother, Bluma, was the daughter of Jake Weber, another local jeweler.

When Bluma Weber and Louis Daiches, both Polish immigrants, married in 1920, the couple lived with her parents. During a flu epidemic, Bluma took sick and never fully recovered. Although she became pregnant and delivered a healthy son—J.B.—in 1922, the pregnancy so weakened her that she became an invalid who rarely left her bed.

Meanwhile, her husband, Louis, found economic opportunity in the oil-boomtown of Breckenridge. He opened a jewelry store and was among the founders in 1929 of Breckenridge's Temple Beth Israel. Louis led two lives. Work days he stayed in Breckenridge. After closing the store on Saturday afternoons, he commuted to Fort Worth to spend the next day-and-a-half with his ailing wife, Bluma, and their growing son.

Bluma Daiches died in March 1935 at age 32. Her grieving husband did not remain a widower for long. Matchmakers got busy. By year's end, Louis had married Edna Berk, the daughter of an El Dorado, Arkansas, jeweler. (The collection includes photo portraits, on canvas, of Edna's parents, Ben and Rose Berk, on their wedding day in the early 1890s.)

Edna, a piano teacher, had a beautiful soprano voice and became active in the music sections of the Junior Women's Club. The newlyweds built and photographed a house, still standing, in the city's upscale Berkeley neighborhood. They fully expected that J.B., then thirteen years old, would move in and spend his teenage years in a conventional family setting. But that was not to be.

By some accounts, J.B. clashed with his stepmother. By other accounts, the boy's grandmother, Sarah Fred We-

ber, threw a crying fit and refused to surrender the youth to his father. Also living in the grandmother's home



Flying High in early 20th-century Fort Worth, four unidentified young men posed for this staged studio photo, which shows downtown buildings in the foreground. Courtesy, J.B. Daiches Collection, Beth-El Congregation Archives.

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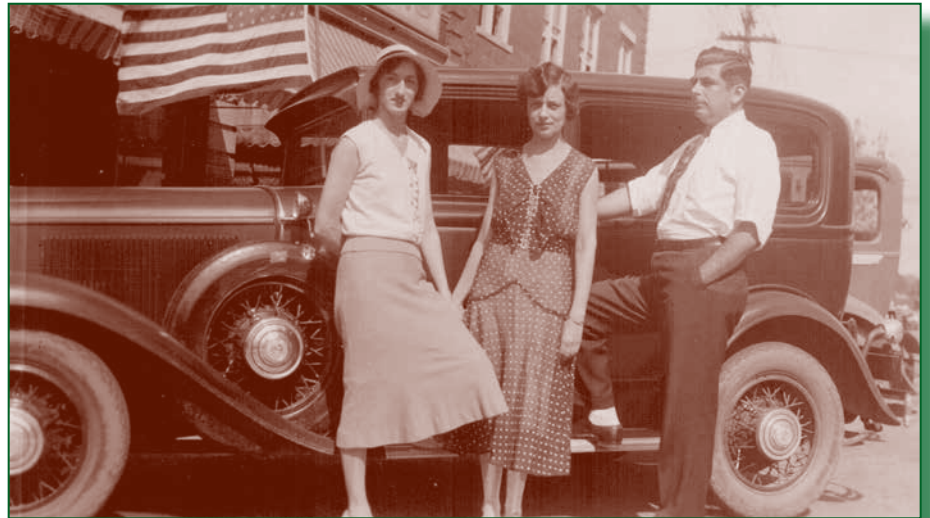
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were her married daughter, Hannah Weber Sandler, her son-in-law Ike, and their adopted daughter, Eleanor. J.B. and Eleanor were raised like siblings. The boy also grew up close with his grandmother's extended family. He was not as close with his Daiches cousins, whose descendants still reside in Fort Worth. As J.B. grew into adulthood, graduated from Baylor University, and served in the Navy, he and his stepmother became close.

After World War II, Louis and Edna Daiches traveled extensively, snapping pictures in Cuba, Panama, Guatemala and the Caribbean. Travel abroad was just opening up to middle-class Americans, who, judging from photos in the collection, wore hats, orchid corsages, and mink as they embarked on voyages abroad. The collection also includes menus from Grosinger, the Catskills Mountain resort enjoyed by a generation of Jewish vacationers.




Louis Daiches stands alongside his fiancée, Edna Berk, and an unidentified relative next to a new car parked outside the Berk jewelry store in El Dorado, Ark., 1935. Courtesy, J.B. Daiches Collection, Beth-El Congregation Archives.

erhood productions, and, in Dallas County, Theatre Oak Cliff, Richardson Community Theatre, and Theatre Three. Also in the collection are black-and-white studio portraits of children and adults; J.B.'s WWII Navy

the collection arrived in the mail December 2012. It was J.B. Daiches' last will and testament. He proved to be generous to Jewish causes and medical foundations. He left generous amounts to Baylor Health Care System Foundation, the Presbyterian Health-care Foundation, the Parkinson's Disease Foundation, the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

He remembered Jewish organizations, bequeathing large donations to the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, Congregation Ahavath Sholom's Hebrew Cemetery in Fort Worth where his grandparents and several aunts and uncles are buried, the Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas, Dallas's Temple Emanu-El, and Fort Worth's Beth-El Congregation, where his photo collection is on file.

In another serendipitous twist to the story, Beth-El Congregation's board president, Eddie Feld, was J.B. Daiches' godson. As they say in Yiddish, it was "b'shert" that the photographs nobody wanted ended up lovingly organized and filed at the Beth-El Congregation Archives. 



The thermometer reads 90 degrees on a sign promoting Louis Daiches Jewelers at the Fort Worth Cats minor league baseball stadium, ca. 1940s. Courtesy, J.B. Daiches Collection, Beth-El Congregation Archives.

Among other treasures in the Daiches collection are playbills from local theaters where J.B. Daiches performed. Those stages include the Horned Frog Summer Theatre, Fort Worth Theatre Guild, Beth-El Broth-

scrapbook; and professional pictures of Louis Daiches' jewelry store at 614 Houston Street. The latter were taken by W.D. Smith, one of Fort Worth's premier photographers.

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