

# 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. We want our archives to be as complete as possible.*

## — The Jewish Literary Society of Houston —

by Vickie Vogel

A few years ago while rummaging through the index to the TJHS Collection at the Briscoe Center for American History, I noted an interesting title, “Sylvan Beach Party.”<sup>1</sup> I finally got around to looking it up. I was surprised when the aide brought me not a typical file box, but a large flat box like an evening gown would be packaged in at a department store.<sup>2</sup> I lifted the lid and saw an oversized photograph of the late Congressman Mickey Leland that was used for a

commemorative postage stamp. The desk attendant helped me remove it and the next layer until we reached the three TJHS items. The first was an 8 x 10 photograph of a mock trial from May 10, 1915, given by the Jewish Literary Society of Houston.<sup>3</sup> A program of the event accompanied it. The case was styled *State of Texas v. Reginald Shimsha Muchwed* and was a charge of polygamy. Clearly, it was an amusing evening with characters like Winem & Losem, Attorneys

for the Defense and Sheriff Ketchum I. Lynchem, and an astonishingly full cast of thirty-five actors, including prominent Houston names like Westheimer, Weingarten, Dannenbaum, Lippman, and Hurwitz. The staff loaned me a magnifying glass so I could read the signs posted on the stage set, such as “A Great Dowry is a bed full of troubles,” “Witness Room: Dice, cards and whiskey may be had from the judge,” and “A deposit of 97¢

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*Sylvan Beach Picnic, 1913. Texas Jewish Historical Society Records, di\_10287, T*

required on all cases before trial.”

The third item was an amazing panoramic photograph of the promised Sylvan Beach party of 1913. It is about 7" tall and 20" wide. The participants are dressed mostly in white with boater straw hats, many wearing ties even for a beach picnic. I counted about 132 people. There is no further description and no one is identified.

My curiosity piqued, I returned to the index to see what else we have on the Jewish Literary Society, and I was not disappointed. We have their constitution and bylaws from 1907, an article on their history from 1906 to 1916, a roster of members in 1916, along with several bulletins from 1915 to 1917 and a small amount of correspondence. It was organized for the purpose of promoting “culture and character along lines approved by Jewish thought and ethics.” This was expanded to include the support of any literary, musical or scientific undertak-

ing, the maintenance of a library, and the support of other arts. Their annual activities included the mock trial, a boat ride, a declamation contest, a public Seder, a Purim ball for Sunday School children, a carnival ball, a new year’s ball, a musical, monthly literary meetings, dances, a bulletin of activities and editorials, a weekly debating club, an orchestra, and public athletic games. There were also daily athletics, and the building could be used by members “when nothing special is going on.”

The Society came into being when Max Flaxman, H. Grossman and Boris Litowich called a meeting to organize a Zionist society at Adath Yeshurun Synagogue. The young people who showed up, however, wanted a different kind of society on a broader basis, and the Jewish Literary Society of Houston was born. Isidor Tiras was elected President; other offices were filled by Sadie Eden, Max T. Karkow-

ski, and Jessie Stark. An Amusement Committee was formed.

The rabbis of Houston became interested and offered their services. Meetings were held in the Mason Building. Congregation Beth Israel used the same hall for Friday night services during the construction of their temple. The first debate was held in 1906 on the topic “Are We Better Than Our Forefathers?” The affirmative side won the debate. 1907 saw Henry Dannenbaum elected president, the presentation of the first mock trial (Jewish Literary Society v. J. L. Mendlovitz for Breach of Duty), and the annual boat ride to the San Jacinto Battleground.

In 1908, a library was started with Max Westheimer’s gift of a twenty volume set of Charles Dickens. Classes were organized to teach English and American customs to immigrants.<sup>4</sup>

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*The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.*



The first Carnival Ball was October 27.

In 1909, a \$2 initiation fee for male applicants and a 50¢ fee for

room, dressing rooms with showers, and storage space. On September 12, the first dance in the new building was held.<sup>5</sup>

directed the show in April. Basketball and baseball teams were organized. To express encouragement and welcome to young men and women graduates and confirmands, an annual Kadimah Reception was started. A girls basketball team was formed, and a Sunday School opened with Dr. W. Willner as superintendent.

By 1913, businessmen were starting to take note of the growing organization, and a special sustaining membership of \$10 was created for them. Joseph Fels gave a talk on single taxation.<sup>6</sup>

The annual outing in 1914 was a trolley ride via the interurban to Galveston Beach, joined by 147 members and friends. About 2,500 people attended the Cabaret Play presented at the City Auditorium, netting over \$900 for the Society.

In 1915, the Society filed suit against Galveston-Houston Interurban

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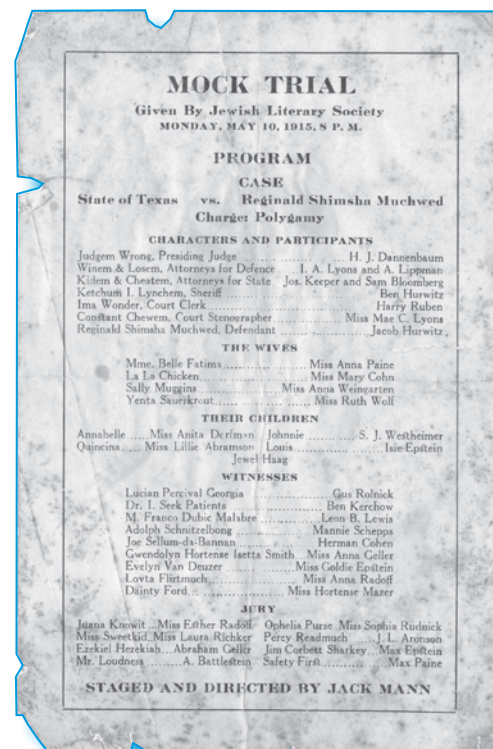
*The Group Photo, Mock Trial, 1915: Texas Jewish Historical Society, di\_10290, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin (the group photo)*

females was instituted. A major effort was made to abolish Jewish stereotypes in the theater. A resolution was passed that any theater presenting a Jewish character “giving offense to our people or casting a reflection on them” would be boycotted. All theaters were informed, and they promised cooperation.

A committee was formed to raise money and purchase land for a building of their own. They began negotiations to buy the Adath Yeshurun vacant lot. The lot was purchased in 1910 and the use of the Mason building was discontinued. The Society was granted use of Montefiore Hall by CBI for public meetings and Adath Yeshurun Hall for business meetings. A temporary building was constructed with an auditorium for dances and public meetings, a library, directors

Membership increased with the new building. Any Jewish organization without a hall of its own could use this one. Galveston’s Rabbi Henry Cohen, a great supporter of the organization, was the speaker in December. There was also a lecture about Russian Jewish immigrants, and Literary Wednesdays was instituted. The office of General Secretary was created to look after the affairs of the group. Sam Bloomberg of San Antonio was elected General Secretary in 1911. He was closely connected with the JLS of that city, which was formed two years after Houston and patterned after it. S. J. Westheimer was elected president. There were 170 members.

In 1912, Bertha Westheimer suggested a vaudeville show and a committee was formed. Bertha



*Mock Trial Program, 1915. Texas Jewish Historical Society, di\_10291, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.*

for placing tracks in the street in front of their building, claiming damage to their property. The trial court ruled in their favor, but the appellate court reversed the judgment. The Society maintained it owned to the middle of the street, and the railroad laid tracks down the middle without condemning the property and making compensation. The Defendant said it was using Houston Electric Company streetcar tracks and was entitled to do so. The court stated it was a difficult case, but that the use of the street by the inter-urban railroad was basically the same as the street railway company.<sup>7</sup>

The JLS reached its peak around 1916. Large crowds attended the mock trial, the annual Kadimah Reception, the kosher public Seder, and the tenth anniversary celebration, a Musical Night with the JLS Orchestra and others. Leona Westheimer<sup>8</sup> gave a reading from *Anne of Green Gables*. 200 attended the Shirtwaist Dance in June. They were still trying to pay off the building.

At its height, the JLS had some 400 members, but World War I apparently took the wind out of the sails, and the group disbanded in 1920.<sup>9</sup> For ten years, though, the Jewish Literary Society was an important organization in Houston and widely praised and supported by the community. Rabbi W. Willner called it “one of the best assets of our community.” Rabbi Henry Barnstein said it filled “a grievously needed want among the young Jewish people of Houston,” teaching them how to use their leisure hours “pleasurably and profitably in the cultivation of athletics, by social intercourse, and by literary exercises.”

Dr. Radoslav Andrea Tsanoff of the Rice Institute praised the group, putting it in an even larger context. “American nationalism does not rest upon racial homogeneity, nor upon a common language bond. It

cannot be the result of a process in which the ethnic distinctiveness of the immigrant is melted out... Hence, whatever agency helps any one of the various racial elements constituting the American people to gain a clearer and a deeper appreciation of the peculiar contribution which it can make, out of its own culture, to the upbuilding of the American character... is an agency deserving all praise and welcome. This... is the fundamental aim of the Jewish Literary Society.”

### *Endnotes*

- <sup>1</sup> Sylvan Beach is in La Porte.
- <sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all information is from Box 3So3 (photos and program) and Box 3A191 of the Texas Jewish Historical Society Collection, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.
- <sup>3</sup> With gratitude to J. L. and Rose Keeper for donating this photo for preservation.
- <sup>4</sup> Eventually, the City of Houston opened night schools for this purpose.
- <sup>5</sup> The October 19 *Jewish Herald* contains a good description of the dedication ceremonies.
- <sup>6</sup> A single tax is a system of taxation based mainly or exclusively on one tax, typically chosen for its special properties, often being a tax on land value. The idea was proposed by both John Locke and Baruch Spinoza. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Single\\_tax](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Single_tax).
- <sup>7</sup> [https://books.google.com/books?id=OnVFAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA325&lp g=RA1-PA325&dq=jewish+literary+society+houston&source=bl&ots=fie\\_fK9LRp&sig=25Inj8AAUa4ad eRvvY3KTPp5Mlg&hl=en&sa=X &ved=0CDAQ6AEwBGoVChMIybXB4OSTyAIVQZQNCh0eegxr#v=one page&q=jewish%20literary%20society%20houston&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=OnVFAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA325&lp g=RA1-PA325&dq=jewish+literary+society+houston&source=bl&ots=fie_fK9LRp&sig=25Inj8AAUa4ad eRvvY3KTPp5Mlg&hl=en&sa=X &ved=0CDAQ6AEwBGoVChMIybXB4OSTyAIVQZQNCh0eegxr#v=one page&q=jewish%20literary%20society%20houston&f=false).
- <sup>8</sup> See TJHS summer news magazine, 2010, “From the Footlights” about Leona Westheimer.
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.isjl.org/texas-houston-encyclopedia.html>. 